

SAUDI ARABIA 2019 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is both head of state and head of government. The 1992 Basic Law sets out the system of governance, rights of citizens, and powers and duties of the government, and it provides that the Quran and Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) serve as the country's constitution. It specifies that the rulers of the country shall be male descendants of the founder, King Abdulaziz (Ibn Saud). In 2015 the country held its most recent municipal elections on a nonparty basis for two-thirds of the 3,159 seats in the 284 municipal councils around the country. Independent polling station observers did not identify significant irregularities with the elections.

The State Security Presidency (SSP), the National Guard, and the Ministries of Defense and Interior, all of which report to the king, are responsible for law enforcement and maintenance of order. The SSP includes the General Directorate of Investigation (Mabahith), Special Security Forces, and Special Emergency Forces; police are under the Ministry of Interior. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces.

Through royal decrees the government instituted significant reforms to male guardianship provisions that had long required women to obtain permission from a close male relative for a range of activities, including applying for passports and traveling abroad, registering the birth of a child, registering a marriage or divorce, obtaining status as a "head of household," and seeking legal guardianship of children. Other new regulations expanded women's economic empowerment by banning gender discrimination in the workplace and opening new employment opportunities for women.

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful killings; executions for nonviolent offenses; forced disappearances; torture of prisoners and detainees by government agents; arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy; criminalization of libel, censorship, and site blocking; restrictions on freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and movement; severe restrictions of religious freedom; citizens' lack of ability and legal means to choose their government through free and fair elections; trafficking in persons; violence and official discrimination against women, although new women's rights

initiatives were implemented; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual activity; and prohibition of trade unions.

In several cases the government did not punish officials accused of committing human rights abuses, contributing to an environment of impunity. Following the high-profile October 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey, a court sentenced five officials to death and three officials to prison on December 23. The court ruled that guilt could not be established in the case of three other defendants.

In September state-owned oil processing facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked by drones and missiles. Houthi militants in Yemen claimed responsibility, but the Saudi government concluded Iran was responsible for the attack. Houthi militants were also responsible for numerous other attacks on civilian infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia, including airports, schools, hospitals, and oil facilities. Saudi Arabia continued air operations in Yemen throughout the year as leader of a coalition formed in 2015 to counter the 2014 Houthi takeover of government institutions and facilities. Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen reportedly resulted in civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure on multiple occasions. The pace of airstrikes declined in the fall, as the warring parties pursued a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The coalition's Joint Incident Assessment Team (JIAT) investigated allegations of civilian casualties, but the Saudi government did not prosecute any cases based on JIAT findings.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. On January 20, the London-based Saudi human rights group ALQST reported that Islamic scholar Sheikh Ahmed al-Amari died as a result of poor prison conditions and possible torture. Al-Amari, the former dean of the School of Quran at the University of Medina, was detained in July 2018 and suffered a brain hemorrhage on January 2. The government did not formally charge Al-Amari with a crime, and the specific reasons for his detention were not disclosed. The Twitter account *Prisoners of Conscience*, which documents human rights cases in the country, asserted his death was due to “intentional neglect” by prison authorities. On November 13, family members of Islamic scholar Sheikh Fahd al-Qadi announced that he died in prison; the circumstances surrounding his death were unknown. Detained since 2016, al-Qadi was sentenced in October to

six years in prison. Prisoners of Conscience reported he was detained after sending a letter of advice to the Royal Court.

According to an August Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, Ethiopian migrants crossing the border in rural, mountainous areas from Yemen's Saada Governorate into Saudi Arabia's Jizan Province reported being shot at with live ammunition by Saudi border guards, sometimes without warning. Migrants reported witnessing others being shot in the leg and chest and seeing "many dead people at the border."

On December 23, a court sentenced 11 government agents accused of killing journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, in October 2018. The court did not publicly name the defendants but sentenced five to death; three to prison sentences ranging from seven to 10 years; and ruled that guilt could not be established in the case of three others--including the former deputy director of the General Intelligence Presidency. The defendants, prosecutors, and victim's family can appeal the verdicts. No additional individuals were believed to be under continuing investigation. In an op-ed column published on the day of the verdicts, UN special rapporteur Agnes Callamard stated the trial was "grossly inadequate" and did not meet "even minimum international standards." A government official stated in a press conference following the announcement of the verdicts that investigators did not indict former royal court official Saud al-Qahtani due to "insufficient evidence." Human rights groups asserted the lack of significant prison sentences for the most senior officials suspected of involvement in the killing was indicative of a climate of impunity for human rights violations in the country. Authorities allowed some diplomatic observers to attend trial hearings during the year.

Under the country's interpretation and practice of sharia (Islamic law), capital punishment may be imposed for a range of nonviolent offenses, including apostasy, sorcery, and adultery, although in practice death sentences for such offenses were rare and usually reduced on appeal. The government, however, frequently implemented capital punishment for nonviolent drug trafficking offenses. As of November 11, the country carried out 177 executions, 77 of which were for drug-related offenses. According to Amnesty International, this was the highest number of executions in a single year since 1995, when authorities carried out 192 executions.

Since the country lacks a comprehensive written penal code listing criminal offenses and the associated penalties for them (see section 1.e.), punishment--including the imposition of capital punishment--is subject to considerable judicial

discretion. Defendants are able to appeal their sentences. The law requires a five-judge appellate court to affirm a death sentence, which a five-judge panel of the Supreme Court must unanimously affirm. Appellate courts may recommend changes to a sentence, including increasing the severity of a lesser sentence, including up to the death penalty if the trial court convicted the defendant of a crime for which capital punishment is permitted.

Defendants possess the right under the law to seek commutation of a death sentence for some crimes and may receive a royal pardon under specific circumstances (see section 1.d.). In some prescribed cases (*qisas*), the families of the deceased may accept compensation from the family of the person convicted in an unlawful death, sparing the convicted from execution.

On February 1, human rights groups reported the public prosecutor was no longer seeking the death penalty for female activist Israa al-Ghomgham, held since 2015 after participating in antigovernment protests in the Eastern Province. She was facing trial before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) along with five other individuals, including her husband, on terrorism and conspiracy charges.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International asserted that many of those executed during the year were convicted in trials that did not meet international minimum fair-trial standards. On April 23, the Ministry of Interior announced the execution of 37 citizens in Riyadh, Mecca, Medina, the Eastern Province, Qassim, and Asir regions in connection with “terrorism crimes.” The mass execution was the largest since 2016. The Ministry of Interior stated the culprits “adopted extremist terrorist ideology and formed terrorist cells to spread corruption, insecurity, chaos...in addition to attacking security headquarters by using explosive bombs.” Amnesty condemned the executions, stating, “The majority of those executed were Shi’a men who were convicted after sham trials that violated international fair-trial standards (and) which relied on confessions extracted through torture.”

The government also imposed death sentences for crimes committed by persons younger than 18. According to Amnesty International and the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), at year’s end three individuals on death row were minors when detained or at the time they committed offenses. The new Juvenile Law (approved by Royal Decree No. M/113, dated August 1, 2018) sets the legal age at 18 based on the Hijri calendar and in some cases permits detention of minors in a juvenile facility for up to 15 years if the crime is otherwise punishable by death. The law, however, does not categorically prohibit executions

of minors; Article 16 of the law states the provisions of the Juvenile Law shall not prejudice the applicable sharia provisions related to hudood or qisas crimes. Hudood crimes have punishments fixed in the Quran, and in qisas cases, the family of an unlawfully killed person retains the right to insist on execution.

In a statement after the mass executions in April, UN high commissioner for human rights Michelle Bachelet noted, “[i]t is particularly abhorrent that at least three of those killed were minors at the time of their sentencing.” Although disputed by authorities, the ESOHR claimed at least six of the executed were minors at the time of their alleged offenses: Abdullah Salman al-Sarih and Abdulkarim Mohammad al-Hawaj, whose charges date back to age 16, and Said Mohammad al-Sakafi, Salman Amin al-Quraysh, Mujtaba Nadir al-Sweiket, and Abdulaziz Hassan al-Sahwi, whose charges date back to age 17.

At year’s end the government had not carried out the execution of Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, sentenced to death in 2014 for crimes he allegedly committed when he was 17. Al-Nimr was charged with protesting, aiding and abetting fugitives, attacking security vehicles, and various violent crimes. Human rights organizations reported due process concerns relating to minimum fair-trial standards for his case. Al-Nimr was the nephew of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, executed in 2016.

Abdullah al-Zaher and Dawood al-Marhoon, both Shia, faced execution in connection with their involvement in antigovernment protests; at the time of their arrests in 2012, al-Zaher and al-Marhoon were 16 and 17, respectively.

On June 16, Reuters reported the SCC reduced the sentence against Murtaja Qureiris from the death penalty to a 12-year prison term. According to rights groups including Amnesty International, Qureiris was detained in 2014 for a series of offenses committed when he was between 10 and 13 years old.

There were several terrorist attacks in the country during the year, but unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of deaths of civilians or security officials resulting from these attacks.

b. Disappearance

There were reports of disappearances carried out by or on behalf of government authorities.

On May 20, Reporters Without Borders stated that authorities were holding Abdel Rahman Farhaneh, a Jordanian journalist who disappeared in the east of the country in February, and Marwan al-Muraisi, a Yemeni journalist missing in Saudi Arabia since June 2018.

In 2018 the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances transmitted the case of humanitarian worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan to the government under its urgent action procedure. According to his family, al-Sadhan was disappeared in Riyadh in March 2018 and was reportedly subjected to “severe torture” by authorities. Al-Sadhan remained missing at year’s end.

ALQST called on authorities to investigate the disappearances of journalist Turki al-Jasser, who disappeared in 2018; Syrian Khaled Mohammed Abdulaziz, who disappeared in 2017 while performing the Hajj pilgrimage; and Sulaiman al-Dowaish, who disappeared in 2016 after posting tweets critical of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture and makes officers, who are responsible for criminal investigations, liable for any abuse of authority. Sharia (customary Islamic law), as interpreted in the country, prohibits judges from accepting confessions obtained under duress. Statutory law provides that public investigators shall not subject accused persons to coercive measures to influence their testimony.

Multiple human rights organizations, the United Nations, and independent third parties noted numerous reports of torture and mistreatment of detainees by law enforcement officers. Human rights organizations reported the SCC based its decisions on confessions allegedly obtained through torture and then admitted as evidence.

Human rights organizations and media outlets reported some detained women’s rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, were subjected to torture including electrocution, beatings, whipping, and sexual assault.

On February 4, a panel of British parliamentarians issued a report accusing the government of subjecting detained women’s rights activists to torture and warning that the detainees might suffer serious long-term health problems if they did not they receive urgent medical care. Authorities did not respond to a request by the

panel in January for access to the country and to the detained women's rights advocates. On February 14, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the detention and torture of some women's right-to-drive activists detained since May 2018.

In March the lawyer for the family of dual U.S.-Saudi citizen Walid Fitaihi, who was reportedly detained as part of a 2017 anticorruption campaign, told reporters that Fitaihi had been subjected to routine abuse during his detention, including beatings and electrical shocks. Fitaihi was released on bond in late July but continued to face charges. Fitaihi and his dual U.S.-Saudi citizen family members in Saudi Arabia were also under an international travel ban.

Former detainees in facilities run by the Mabahith alleged that abuse included beatings, sleep deprivation, and long periods of solitary confinement for nonviolent detainees.

Officials from the Ministry of Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO), and the governmental Human Rights Commission (HRC), which is responsible for coordinating with other government entities to investigate and respond to alleged human rights violations (see section 5) claimed that rules prohibiting torture prevented such practices from occurring in the penal system. The Ministry of Interior stated it installed surveillance cameras to record interrogations of suspects in some criminal investigation offices, police stations, and prisons where such interrogations regularly occurred, such as the Mabahith prison facilities. There were reports that defendants who requested copies of video footage from the ministry's surveillance system to provide as evidence of torture did not receive it.

Courts continued to sentence individuals to corporal punishment, usually in the form of floggings, whippings, or lashings, a common punishment that government officials defended as punishment dictated by sharia. According to human rights activists, police conducted the floggings according to a set of guidelines determined by local interpretation of sharia. The police official administering the punishment must place a copy of the Quran under his arm that prevents raising the hand above the head, limiting the ability to inflict pain or injury on the person subjected to the punishment, and instructions forbid police from breaking the skin or causing scarring when administering the lashes. Human rights organizations disputed that officials implemented floggings according to these guidelines for all prisoners and characterized flogging as a form of cruel and unusual punishment.

There were no reported cases of judicially administered amputation during the year.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions varied, and some did not meet international standards; reported problems included overcrowding and inadequate conditions.

Physical Conditions: On March 31, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that “leaked medical reports” prepared for King Salman showed that political prisoners suffered from “malnutrition, cuts, bruises, and burns” as well as severe dehydration and denial of medical care.

Juveniles constituted less than 1 percent of detainees and were held in separate facilities from adults, according to available information.

Authorities held pretrial detainees together with convicted prisoners. They separated persons suspected or convicted of terrorism offenses from the general population but held them in similar facilities. Activists alleged that authorities sometimes detained individuals in the same cells as individuals with mental disabilities as a form of punishment and indicated that authorities mistreated persons with disabilities.

Authorities differentiated between violent and nonviolent prisoners, sometimes pardoning nonviolent prisoners to reduce the prison population. Certain prisoners convicted on terrorism-related charges were required to participate in government-sponsored rehabilitation programs before consideration of their release.

Administration: There were multiple legal authorities for prisons and detention centers. The General Directorate of Prisons administered approximately 91 detention centers, prisons, and jails, while the Mabahith administered approximately 20 regional prisons and detention centers for security prisoners. The law of criminal procedure gives the PPO the authority to conduct official visits of prisons and detention facilities “within their jurisdictional areas to ensure that no person is unlawfully imprisoned or detained.” No ombudsmen were available to register or investigate complaints made by prisoners, although prisoners could and did submit complaints to the HRC and the quasi-governmental National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) for follow up. The law of criminal procedure provides that “any prisoner or detainee shall have the right to submit, at any time, a written or verbal complaint to the prison or detention center officer and request that he

communicate it to a member of the [former] Bureau of Investigations and Public Prosecution [renamed the PPO].” Under the law there is no right to submit complaints directly to judicial authorities or to challenge the legality of an individual’s detention before a court of law (habeas corpus). There was no information available on whether prisoners were able to submit complaints to prison or prosecutorial authorities without censorship or whether authorities responded or acted upon complaints.

Recordkeeping on prisoners was inadequate; there were reports authorities held prisoners after they had completed their sentences.

A Ministry of Interior-run website (Nafetha) provided detainees and their relatives access to a database containing information about the legal status of the detainee, including any scheduled trial dates. Activists said the website did not provide information about all detainees.

Authorities generally permitted relatives and friends to visit prisoners twice a week, although certain prisons limited visitation to once or twice a month. There were reports that prison, security, or law enforcement officials denied this privilege in some instances, often during investigations. The families of detainees could access the Nafetha website for applications for prison visits, temporary leave from prison (generally approved around post-Ramadan Eid holidays), and release on bail (for pretrial detainees). Some family members of detained persons under investigation said family visits were typically not allowed, while others said allowed visits or calls were extremely brief (less than five minutes). Some family members of prisoners complained authorities canceled scheduled visits with relatives without reason.

Authorities generally permitted Muslim detainees and prisoners to perform religious observances such as prayers.

Independent Monitoring: Independent institutions were not permitted to conduct regular, unannounced visits to places of detention, according to the UN Committee against Torture. During the year the government permitted some foreign diplomats restricted access to some prison facilities in nonconsular cases. In a limited number of cases, foreign diplomats visited individuals in detention, but the visits took place in a separate visitors’ center where conditions may have differed from those in the detention facilities holding the prisoners.

The government permitted the HRC and domestic quasi-governmental organizations, such as the NSHR, to monitor prison conditions. The organizations stated they visited prisons throughout the country and reported on prison conditions. On January 27, local media reported the HRC conducted 394 prison visits between September 2017 and September 2018, including visits to Mabahith prisons, criminal investigation prisons, and some military prisons as well as “social surveillance centers” and girls’ welfare institutions. The NSHR reportedly monitored health care in prisons and brought deficiencies to the attention of the PPO.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law provides that no entity may restrict a person’s actions or imprison a person, except under the provisions of the law. The law of criminal procedure provides that authorities may not detain a person for more than 24 hours, but the Ministry of Interior and the SSP, to which the majority of forces with arrest powers reported, maintained broad authority to arrest and detain persons indefinitely without judicial oversight, notification of charges, or effective access to legal counsel or family.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In 2017 King Salman issued a decree that created the PPO, (formerly the Bureau of Investigations and Public Prosecution or BIPP), establishing Saud bin Abdullah bin Mubarak al-Mu’jab as attorney general. The decree directed the PPO to report directly to the king (rather than the Ministry of Interior, to which the BIPP had reported). Human rights organizations criticized the move as a consolidation of power in the Royal Court that undermined the independence of the judiciary.

According to the law of criminal procedure, “no person shall be arrested, searched, detained, or imprisoned except in cases provided by law, and any accused person shall have the right to seek the assistance of a lawyer or a representative to defend him during the investigation and trial stages.” By law authorities may summon any person for investigation and may issue an arrest warrant based on evidence. In practice authorities frequently did not use warrants, and warrants were not required under the law in all cases.

The law requires authorities to file charges within 72 hours of arrest and hold a trial within six months, subject to exceptions specified by amendments to the law of criminal procedure and the counterterrorism law (see section 2.a.). Authorities

may not legally detain a person under arrest for more than 24 hours, except pursuant to a written order from a public investigator. Authorities reportedly often failed to observe these legal protections, and there was no requirement to advise suspects of their rights.

The law of criminal procedure specifies procedures required for extending the detention period of an accused person beyond the initial five days. Authorities may approve detentions in excess of six months in “exceptional circumstances,” effectively allowing individuals to be held in pretrial detention indefinitely in cases involving terrorism or “violations of state security.” There is a functioning bail system for less serious criminal charges. The PPO may order the detention of any person accused of a crime under the counterterrorism law for up to 30 days, renewable up to 12 months, and in state security cases up to 24 months with a judge’s approval.

By law defendants accused of any crime cited in the law are entitled to hire a lawyer to defend themselves before the court “within an adequate period of time to be decided by the investigatory body.” In cases involving terrorism or state security charges, detainees generally did not have the right to obtain a lawyer of their choice. The government provided lawyers to defendants who made a formal application to the Ministry of Justice to receive a court-appointed lawyer and proved their inability to pay for their legal representation.

There were reports that authorities did not always allow legal counsel access to detainees who were under investigation in pretrial detention. Authorities indicated that a suspect could be held up to 12 months in investigative detention without access to legal counsel if authorized by prosecutors. Judicial proceedings begin after authorities complete a full investigation, which in some cases took years.

The king continued the tradition of commuting some judicial punishments. Royal pardons sometimes set aside a conviction and sometimes reduced or eliminated corporal punishment. The remaining sentence could be added to a new sentence if the pardoned prisoner committed a crime subsequent to release.

Authorities commuted the sentences of some who had received prison terms. The counterterrorism law allows the PPO to stop proceedings against an individual who cooperates with investigations or helps thwart a planned terrorist attack. The law authorizes the SSP to release individuals already convicted in such cases.

Arbitrary Arrest: Local human rights activists and diplomatic representatives reportedly received regular reports from families claiming authorities held their relatives arbitrarily or without notification of charges. During the year authorities detained without charge security suspects, persons who publicly criticized the government, Shia religious leaders, individuals with links to women's rights activists, and persons accused of violating religious standards.

On March 6, UN high commissioner for human rights Bachelet expressed concern "at the apparently arbitrary arrest and detention and alleged ill-treatment and torture of several women human rights defenders."

On March 7, 36 countries issued a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council expressing "significant concerns about reports of continuing arrests and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The group expressed particular concern "about the use of the counterterrorism law and other national security provisions against individuals peacefully exercising their rights and freedoms."

In April activists reported that authorities released poet Nawaf al-Rasheed, a Saudi citizen with dual Qatari nationality, after 10 months in detention for unspecified reasons. Kuwaiti authorities deported al-Rasheed to Saudi Arabia in May 2018 at the Saudi government's request.

Pretrial Detention: The United Nations and international human rights organizations reported detention cases that exceeded the maximum period allowed under the law. In a May 2018 statement, HRW noted that authorities had detained thousands of persons for more than six months--in some cases for more than a decade--without referring them to courts for criminal proceedings, and that the number held for excessively long periods had apparently increased dramatically in recent years. During the year HRW reported the government continued this practice of long-term arbitrary detention.

On January 30, the Royal Court announced the end of the anticorruption campaign launched in 2017 (see section 4). On February 18, HRW called on authorities "to immediately clarify whether those who remained in detention face charges in connection with the anticorruption campaign or for other recognizable criminal activity, and if not, the authorities should release them immediately...holding detainees without charge or trial for 16 months only reinforces the reality that the Saudi corruption campaign has taken place completely outside the rule of law."

Incommunicado detention was also a problem. Authorities reportedly did not always respect a detainees' right to contact family members following detention, and the counterterrorism law allows the investigatory body to hold a defendant for up to 90 days in detention without access to family members or legal counsel (and the SCC may extend such restrictions beyond this period). Security and some other types of prisoners sometimes remained in prolonged solitary detention before family members or associates received information of their whereabouts, particularly for detainees in Mabath-run facilities.

On January 25, Amnesty International reported that at least 10 women activists arrested in May 2018 were held incommunicado in a secret prison, where they were allegedly subjected to severe torture. On March 14, then HRC president Bandar al-Aiban asserted that there were no secret prisons and detention centers and that secret detention was prohibited.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: Under the law detainees are not entitled to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court. In the case of wrongful detention, the law of criminal procedure, as well as provisions of the counterterrorism law, provide for the right to compensation if detainees are found to have been held unlawfully.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides that judges are independent and not subject to any authority other than the provisions of sharia and the laws in force. Nevertheless, the judiciary, PPO, and SSP were not independent entities, as they were required to coordinate their decisions with executive authorities, with the king and crown prince as arbiters. Although public allegations of interference with judicial independence were rare, the judiciary reportedly was subject to influence, particularly in the case of legal decisions rendered by specialized judicial bodies, such as the SCC, which rarely acquitted suspects. Human rights activists reported that SCC judges received implicit instructions to issue harsh sentences against human rights activists, reformers, journalists, and dissidents not engaged in violent activities. Activists also reported that judicial and prosecutorial authorities ignored due process-related complaints, including lack of access by lawyers to their clients at critical stages of the judicial process, particularly during the pretrial/investigation phase.

Trial Procedures

In the judicial system, there traditionally was no published case law on criminal matters, no uniform criminal code, no presumption of innocence, and no doctrine of *stare decisis* that binds judges to follow legal precedent. The Justice Ministry continued to expand a project started in 2007 to distribute model judicial decisions to ensure more uniformity of legal application, and as recently as August the ministry published judicial decisions on its website. The law states that defendants should be treated equally in accordance with sharia. The Council of Senior Scholars, or the *ulema*, an autonomous advisory body, issues religious opinions (*fatwas*) that guide how judges interpret sharia.

In the absence of a formalized penal code that details all criminal offenses and punishments, judges in the courts determine many of these penalties through their interpretations of sharia, which varied according to the judge and the circumstances of the case. Because judges have considerable discretion in decision making, rulings and sentences diverged widely from case to case.

Several laws, however, provide sentencing requirements for crimes including terrorism, cybercrimes, trafficking in persons, and domestic abuse. In 2016 the Ministry of Justice issued a compilation of previous decisions that judges could refer to as a point of reference in making rulings and assigning sentences.

Appeals courts cannot independently reverse lower court judgments; they are limited to affirming judgments or returning them to a lower court for modification. Even when judges did not affirm judgments, appeals judges in some cases remanded the judgment to the judge who originally authored the opinion. This procedure sometimes made it difficult for parties to receive a ruling that differed from the original judgment in cases where judges hesitated to admit error. While judges may base their decisions on any of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, all of which are represented in the Council of Senior Scholars, the Hanbali school predominates and forms the basis for the country's law and legal interpretations of sharia. Shia citizens use their legal traditions to adjudicate family law cases between Shia parties, although either party can decide to adjudicate a case in state courts, which apply Sunni legal traditions.

While the law states that court hearings shall be public, courts may be closed at the judge's discretion. As a result, many trials during the year were closed. Since October 2018 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs barred foreign diplomatic missions from attending court proceedings at the SCC as well as trials related to security and human rights issues. Diplomatic personnel were generally allowed to attend consular proceedings of their own citizens. Some family members of prisoners

complained that neither they nor legal representatives were permitted access to trials or notified about the status of trial proceedings. SCC officials sometimes banned female relatives from attending due to the absence of women officers to conduct security inspections of the women upon entry to the courtroom.

According to the Ministry of Justice, authorities may close a trial depending on the sensitivity of the case to national security, the reputation of the defendant, or the safety of witnesses. Representatives of the HRC sometimes attended trials at the SCC.

According to the law, authorities must offer defendants a lawyer at government expense. In 2017 the Ministry of Justice stated that defendants “enjoy all judicial guarantees they are entitled to, including the right to seek the assistance of lawyers of their choosing to defend them, while the ministry pays the lawyer’s fees when the accused is not able to settle them.” Activists, however, reported the process for applying for a court-appointed lawyer was difficult and cumbersome. Many said detained activists were not able or allowed to retain an attorney or consult with their attorneys during critical stages of the investigatory and trial proceedings. Detained human rights activists often did not trust the courts to appoint lawyers for them due to concerns of lawyer bias.

The law provides defendants the right to be present at trial and to consult with an attorney during the trial. The counterterrorism law, however, authorizes the attorney general to limit the right of defendants accused of terrorism to access legal representation while under investigation “whenever the interests of the investigation so require.” There is no right to discovery, nor can defendants view their own file or the minutes from their interrogation. Defendants have the right to call and cross-examine witnesses under the law. Activists reported, however, that SCC judges could decide to restrict this right in “the interests of the case.” The law provides that a PPO-appointed investigator question the witnesses called by the defendant during the investigation phase before the initiation of a trial. The investigator may also hear testimony of additional witnesses he deems necessary to determine the facts. Authorities may not subject a defendant to any coercive measures or compel the taking of an oath. The court must inform convicted persons of their right to appeal rulings.

The law does not provide for a right against self-incrimination.

The law does not provide free interpretation services, although services were often provided in practice. The law of criminal procedure provides that “the court should seek the assistance of interpreters,” but it does not obligate the court to do

so from the moment the defendant is charged, nor does the law specify that the state will bear the costs of such services.

While sharia as interpreted by the government applies to all citizens and noncitizens, the law in practice discriminates against women, noncitizens, nonpracticing Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and persons of other religions. In some cases the testimony of a woman equals half that of a man. Judges have discretion to discount the testimony of nonpracticing Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, or persons of other religions; sources reported judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia Muslims.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

The government maintained there were no political prisoners, including detainees who reportedly remained in prolonged detention without charge, while local activists and human rights organizations claimed there were “hundreds” or “thousands.” Credible reporting by advocacy groups and press suggested authorities detained persons for peaceful activism or political opposition, including nonviolent religious figures, imams deemed to have strayed from the official religious line, Shia activists, women’s rights defenders, other activists, and those who the government claimed posted offensive or antigovernment comments on social media sites.

In many cases it was impossible to determine the legal basis for incarceration and whether the detention complied with international norms and standards. Those who remained imprisoned after trial, including persons who were political activists openly critical of the government, were often convicted of terrorism-related crimes. During the year the SCC tried political and human rights activists for nonviolent actions unrelated to terrorism, violence, or espionage against the state. Authorities restricted attorneys’ access to detainees on trial at the SCC.

International NGOs, the United Nations, and others criticized the government for abusing its antiterrorism legal authorities to detain or arrest some dissidents or critics of the government or royal family on security-related grounds, who had not espoused or committed violence. On February 14, the European Parliament called on the government to immediately and unconditionally release “women’s rights defenders and all human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and other prisoners of conscience detained and sentenced merely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and for their peaceful human rights work.”

On September 23, nearly two dozen countries delivered a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council criticizing the government for its treatment of dissidents, journalists, and women activists and stating they were “concerned at reports of torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, unfair trials, and harassment of individuals engaged in promoting and defending human rights.”

At least 120 persons remained in detention for activism, criticism of government leaders, impugning Islam or religious leaders, or “offensive” internet postings, including prominent activists such as Raif Badawi, Mohammed al-Qahtani, and Nassima al-Sadah; clerics including former Grand Mosque Imam Salih al-Talib; and Sahwa movement figures Safar al-Hawali, Nasser al-Omar, and others. Prominent Muslim scholars Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari also remained in detention for associations and views deemed to be supportive of groups the government declared illegal or extremist (including the Muslim Brotherhood).

On March 13, the Riyadh Criminal Court opened trials against 11 women activists, including several arrested in mid-2018. The activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, and Hatoon al-Fassi, faced charges related to their human rights work and contact with international organizations, foreign media, and other activists. The women were accused of violating Article Six of the cybercrimes law, which prohibits production of materials that harm public order, religious values, public morals or storing that material via an information network. Violation of Article Six carries penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to three million riyals (\$800,000). Between March and September, authorities provisionally released eight of them, including al-Nafjan, al-Yousef, and al-Fassi. They continued to face criminal charges.

In April Amnesty International reported that authorities arrested at least seven individuals--including journalists, writers, and academics--some of whom had expressed their support for prominent activists who were arrested in 2018 for their advocacy for the right of women to drive. Some had already been under a travel ban since February, according to Amnesty International and ALQST.

On June 27, women’s rights activist Samar Badawi appeared at the SCC for the first time since her arrest in July 2018.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Complainants claiming human rights violations generally sought assistance from the HRC or the NSHR, which either advocated on their behalf or provided courts with opinions on their cases. The HRC generally responded to complaints and could refer cases to the PPO; domestic violence cases were the most common. Individuals or organizations may petition directly for damages or government action to end human rights violations before the Board of Grievances, except in compensation cases related to state security, where the SCC handles remediation. The counterterrorism law contains a provision allowing detainees in Mabahith-run prisons to request financial compensation from the Ministry of Interior/SSP for wrongful detention beyond their prison terms. In some cases the government did not carry out judicially ordered compensation for unlawful detentions in a timely manner.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits unlawful intrusions into the privacy of persons, their homes, places of work, and vehicles. Criminal investigation officers are required to maintain records of all searches conducted; these records should contain the name of the officer conducting the search, the text of the search warrant (or an explanation of the urgency that necessitated the search without a warrant), and the names and signatures of the persons who were present at the time of search. While the law also provides for the privacy of all mail, telegrams, telephone conversations, and other means of communication, the government did not respect the privacy of correspondence or communications and used the considerable latitude provided by the law to monitor activities legally and intervene where it deemed necessary.

There were reports from human rights activists of governmental monitoring or blocking of mobile telephone or internet usage. The government strictly monitored politically related activities and took punitive actions, including arrest and detention, against persons engaged in certain political activities, such as calling for a constitutional monarchy, publicly criticizing senior members of the royal family by name, forming a political party, or organizing a demonstration (see section 2.a.). Customs officials reportedly routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband. In some areas Ministry of Interior/SSP informants allegedly reported “seditious ideas,” “antigovernment activity,” or “behavior contrary to Islam” in their neighborhoods.

Media outlets reported that authorities gained access to dissidents' Twitter and social media accounts and in some cases questioned, detained, or prosecuted individuals for comments made online. The counterterrorism law allows the Ministry of Interior/SSP to access a terrorism suspect's private communications as well as banking information in a manner inconsistent with the legal protections provided by the law of criminal procedure.

The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) monitored and regulated public interaction between members of the opposite sex, although in practice CPVPV authorities were greatly curtailed compared with past years, and mixed-gender events became more common during the year.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

In 2015 Saudi officials announced the formation of a coalition to counter the 2014 attempted overthrow of the Yemeni government by militias of the Ansar Allah movement (also known colloquially as "Houthis") and forces loyal to former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Membership in the coalition included the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Senegal. The Saudi-led coalition continued conducting air and ground operations in Yemen, actions initiated in 2015.

Killings: The United Nations, NGOs, media, and humanitarian and other international organizations reported what they characterized as disproportionate use of force by all parties to the conflict in Yemen, including the Saudi-led coalition, Houthi rebels, and other combatants. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), from March 2015 to June 2019 there were at least 18,922 civilian casualties, with 7,292 killed and 11,630 injured in the conflict, with a 12 percent increase in the civilian death toll from June 2018 to June 2019. Since the conflict began, more than 7,500 children had been killed or injured. UNICEF reported that since December 2018, an average of eight children per day were killed due to war-related violence. The UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen assessed the actual death toll was likely higher than these estimates, in view of restrictions on UN researchers' access.

Saudi-led coalition airstrikes reportedly resulted in civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure on multiple occasions. In March a Saudi airstrike hit close to a hospital 60 miles northwest of Saada. The NGO Save the Children, which

supported the hospital, reported that eight persons were killed, including five children, and several were unaccounted for following the strike.

The International Committee of the Red Cross reported that on September 1 an airstrike hit a building serving as a Houthi detention facility in Dhamar. The Red Cross estimated more than 100 prisoners were killed in the attack and that another 40 were wounded. The Saudi-led coalition acknowledged it struck the facility as part of an operation against arms depots in the area, noting that the Houthis had not declared it on the no-strike list.

The government established the JIAT in 2016 to identify lessons and corrective actions and to implement national accountability mechanisms, as appropriate. The Riyadh-based group consisted of military and civilian members from coalition member states who investigated allegations of civilian casualties as well as claims by international organizations that humanitarian aid convoys and infrastructure were targeted by the coalition. The JIAT announced the results of numerous investigations during the year, largely absolving the coalition of responsibility in civilian deaths in the incidents reviewed. The Saudi government did not prosecute any cases based on JIAT findings. The OHCHR and others asserted the JIAT's investigations did not provide sufficient transparency on the targeting process for strikes. HRW stated the JIAT's public conclusions raised serious questions regarding the ways in which the JIAT conducted investigations and applied international humanitarian law.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: Yemen's Houthi militants conducted missile, rocket, drone, and artillery attacks into Saudi Arabia, including launching more than 110,000 projectiles into Saudi territory since the beginning of the conflict in 2015. In 2018-2019 authorities reported some of these projectiles had damaged airports, schools, homes, hospitals, mosques, and critical energy infrastructure. In May a drone attack claimed by the Houthis damaged the country's East-West oil pipeline, the country's main cross-country oil link. In August Houthi militants attacked with armed drones the Shaybah oil facility in the Eastern Province. In September state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked by drones and missiles, damaging and temporarily taking offline half of the country's oil production capacity. Houthi militants in Yemen claimed responsibility, but the government concluded that Iran was responsible for the attacks. There were no reports of deaths or injuries from the attack.

Because of security concerns, authorities restricted categories of imports allowed to arrive at Yemeni ports. In order to facilitate commercial cargo flows into

Yemeni Red Sea Ports, coalition officers carried out an inspection and approval regime coordinated with the United Nations via the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen and the Defense Ministry-hosted Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Committee. During some periods the committee barred fuel and some categories of materials, including those provided by humanitarian relief agencies, from entering the key Houthi-held Yemeni port of Hudaydah. Commercial imports into Yemen during the year remained well below pre-2015 figures. Sana'a International Airport remained closed throughout the year to commercial traffic.

For additional details, including additional information on the Saudi-led coalition's operations in Yemen, see the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights* for Yemen.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The law does not provide for freedom of expression, including for the press. The Basic Law specifies, "Mass media and all other vehicles of expression shall employ civil and polite language, contribute towards the education of the nation, and strengthen unity. The media are prohibited from committing acts that lead to disorder and division, affect the security of the state or its public relations, or undermine human dignity and rights." Authorities are responsible for regulating and determining which speech or expression undermines internal security. The government can ban or suspend media outlets if it concludes they violated the press and publications law, and it monitored and blocked hundreds of thousands of internet sites. There were frequent reports of restrictions on free speech.

The counterterrorism law's definition of terrorism includes "any conduct...intended to disturb public order...or destabilize the state or endanger its national unity." The law also penalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the king or crown prince...or anyone who establishes or uses a website or computer program...to commit any of the offenses set out in the law." Local human rights activists, international human rights organizations, and the UN special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism criticized the law for its overly broad and vague definitions of terrorism and complained the government used it to prosecute peaceful expression and dissent.

Freedom of Expression: The government monitored public expressions of opinion and took advantage of legal controls to impede the free expression of opinion and restrict individuals from engaging in public criticism of the political sphere. The law forbids apostasy and blasphemy, which can carry the death penalty, although there were no recent instances of death sentences being carried out for these crimes (see section 1.a.). Statements that authorities construed as constituting defamation of the king, monarchy, governing system, or Al Saud family resulted in criminal charges for citizens advocating government reform. The government prohibits public employees from directly or indirectly engaging in dialogue with local or foreign media or participating in any meetings intended to oppose state policies.

Some human rights activists were detained and then released on the condition that they refrain from using social media for activism, communicating with foreign diplomats and international human rights organizations, and traveling outside the country, according to human rights organizations.

The government detained a number of individuals for crimes related to their exercise of free speech during the year. From September to November, human rights groups and foreign media reported that authorities detained at least six persons, including an academic, poet, and tribal chief, for allegedly criticizing the General Entertainment Authority (GEA).

On October 10, Omar al-Muqbil, an academic at Qassim University, was allegedly arrested over a video criticizing the GEA's recent policy of hosting concerts by international artists. In the video he accused the GEA of "erasing society's original identity." On October 21, poet Safar al-Dughilbi was summoned for questioning regarding a poem he wrote that referred to the "ill-practices" of the GEA. On October 22, the *Prisoners of Conscience* Twitter account announced a chief of the Otaiba tribe, Faisal Sultan Jahjah bin Humaid, was detained and questioned following a tweet criticizing the GEA and calling for "reasonable forms of entertainment."

On November 12, the chairman of the GEA, Turki Al al-Sheikh, warned on Twitter the government would "take legal steps against anyone who criticizes or complains about the authority's work."

Between November 16 and November 20, authorities detained at least 11 persons, mostly journalists, writers, and entrepreneurs, according to the ALQST. A few days later, authorities released at least eight of those detained.

Press and Media, Including Online Media: The Press and Publications Law governs printed materials; printing presses; bookstores; the import, rental, and sale of films; television and radio; foreign media offices and their correspondents; and online newspapers and journals. Media fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Media. The ministry may permanently close “whenever necessary” any means of communication--defined as any means of expressing a viewpoint that is meant for circulation--that it deems is engaged in a prohibited activity, as set forth in the law.

Media policy statements urged journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage. In 2011 a royal decree amended the press law to strengthen penalties, create a special commission to judge violations, and require all online newspapers and bloggers to obtain a license from the ministry. The decree bans publishing anything “contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving foreign interests that contradict national interests, and damaging the reputation of the grand mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials.”

The law states that violators can face fines up to 50,000 riyals (\$13,300) for each violation of the law, which doubles if the violation is repeated. Other penalties include banning individuals from writing. While the Violations Considerations Committee in the Ministry of Media has formal responsibility for implementing the law, the Ministry of Interior, the CPVPV, and judges considered these issues regularly and exercised wide discretion in interpreting the law. It was unclear which of these institutional processes accords with the law.

Although unlicensed satellite dishes were illegal, the government did not enforce restrictions on them, and their use was widespread. Many foreign satellite stations broadcast a wide range of programs into the country in Arabic and other languages, including foreign news channels. Access to foreign sources of information, including via satellite dishes and the internet, was common. Foreign media were subject to licensing requirements from the Ministry of Media and could not operate freely. Privately owned satellite television networks, headquartered outside the country, maintained local offices and operated under a system of self-censorship.

On March 3, local media reported that authorities temporarily suspended a talk show hosted by journalist and Saudi Broadcasting Corporation president Dawood al-Shirian after it showed episodes on the guardianship system, the shortage of driving schools for women, and Saudi women seeking asylum abroad. The show returned a week later on March 10, according to *Okaz* daily newspaper.

On June 11, local media reported the GEA banned Kuwaiti artist Mona Shadad from appearing on local radio and television channels after Shadad appeared in a video praising Qatar.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities subjected journalists, writers, and bloggers to arrest, imprisonment, and harassment during the year (see sections 1.c., Prison and Detention Center Conditions and 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees).

Throughout the year NGOs, academics, and the press reported on the government's targeting of dissidents using automated social media accounts to ensure that progovernment messages dominated social media trend lists and effectively silenced dissenting voices. Automated account activity was reportedly accompanied by online harassment by progovernment accounts in some instances. Dissidents with large social media followings were targeted for offline harassment and surveillance as well.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government reportedly penalized those who published items counter to government guidelines and directly or indirectly censored the media by licensing domestic media and by controlling importation of foreign printed material.

All newspapers, blogs, and websites in the country must be government licensed. The Ministry of Media must approve the appointment of all senior editors and has authority to remove them. The government provided guidelines to newspapers regarding controversial issues. The Saudi Press Agency reported official government news. The government owned most print and broadcast media and book publication facilities in the country, and members of the royal family owned or influenced privately owned and nominally independent operations, including various media outlets and widely circulated pan-Arab newspapers published outside the country. Authorities prevented or delayed the distribution of foreign print media covering issues considered sensitive, effectively censoring these publications.

The government censored published material it considered blasphemous, extremist, racist, or offensive or as inciting chaos, violence, sectarianism, or harm to the public order. In 2017 the PPO stated that producing and promoting "rumors that affect the public order" was a crime under the cybercrimes law and punishable by up to five years in prison, a fine of three million riyals (\$800,000), or both. In June 2018 the PPO warned against sending, producing, or storing any material that stirs

up tribalism and fanaticism or harms public order, which is also punishable by the above penalties. On July 10, the Shura Council called on the General Commission for Audiovisual Media to intensify efforts to prevent the broadcast of content that contravenes the country's laws, customs, traditions, and public decorum or harms the reputation of the kingdom and its people. According to the Saudi Press Agency, the council underlined the need to enhance control of the electronic games market through surveillance of stores, markets, and websites in accordance with local and international regulations.

In some cases, however, individuals criticized specific government bodies or actions publicly without repercussions. The Consultative Council (*Majlis ash-Shura*), an advisory body, frequently allowed print and broadcast media to observe its proceedings and meetings, but the council closed some high-profile or controversial sessions to the media.

Libel/Slander Laws: There were numerous reports during the year of the government using libel laws to suppress publication of material that criticized policies or public officials.

The cybercrimes law provides for a maximum penalty of one year's imprisonment for "defamation and infliction of damage upon others through the use of various information technology devices," including social media and social networks.

National Security: Authorities used the cybercrimes law and the counterterrorism law to restrict freedom of expression, including by prosecuting numerous individuals under these laws on charges related to statements made on social media.

Internet Freedom

The Ministry of Media or its agencies must authorize all websites registered and hosted in the country. The General Commission for Audiovisual Media has responsibility for regulating all audio and video content in the country, including satellite channels, film, music, internet, and mobile applications, independent from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Internet access was widely available.

The press and publications law implicitly covers electronic media, since it extends to any means of expression of a viewpoint meant for circulation, ranging from words to cartoons, photographs, and sounds. In 2011 the government issued implementing regulations for electronic publishing that set rules for internet-based

and other electronic media, including chat rooms, personal blogs, and text messages. In May 2018 then information minister Awwad bin Saleh al-Awwad approved the executive regulations for types and forms of electronic publishing activities. The list consists of 17 items defining the mechanisms of dealing with electronic publishing activities, classifications, and ways of obtaining the appropriate regulatory licenses to carry out the required activities. Laws, including the cybercrimes law, criminalize a number of internet-related activities, including defamation, hacking, unauthorized access to government websites, and stealing information related to national security as well as the creation or dissemination of a website for a terrorist organization. Security authorities actively monitored internet activity, both to enforce laws, regulations, and societal norms and to monitor recruitment efforts by extremist organizations such as ISIS.

The government reportedly collected information concerning the identity of persons peacefully expressing political, religious, or ideological opinions or beliefs online. According to Freedom House, authorities regularly monitored nonviolent political, social, and religious activists and journalists in the name of national security and maintaining social order. The NGO Citizen Lab reported that NSO Group, an Israeli cybersecurity firm, provided spyware to the government to monitor activists' communications on web-based applications.

Access to the internet is legally available only through government-authorized internet service providers. The government required internet service providers to monitor customers and required internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of customers. Although authorities blocked websites offering proxies, persistent internet users accessed the unfiltered internet via other means.

On a number of occasions, government officials and senior clerics publicly warned against inaccurate reports on the internet and reminded the public that criticism of the government and its officials should be done through available private channels. The government charged those using the internet to express dissent against officials or religious authorities with terrorism, blasphemy, and apostasy.

The press and publications law criminalizes the publication or downloading of offensive sites, and authorities routinely blocked sites containing material perceived as harmful, illegal, offensive, or anti-Islamic. The governmental Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) filtered and blocked access to websites it deemed offensive, including adult content, as well as

pages calling for domestic political, social, or economic reforms or supporting human rights, including websites of expatriate Saudi dissidents.

The CITC coordinated decisions with the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency on blocking phishing sites seeking to obtain confidential personal or financial information. Authorities submitted all other requests to block sites to an interagency committee, chaired by the Ministry of Interior, for decision. Under the Telecommunication Act, failure by service providers to block banned sites can result in a fine of five million riyals (\$1.33 million).

In 2016 the CITC announced it was no longer blocking any free voice, video, or messaging services after criticisms on social media that these services had been blocked. In 2017 the CITC announced the unblocking of calling features for private messenger apps that met regulatory requirements in the country, such as Facebook Messenger, FaceTime, Snapchat, Skype, Line, Telegram, and Tango. On March 12, WhatsApp users reported the unblocking of its calling feature, but the service was reblocked hours later. Other video-calling apps, including Viber, reported services were still blocked.

The government has blocked Qatari websites such as *al-Jazeera* since 2017, due to a dispute between Qatar and a group of countries that included Saudi Arabia.

In 2017 a government official stated that writing for blocked websites, providing them with materials to publish, or promoting alternative addresses to access them is a crime under the cybercrimes law.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted some public artistic expression but opened up cultural expression in a number of areas. Academics reportedly practiced self-censorship, and authorities prohibited professors and administrators at public universities from hosting meetings at their universities with foreign academics or diplomats without prior government permission (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association).

During the year there was an increase in the number of concerts, sports competitions, and cultural performances available to the public. In 2016 King Salman issued royal decrees creating the GEA and the General Authority for Culture with a mandate to expand the country's entertainment and cultural offerings in line with its social and economic reform plan, known as Vision 2030. During the year the GEA sponsored events dedicated to film, comics, music, and

dance. In June 2018 King Salman issued a royal order creating the Ministry of Culture, separating it from the Information Ministry and appointed Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Farhan Al Saud as its minister. The country's first cinema in more than 35 years opened in April 2018, and additional cinemas opened across the country during the year.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law does not provide for freedom of assembly and association, which the government severely limited.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law requires a government permit for an organized public assembly of any type. The government categorically forbids participation in political protests or unauthorized public assemblies, and security forces reportedly arrested demonstrators and detained them for brief periods. Security forces at times allowed a small number of unauthorized demonstrations throughout the country.

Freedom of Association

The law provided for limited freedom of association; however, the government strictly limited this right. The law provides a comprehensive legal framework to govern the establishment, operation, and supervision of associations and foundations. The government, however, prohibited the establishment of political parties or any group it considered as opposing or challenging the regime. All associations must be licensed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and comply with its regulations. Some groups that advocated changing elements of the social or political order reported their licensing requests went unanswered for years, despite repeated inquiries. The ministry reportedly used arbitrary means, such as requiring unreasonable types and quantities of information, to delay and effectively deny licenses to associations.

On August 20, local media reported the issuance of new government regulations that obligate members of the Shura Council and university professors to disclose membership in foreign institutions and associations. These individuals must obtain approval from the relevant authorities before joining any foreign organization.

In 2013 and 2014, the few local NGOs that had operated without a license ceased operating after authorities ordered them disbanded. In the years since banning the

Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) in 2013, the government pursued criminal charges against ACPRA affiliates. In February 2018 the SCC sentenced lawyer and ACPRA-member Issa al-Nukheifi to six years in prison, based on charges of “infringing on the public order and religious values,” “opposing Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen,” and related charges. *Prisoners of Conscience* reported in August that al-Nukheifi was facing additional charges and a new trial.

Government-chartered associations limited membership only to citizens.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The law does not contain provisions for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation.

In-country Movement: The government generally did not restrict the free movement of male citizens within the country. The guardianship system does not require a woman to have the permission of her male guardian (normally a father, husband, son, brother, grandfather, uncle, or other male relative) to move freely within the country (see section 6, Women). Courts, however, sometimes ruled that women should abide by a male guardian’s request to stay at home by “occasionally upholding a guardian’s right to obedience from his female dependents,” according to an HRW report.

Authorities respected the right of citizens to change residence or workplace, provided they held a national identification card (NIC). The law requires all male citizens who are 15 or older to possess a NIC. In 2012 the Ministry of Interior announced it would start issuing NICs to all female citizens at the age of 15, phasing in the requirement over a seven-year period. There was minimal information available regarding whether this initiative was successfully implemented.

In June 2018 the country lifted its longstanding ban on women driving. The process of issuing licenses, however, was slowed by the small number of training schools available to women, which resulted in waiting lists for driving classes,

since a driving school certificate is a requirement to obtain a license. Another obstacle was the high cost of driver's education for women, which international media reported was four to five times as expensive as men's fees, reportedly because women's schools had better technology and facilities.

Foreign Travel: There are restrictions on foreign travel. Many foreign workers require an exit visa and a valid passport to depart the country. Saudi citizens of both genders younger than 21, other dependents, or foreign citizen workers under sponsorship require a guardian's consent to travel abroad. On June 20, *Okaz* reported that married Saudi men younger than 21 no longer require guardian consent to travel abroad. According to Ministry of Interior regulations, a noncitizen wife needs permission from her husband to travel, unless both partners sign a prenuptial agreement permitting the noncitizen wife to travel without the husband's permission. Government entities can ban the travel of citizens and noncitizens without trial, and male family members can "blacklist" women and minor children by reporting them as "disobedient," prohibiting their travel.

On August 1, the government published Royal Decree 134/M, which stipulates that citizens of either gender older than 21 can obtain and renew a passport and travel abroad without guardian permission. The travel regulations entered into effect on August 20. On October 14, local media reported that as many as 14,000 adult women had obtained their passports since August without seeking the consent of their legal guardian.

Employers or sponsors controlled the departure of foreign workers and residents from the country; employers or sponsors were responsible for processing residence permits and exit visas on their behalf. Sponsors frequently held their employees' passports against the desires of the employees, despite a law specifically prohibiting this practice. Foreign workers typically provided sponsors with their residence permit before traveling in exchange for their passport to ensure the worker's return to their employer after their travel.

The government reportedly confiscated passports for political reasons and revoked the rights of some citizens to travel, often without providing them notification or opportunity to contest the restriction. Most travel bans reportedly involved individuals in court cases relating to corruption, state security concerns, or labor, financial, and real estate disputes. Many relatives of citizens detained in relation to the government's anticorruption campaign as well as relatives of detained clerics and human rights activists were also reportedly under travel bans.

The government seized the U.S. passports of the wife and children of dual U.S.-Saudi citizen Walid Fitaihi, barring them from leaving the kingdom and freezing their assets following Fitaihi's detention in 2017. While the international travel ban for family members had been lifted at times during Fitaihi's detention, it was reinstated following Fitaihi's release on bond and subsequent charging in July.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides that the "state will grant political asylum if public interest so dictates." There are no regulations implementing this provision. Generally, there is not a codified asylum system for those fleeing persecution, and the country is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The government permitted refugees recognized by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stay in the country temporarily, pending identification of a durable solution, including third-country resettlement or voluntary repatriation. The government generally did not grant asylum or accept refugees for resettlement from third countries. Government policy is to refuse refugee status to persons in the country illegally, including those who have overstayed a pilgrimage visa. The government strongly encouraged persons without residency to leave, and it threatened or imposed deportation. Access to naturalization was difficult for refugees.

The government granted six-month visas to Syrian and Yemeni citizens, and a royal decree allowed pro forma extensions of these visas. On January 8 and July 11, the General Directorate of Passports announced renewal of visitor identification cards for Yemeni citizens in accordance with royal directives. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported, however, that during the year more than 30,000 Yemenis were deported due to their immigration status (see section 7.e., Acceptable Conditions of Work). In April 2018 then foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir stated that, since the start of the Syrian conflict, the country had taken in approximately two and one-half million Syrians and treated them as its own citizens, providing them with free health care, work, and education. He added that the country's universities and schools had more than 140,000 Syrian students.

The IOM reported that as of August an estimated 300,000 Ethiopians had returned to Ethiopia since the government launched a campaign titled "A Nation without

Violations” in 2017. HRW reported that a number of these migrants came to Saudi Arabia after experiencing persecution by the Ethiopian government and that deportations may have returned individuals to potentially harmful circumstances. HRW also noted migrants had faced abusive prison conditions in Saudi Arabia.

The government did not recognize the right of Saudi citizens to petition for access to asylum or refugee status in foreign countries. In several cases the government prosecuted and penalized Saudi citizens who sought asylum in foreign countries, according to multiple sources (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). In January an 18-year-old Saudi citizen, citing fear for her life, was granted refugee status in Canada after fleeing from her family to Bangkok. Rahaf Mohammed claimed the Saudi embassy in Bangkok tried to force her to return to Saudi Arabia.

Employment: Refugees and asylum seekers were generally unable to work legally, although Syrian and Yemeni citizens who possessed a temporary visa could obtain a visitor card from the Ministry of Interior, which reportedly allows these persons to work. The renewable permits are valid for up to six months and tied to the validity period of their temporary visas; men between the ages of 18 and 60 were eligible to apply. In 2017 the General Directorate of Passports allowed Yemeni men to convert their visitor identification card to a residency permit if their Yemeni passport and visitor identification card were valid.

Access to Basic Services: The government provides preferential access to education, health care, public housing, and other social services to citizens and certain legal residents. A royal decree issued in 2012 permitted all Syrians in Saudi Arabia free access to the educational system and a separate decree issued in 2015 gave Yemenis in Saudi Arabia free access to schools. The Ministry of Education modified these decisions in February 2018, announcing that Syrian and Yemeni students holding visitor identification cards were no longer allowed to enroll in public schools and universities and would have to enroll in private ones at their own expense. The UNHCR office in Riyadh provided a subsistence allowance covering basic services to a limited number of vulnerable families, based on a needs assessment. Authorities worked with UNHCR to provide medical treatment, also following a needs assessment.

g. Stateless Persons

The country had a number of habitual residents who were legally stateless, but data on the stateless population were incomplete and scarce.

Citizenship is legally derived only from the father. Children born to an unmarried citizen mother who is not legally affiliated with the citizen father may be considered stateless, even if the father recognized the child as his, or if the government did not authorize the marriage of a citizen father and a noncitizen mother prior to birth of the children. The nationality laws do not allow Saudi women married to foreign citizens to pass their nationality to their children, except in certain circumstances, such as fathers who are unknown, stateless, of unknown nationality, or do not establish filiation. Sons of citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers may apply for citizenship once they turn 18 (if not already granted citizenship at birth under certain circumstances); daughters in such cases can obtain citizenship only through marriage to a Saudi man. A child may lose legal identification and accompanying rights if authorities withdraw identification documents from a parent (possible when a naturalized parent denaturalizes voluntarily or loses citizenship through other acts). Since there is no codified personal status law, judges make decisions regarding family matters based on their own interpretations of Islamic law.

Foreign male spouses of female citizens can obtain permanent residency in the country without needing a sponsor, and they can receive free government education and medical benefits, although in general they cannot apply for citizenship on the basis of their marriage and residence. These spouses are also included in the quota of Saudis employed in private companies under the labor quota system, which improves their employment prospects. Female citizens must be between the ages of 30 and 50 in order to marry a non-Saudi man. Non-Saudi wives of Saudi men receive more rights if they have children resulting from their marriage with a Saudi man. Male citizens must be between the ages of 40 and 65 in order to marry a non-Saudi woman. The extent to which those strictures were enforced was unclear; there was anecdotal evidence that they were not uniformly enforced. Children of Saudi women who are married to foreign spouses receive permanent residency, but their residency status is revocable in the event of the death of the Saudi mother.

In past years UNHCR unofficially estimated there were 70,000 stateless persons in the country, almost all of whom were native-born residents known locally as *Bidoon* (an Arabic word that means “without” [citizenship]). Updated information on stateless persons was not available. *Bidoon* are persons whose ancestors failed to obtain nationality, such as descendants of nomadic tribes not counted among the native tribes during the reign of the country’s founder, King Abdulaziz; descendants of foreign-born fathers who arrived before there were laws regulating citizenship; and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. As

noncitizens, Bidoon are unable to obtain passports. The government sometimes denied them employment and educational opportunities, and their marginalized status made them among the poorest residents of the country. In recent years the Ministry of Education encouraged them to attend school. The government issues Bidoon five-year residency permits to facilitate their social integration in government-provided health care and other services, putting them on similar footing with sponsored foreign workers. The General Directorate of Passports issued special identification cards to Bidoon similar to residency permits issued to foreigners in the country, but with features entitling their holders to additional government services similar to those available to citizens.

Very small numbers of Baloch, West African, and Rohingya Muslims from Burma resident in Saudi Arabia were stateless. Some Rohingya had expired passports that their home government had refused to renew, or they had entered the country with fraudulent travel documents. Many of them had been held in detention for years following their entry into the country under fake passports. UNHCR estimated there were between 250,000 and 500,000 Rohingya in the country. Some of these individuals benefited from a prior program to correct their residency status; in 2014 the government issued nearly 200,000 four-year residency permits to Rohingya who entered the country prior to 2008. Rohingya who arrived in the country after 2008 were not eligible for residency permits, although NGOs reported that Rohingya, including those without legal residency, were generally not subject to deportation prior to 2018. Upon the expiration of Rohingya residency permits in 2018, media reported more than 100 Rohingya faced deportation to Bangladesh at year's end, and hundreds more were in detention at Shumaisi Detention Center near Mecca. In January the activist group Free Rohingya Coalition said Saudi Arabia continued to deport dozens of Rohingya to Bangladesh and was planning to deport 250 more. On January 26, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, criticized Saudi Arabia for mistreatment of the Rohingya. In April a report indicated that nearly 650 Rohingya refugees at Shumaisi detention center in Jeddah went on a hunger strike, resulting in a number of deaths. Only an estimated 2,000 individuals of Rohingya origin had Saudi citizenship.

There also were between 300,000 and 400,000 Palestinian residents not registered as refugees.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law does not provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage; it establishes an absolute monarchy led by the Al Saud family as the political system. The Allegiance Council, composed of up to 34 senior princes appointed by the king, is formally responsible for selecting a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either. Only select members of the ruling family have a voice in the choice of leaders, the composition of the government, or changes to the political system.

The law provides citizens the right to communicate with public authorities on any matter and establishes the government on the principle of consultation (*shura*). The king and senior officials, including ministers and regional governors, are required to be available through *majlis*, open-door meetings where in theory any male citizen or noncitizen may express an opinion or a grievance without an appointment.

Most government ministries and agencies had women's sections to interact with female citizens and noncitizens, and at least two regional governorates hired female employees to receive women's petitions and arrange meetings for women with complaints for, or requests of, the governor.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2015 elections were held for two-thirds of the 3,159 seats on 284 municipal councils; the government appointed the remaining third. Council members serve until an intervening election--nominally for four-year terms--but there was no active discussion of holding municipal elections during the year. Women were allowed to vote and run as candidates for the first time in 2015. The voting age was also lowered universally to 18 years. The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs actively encouraged women's participation in the municipal elections. Election regulations prohibited candidates from contesting under party affiliation. Twenty-one women won seats and 17 were appointed to seats, totaling approximately 1 percent of all available seats.

The NSHR observed the elections, and select international journalists were also permitted to observe. Independent polling station observers identified no irregularities with the election. Prior to the election, several candidates reported they were disqualified for "violating the rules and regulations" without further explanation. They had the right to appeal, and some were reinstated in time for the

elections. Uniformed members of the security forces, including the military and police, were ineligible to vote.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were no political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically bans a number of organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups. The government continued to regard human rights organizations, such as ACPRA, as illegal political movements and treated them accordingly.

Participation of Women and Minorities: The government changed laws and regulations to open new social and economic opportunities for women, but societal and institutional gender discrimination continued to exclude women from some aspects of public life. Political participation remained restricted, and authorities arrested and abused women's rights activists perceived as critical or independent of the government. Nevertheless, women served in senior advisory positions within government ministries.

On March 8, the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques appointed a female official to a leadership position for the first time, naming Dr. Munira bint Awad al-Jamihi as head the General Directorate for Women's Affairs. On April 1, Minister of Civil Services Sulaiman al-Hamdan appointed Hind al-Zahid as undersecretary for women's empowerment. In June the Ministry of Education appointed five women to leadership positions as undersecretaries and directors general. On August 19, Minister of Education Hamad Al al-Sheikh appointed Ibtisam al-Shehri as the first spokeswoman for public education in the country.

Thirty women were members of the Consultative Council, the 150-person royally appointed body that advises the king and may propose but not pass laws.

Women's ability to practice law was limited; there were no women on the High Court or Supreme Judicial Council and no female judges or public prosecutors. On August 26, however, the PPO announced the appointment of 50 women as public prosecution investigators, marking the first time that women had held this position.

The country had an increasing number of female diplomats. On February 23, a royal decree appointed the first female Saudi ambassador, naming H.R.H. Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud to be ambassador to the United States. In May local media reported that approximately 30 percent of Ministry of Foreign Affairs employees were women.

Bureaucratic procedures largely restricted women working in the security services to employment in women's prisons, at women's universities, and in clerical positions in police stations, where they were responsible for visually identifying other women, for example wearing niqabs, for law enforcement purposes. In June the Ministry of Interior employed women as security guards at the women's offices of the Civil Affairs Departments throughout the kingdom.

No laws prevent male citizens from minority groups from participating in political life on the same basis as other male citizens. Societal discrimination, however, marginalized the Shia Saudi population, and tribal factors and longstanding traditions continued to dictate many individual appointments to positions. Unofficially, government authorities will not appoint a Bedouin tribesman to a high-ranking cabinet-level position, and Bedouins can reach only the rank of major general in the armed forces. All cabinet members from tribal communities were members of urbanized "Hamael" tribes, rather than Bedouin tribes. While the religious affiliation of Consultative Council members was not known publicly, the council included an estimated seven or eight Shia members. The cabinet contained one religious minority member, Mohammad bin Faisal Abu Saq, a Shia Ismaili, who had held the position of Minister of State for Shura Affairs since 2014. Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia Saudis resided, had large proportions of Shia Saudis as members to reflect the local population, including a majority in Qatif and 50 percent in al-Ahsa. Eastern Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption. Some officials engaged in corrupt practices, and perceptions of corruption persisted in some sectors. Government employees who accepted bribes faced 10 years in prison or fines up to one million riyals (\$267,000).

The Supreme Anticorruption Committee, the National Anticorruption Commission (*Nazaha*), the PPO, and the Control and Investigation Board are units of the government with authority to investigate reports of criminal activity, corruption, and "disciplinary cases" involving government employees. These bodies are responsible for investigating potential cases and referring them to the administrative courts.

While Nazaha is responsible for promoting transparency and combating all forms of financial and administrative corruption, the relationship between Nazaha and the newer Supreme Anticorruption Committee was unclear. Nazaha's ministerial-level director reported directly to the king. In 2015 the Shura Council criticized Nazaha for its failure to refer for investigation a sufficient number of corruption cases. The council also stated the public did not believe Nazaha could handle its responsibility to investigate and punish corruption.

Legal authorities for investigation and public prosecution of criminal offenses are consolidated within the PPO; the Control and Investigation Board is responsible for investigation and prosecution of noncriminal cases. Financial audit and control functions are vested in the General Auditing Board. The HRC also responded to and researched complaints of corruption.

On December 12, King Salman issued three royal decrees consolidating anticorruption responsibilities under a single entity, the new Control and Anticorruption Commission. The decrees consolidate the Control and Investigation Board, Mabath's Administrative Investigations Directorate (within the General Investigation Directorate), and the National Anticorruption Commission (Nazaha) into the new commission, which is to be led by Mazen bin Ibrahim al-Khamous, who assumed leadership of Nazaha in August. The consolidated agency is intended to have criminal investigation and prosecutorial authorities that its predecessors lacked. As with Nazaha, the new Control and Anticorruption Commission will report directly to the king.

Provincial governors and other members of the royal family paid compensation to victims of corruption during weekly majlis meetings where citizens raised complaints.

Corruption: Nazaha continued operations and referred cases of possible public corruption to the PPO. Nazaha reported that the commission received 15,591 complaints in 2018, up from 10,402 in 2017.

On January 29, local media reported the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs suspended 126 local government employees at municipalities across the kingdom on corruption charges. "They are charged with involvement in a number of cases including financial and managerial corruption, abuse of power, as well as other legal and criminal violations," the ministry announced on Twitter.

On February 5, Public Prosecutor Saud al-Mu'jab announced the launch of the Financial Reports Office, part of the government's General Auditing Bureau. Al-Mu'jab noted the office would monitor state spending and help sustain the fight against corruption after the end of the anticorruption campaign, which the Royal Court announced on January 30.

The Royal Court noted that in the anticorruption campaign, launched in 2017, the government had recovered 400 billion riyals (\$106.7 billion) in cash, real estate, and other assets as settlements. It added that the anticorruption committee, led by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, summoned 381 individuals for questioning and reached financial settlements with 87 suspects. Eight individuals declined to settle and were referred to the PPO. The cases of an additional 56 individuals were not settled due to preexisting criminal charges against them, the Royal Court stated.

Human rights organizations criticized the government for using the anticorruption campaign as a pretext to target perceived political opponents and for arbitrarily detaining and abusing individuals targeted in the crackdown (see sections 1.c. and 1.d., Pretrial Detention).

In September the government appointed a new Supreme Anticorruption Committee head who announced he would prioritize elimination of corruption in the government ministry and agency ranks.

Financial Disclosure: The government had a uniform schedule of financial disclosure requirements for public officials.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The law provides that “the State shall protect human rights in accordance with Islamic sharia.” The government restricted the activities of domestic and international human rights organizations. The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to be based in the country and restricted access to the country for visits. International human rights and humanitarian NGOs reported the government was at times unresponsive to requests for information and did not establish a clear mechanism for communication with NGOs on both domestic human rights issues and issues relating to the conflict in Yemen. There were no transparent standards governing visits by international NGO representatives. The HRC stated that the government welcomed visits by legitimate, unbiased human

rights groups but added the government could not act on the “hundreds of requests” it received, in part because it was cumbersome to decide which domestic agencies would be their interlocutor.

The government often cooperated with and sometimes accepted the recommendations of the NSHR, the sole government-licensed domestic human rights organization. The NSHR accepted requests for assistance and complaints about government actions affecting human rights.

The government viewed unlicensed local human rights groups with suspicion, frequently blocking their websites and charging their founders with founding and operating unlicensed organizations.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The government had mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse. The HRC is part of the government and requires the permission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before meeting with diplomats, academics, or researchers with international human rights organizations. The HRC president has ministerial status and reports to the king. The well-resourced HRC was effective in highlighting nonpolitically sensitive problems and registering and responding to the complaints it received, but its capacity to effect change was more limited. The HRC worked directly with the Royal Court and the cabinet, with a committee composed of representatives of the Consultative Council and the Ministries of Labor and Social Development and Interior, and with Consultative Council committees for the judiciary, Islamic affairs, and human rights.

During the year the HRC and NSHR were more outspoken in areas deemed less politically sensitive, including child abuse, child marriage, prison conditions, and cases of individuals detained beyond their prescribed prison sentences. They avoided topics such as protests or cases of political activists or reformers that would require directly confronting government authorities. The HRC board’s 18 full-time members included four women and at least three Shia members; they received and responded to complaints submitted by their constituencies, including problems related to persons with disabilities, religious freedom, and women’s rights. The Consultative Council’s Human Rights Committee also actively followed cases and included women and Shia among its members; a woman served as chairperson of the committee.

The HRC and NSHR maintained records of complaints and outcomes, but privacy laws protect information about individual cases, and information was not publicly available. According to HRC figures, the body received at least 1,070 human

rights-related complaints between January and April. On January 5, the NSHR stated it received 2,871 complaints in 2017. Topics of complaints included labor, abuse, citizenship, social welfare, health, and education. During the year the Board of Grievances held hearings and adjudicated claims of wrongdoing, but there were no reported prosecutions of security force members for human rights violations.

The HRC, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, provided materials and training to police, other security forces, the Ministry of Defense, and the CPVPV on protecting human rights.

Military and security courts investigated abuses of authority and security force killings. The Board of Grievances, a high-level administrative judicial body that hears cases against government entities and reports directly to the king, is the primary mechanism to seek redress for claims of abuse. Citizens may report abuses by security forces at any police station or to the HRC or NSHR.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is a criminal offense under sharia with a wide range of penalties, from flogging to execution. The law does not recognize spousal rape as a crime. The government enforced the law based on its interpretation of sharia, and courts often punished victims as well as perpetrators for illegal “mixing of genders,” even when there was no conviction for rape. Victims also had to prove that the rape was committed, and a woman’s testimony in court was not always accepted.

Due to these legal and social obstacles, authorities brought few cases to trial. Statistics on incidents of, and prosecutions, convictions, or punishments for rape were not available, but press reports and observers indicated rape was a serious problem. Moreover, most rape cases were likely unreported because victims faced societal and familial reprisal, including diminished marriage opportunities, criminal sanction up to imprisonment, or accusations of adultery or sexual relations outside of marriage, which are punishable under sharia.

The law against domestic violence provides a framework for the government to prevent and protect victims of violence in the home. The law defines domestic abuse broadly and criminalizes domestic abuse with penalties of one month to one

year of imprisonment or a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 riyals (\$1,330 to \$13,300), unless a court provides a harsher sentence.

Researchers stated it was difficult to gauge the magnitude of the problem, which they believed to be widespread. The National Family Safety Program, a quasi-governmental organization under the Ministry of National Guard, is charged with spreading awareness of and combatting domestic violence, including child abuse, and continued to report abuse cases.

Officials stated the government did not clearly define domestic violence and procedures concerning cases, including thresholds for investigation or prosecution, and thus enforcement varied from one government body to another. Some women's rights advocates were critical of investigations of domestic violence, claiming investigators were hesitant to enter a home without permission from the male head of household, who may also be the perpetrator of violence. Some activists also claimed that authorities often did not investigate or prosecute cases involving domestic violence, instead encouraging victims and perpetrators to reconcile in order to keep families intact, regardless of reported abuse. There were reports of police or judges returning women directly to their abusers, most of whom were the women's legal guardians.

On January 15, the PPO ordered an investigation into a video posted on social media in which a young woman alleged abuse by her father and described her escape from her family's home. No updates were available by year's end.

The government made efforts to combat domestic violence. On November 24, the HRC held a symposium on ending violence against women that had participation from government ministries as well as from academia, media, and foreign missions. During the year the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue held workshops and distributed educational materials on peaceful conflict resolution between spouses and within families. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development administered government-supported family-protection shelters. Women reported that remaining in the shelters was not always voluntary.

The HRC received complaints of domestic abuse and referred them to other government offices. The HRC advised complainants and offered legal assistance to some female litigants. The organization provided services for children of female complainants and litigants and distributed publications supporting women's rights in education, health care, development, and the workplace.

Women reported that domestic abuse in the form of incest was common but seldom reported to authorities due to fears over societal repercussions, according to local sources.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): FGM/C was not a common practice in the country. The official government interpretation of sharia prohibits the practice.

Sexual Harassment: The extent of sexual harassment was difficult to measure, with little media reporting and no official government data. On August 28, local media reported a 4 percent drop in harassment cases during the year but did not specify the number of harassment cases or cite sources for the data. Otherwise, no statistics were available on the incidence of sexual harassment due to past reluctance to report violations.

In May 2018 the Council of Ministers passed the sexual harassment law, which carries a maximum penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to 300,000 riyals (\$80,000).

On May 11, the public prosecution issued a statement on its Twitter page explaining the legal definition of harassment, noting that the law provides for penalties of up to two years in prison and fines of up to 100,000 riyals (\$26,700).

Local media reported at least five incidents of harassment in the first half of the year. On June 7, the PPO filed an objection to the preliminary sentence issued against a man arrested in May for sexually harassing a female driver. The PPO requested that the initial sentence of 10 months' imprisonment and 5,000-riyal fine (\$1,330) be increased to the maximum penalty under the sexual harassment law.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: Women continued to face discrimination under law and custom. New regulations issued during the year, however, granted women many of the same rights enjoyed by men pertaining to travel abroad, civil status, and employment.

The restrictions under the guardianship system, which require women to have permission from close male relatives to conduct certain actions, were loosened during the year.

The new amendments to the Civil Status Regulation, which entered into effect on September 4, grant women older than 18 the right to perform several actions pertaining to civil status that were previously limited to men. These include registering the birth of a child; registering the death of a spouse or close relative; registering a marriage or divorce (whether initiated by the husband or wife); and being designated “head of household,” thereby allowing women to serve as the guardian of their minor children. Women can also obtain from the Civil Status Administration a “family registry,” which is official documentation of a family’s vital records that verifies the relationship between parents and children. This move allows mothers to perform administrative transactions for their children, such as registering them for school or obtaining services at a hospital.

Women may legally own property and are entitled to financial support from their guardian. They can make their own determinations concerning hospital care. Women can work without their guardian’s permission, but some employers required women to have such permission, even though the law prohibits the practice. In February 2018 the Ministry of Commerce and Investment announced women no longer need their male guardian’s permission to start a business. Women still require a guardian’s permission to exit prisons after completing their terms.

In July 2018 two men were arrested in Mecca for setting fire to a female motorist’s car. The motorist, Salma al-Sherif, subsequently posted a widely circulated video on social media documenting the incident, claiming that her car was deliberately set alight by men “opposed to women drivers,” and that she had been repeatedly threatened and harassed by young men from her village of Samad in Mecca Province. In October 2018 the Mecca Criminal Court acquitted the two defendants for lack of sufficient evidence. During the year al-Sherif successfully appealed the verdict; on July 21, the Mecca Criminal Court sentenced the defendants to 11 months’ imprisonment and 240 lashes. The court awarded al-Sherif 50,000 riyals (\$13,300) in restitution.

The law prohibits women from directly transmitting citizenship to their children, particularly if the children’s father is a noncitizen (see section 2.d. and section 6, Children). The country’s interpretation of sharia prohibits women from marrying non-Muslims, but men may marry Christians and Jews. Women require government permission to marry noncitizens; men must obtain government permission if they intend to marry citizens from countries other than Gulf Cooperation Council-member states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar,

and the United Arab Emirates). Regulations prohibit men from marrying women from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Chad, and Burma. The government additionally requires Saudi men wishing to marry a second wife who is a foreigner to submit documentation attesting to the fact that his first wife was disabled, had a chronic disease, or was sterile.

Societal pressures restricted women from using some public facilities. Some but not all businesses still required or pressured women to sit in separate, specially designated family sections in public places. In a June 2 press conference, Jeddah Mayor Saleh al-Turki gave his support for ending gender segregation in Jeddah's restaurants and markets. Turki's comments prompted at least several Jeddah restaurants and coffee shops to dismantle barriers separating family and male-only seating areas. In December the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs ended the requirement for restaurants throughout the country to provide separate sections for males and families.

Cultural norms selectively enforced by state institutions require women to wear an *abaya* (a loose-fitting, full-length cloak) in public. In September the chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, Ahmed al-Khateeb, stated abayas would not be mandatory for foreign tourists but modest dress covering shoulders and knees was mandatory.

In June a Saudi woman was barred by male security guards from entering an upscale shopping mall in Riyadh because she was not wearing an abaya. In a video posted to social media, the woman said the guards told her she was not dressed modestly.

Women also faced discrimination in courts, where in some cases, the testimony of a woman equals half that of a man. All judges are male, and women faced restrictions on their practice of law (see section 3, Participation of Women and Minorities, regarding the appointment of women as public prosecution investigators). In divorce proceedings women must demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men may divorce without giving cause, citing "irreconcilable differences." In doing so, men must pay immediately an amount of money agreed at the time of the marriage that serves as a one-time alimony payment. Men may be forced, however, to make subsequent alimony payments by court order. The Ministry of Justice reported that it compelled 7,883 fathers to pay alimony in 2018. The government began implementing an identification system based on fingerprints, designed to provide women more access to courts, even if they chose to cover their faces with the niqab covering.

Women faced discrimination under family law. For example, a woman needs a guardian's permission to marry or must seek a court order in the case of *adhI* (male guardians refusing to approve the marriage of women under their charge). In such *adhI* cases, the judge assumes the role of the guardian and may approve the marriage. During the year courts executed marriage contracts for women whose male custodians refused to approve their marriage, according to informed judicial sources quoted by local media. Courts considered as many as 321 *adhI* cases between September 2018 and February 5.

Courts routinely award custody of children when they attain a specified age (seven years for boys and nine years for girls) to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family. In numerous cases former husbands prevented divorced noncitizen women from visiting their children. In March 2018 Justice Minister Sheikh Walid Al-Samaani directed all courts to drop the requirement for divorced women to file a lawsuit in order to gain custody of their children. Provided there were no disputes between the parents, mothers may simply submit a request to the relevant court, without the need for legal action.

Inheritance laws also discriminate against women, since daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers.

According to recent surveys, women constituted 52 percent of public education and higher education students. Segregated education through university level was standard. The only exceptions to segregation in higher education were medical schools at the undergraduate level and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a graduate-level research university, where women worked jointly with men, were not required to wear an abaya, and drove cars on campus. Other universities, such as al-Faisal University in Riyadh, offered partially segregated classes with students receiving instruction from the same teacher and able to participate together in class discussion, but with the women and men physically separated by dividers. In August Minister of Education Hamad Al al-Sheikh announced the assignment of female teachers to educate boys in public elementary schools for the first time.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from the father, and both the father and mother may register a birth. There were cases of authorities denying public services to children of citizen parents, including education and health care, because

the government failed to register the birth entirely or had not registered it immediately, sometimes because the father failed to report the birth or did not receive authorization to marry a foreigner. Children of women who were married to foreign spouses receive permanent residency, but their residency status is revocable in the event of the death of the Saudi mother (see section 2.d., Stateless Persons).

Child Abuse: Abuse of children occurred. The National Family Safety Program operated a Child Helpline dedicated to assisting children in matters ranging from bullying to abuse, providing counseling, tracking, and referrals to social services. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development had 17 Social Protection Units across the country providing social protection to children younger than 18 as well as other vulnerable populations suffering domestic violence and abuse.

Early and Forced Marriage: The law does not specify a minimum age for marriage, although Ministry of Justice guidelines referred marriage applications to sharia courts to determine the validity of a marriage when the bride was younger than 16. Families sometimes arranged such marriages to settle family debts without the consent of the child. The HRC and NSHR monitored cases of child marriages, which they reported were rare or at least rarely reported, and took steps to prevent consummation of the marriage. Media reports quoted judges as saying the majority of child marriage cases in the country involved Syrian girls, followed by smaller numbers of Egyptians and Yemenis. There were media reports that some men who traveled abroad to find brides sought to marry minors. The application for a marriage license must record the bride's age, and registration of the marriage is a legal prerequisite for consummation. The government reportedly instructed marriage registrars not to register marriages involving children.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The cybercrimes law stipulates that punishment for such crimes, including the preparation, publication, and promotion of material for pornographic sites, may be no less than two and one-half years' imprisonment or a fine of 1.5 million riyals (\$400,000) if the crime includes the exploitation of minors. The law does not define a minimum age for consensual sex.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There was no known data on Jewish citizens and no statistics available concerning the religious denominations of foreigners.

Cases of government-employed imams using anti-Jewish language in their sermons were rare and occurred without authorization by government authorities. The law requires government-employed imams to deliver all sermons in mosques in the country. Sermons are vetted and cleared by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. During the year the ministry issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their sermons.

Some NGOs reported that anti-Semitic material remained in school textbooks and online in private web postings and that some journalists, academics, and clerics made anti-Israel comments that sometimes strayed into anti-Semitism. Saudi Council of Senior Scholars member and Muslim World League secretary-general Mohammed al-Issa condemned anti-Semitism and intolerant speech.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, the judicial system, or the provision of other state services or other areas. The law does not require public accessibility to buildings, information, and communications. Newer commercial buildings often included such access, as did some newer government buildings. Children with disabilities could attend government-supported schools.

Persons with disabilities could generally participate in civic affairs, and there were no legal restrictions preventing persons with disabilities from voting in municipal council elections. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development is responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation projects and social care programs increasingly brought persons with disabilities

into the mainstream. Persons with disabilities were elected and appointed to municipal councils in 2015, and two individuals with disabilities served on the consultative Shura Council, which was reconstituted in 2016.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although racial discrimination is illegal, societal discrimination against members of national, racial, and ethnic minorities was a problem. There was also discrimination based on tribal or nontribal lineage. Descendants of former slaves in the country, who have African lineage, faced discrimination in both employment and society. There was formal and informal discrimination, especially racial discrimination, against foreign workers from Africa and Asia. In August an advertisement on social media seeking female participants for a military parade requested that applicants be of “white” or “medium white” skin tone. Event organizers said they had already recruited a similar number of women of darker skin tones. A tolerance campaign by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue sought to address discrimination, and it provided training during the year to combat discrimination against national, racial, or ethnic groups.

The government’s multi-year Tatweer project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam began in 2007. In November 2018 the Anti-Defamation League issued a report asserting that Saudi textbooks still contained anti-Semitic language and hate speech against other minority religions.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Under sharia as interpreted in the country, consensual same-sex sexual conduct is punishable by death or flogging, depending on the perceived seriousness of the case. It is illegal for men “to behave like women” or to wear women’s clothes, and vice versa. Due to social conventions and potential persecution, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) organizations did not operate openly, nor were there LGBTI rights advocacy events of any kind. There were reports of official and societal discrimination, physical violence, and harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, access to education, and health care. Stigma or intimidation acted to limit reports of incidents of abuse.

There were no government efforts to address discrimination. In 2016 newspapers quoted PPO officials as stating the bureau would seek death sentences for anyone

using social media to solicit homosexual acts. There were no reports, however, that the PPO sought death sentences in LGBTI cases during the year (see section 1.a.).

During the year local newspapers featured opinion pieces condemning homosexuality and calling on authorities to harshly punish individuals engaging in same-sex relations.

In September, two Saudi male journalists fled the country, claiming authorities revealed their romantic relationship to relatives in retaliation for contacts they had with foreign media. The journalists sought asylum in Australia.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no reports of societal violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS. By law the government deported foreign workers who tested positive for HIV/AIDS upon arrival or who tested positive when hospitalized for other reasons. There was no indication that HIV-positive foreigners failed to receive antiretroviral treatment or that authorities isolated them during the year. The Ministry of Health's HIV/AIDS program worked to counter stigma and discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Social, legal, economic, and political discrimination against the country's Shia minority continued. HRW claimed that some state clerics and institutions "incited hatred and discrimination against religious minorities, including the country's Shia Muslim minority."

To address the problem, the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard included antidiscrimination training in courses offered by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue for police and other law enforcement officers (see section 6, Other Societal Violence and Discrimination).

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law does not provide for the right of workers to form and join independent unions. The law does not provide for the right to collective bargaining or the right

to conduct legal strikes. The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination or require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The government did not respect freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. There were no labor unions in the country, and workers faced potential dismissal, imprisonment, or, in the case of migrant workers, deportation for union activities.

The government allowed citizen-only labor committees in workplaces with more than 100 employees, but it placed undue limitations on freedom of association and was heavily involved in the formation and activities of these committees. For example, the ministry approves the committee members and authorizes ministry and employer representatives to attend committee meetings. Committee members must submit the minutes of meetings to management and then transmit them to the minister; the ministry can dissolve committees if they violate regulations or are deemed to threaten public security. Regulations limit committees to making recommendations to company management that are limited to improvements to working conditions, health and safety, productivity, and training programs.

In April 2018 Riyadh governor Prince Faisal bin Bandar Al Saud warned against illegal assemblies by workers to protest delayed salaries. He advised that foreign workers should seek recourse from the offices of provincial governors and through legal processes, and he reiterated the importance of both employers' and employees' abiding by their contractual obligations.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law. Forced labor occurred, especially among migrant workers--notably domestic servants. Conditions indicative of forced labor experienced by foreign workers included withholding of passports; nonpayment of wages; restrictions on movement; and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Labor law prohibits the confiscation of passports and nonpayment of wages. Violations of labor laws could result in penalties, but these did not sufficiently deter violations. Many noncitizen workers, particularly domestic employees not covered under the labor law, were unable to exercise their right to end their contractual work. An employer may require a trainee to work for him or her upon completion of training for a period not to exceed twice the duration of the training or one year, whichever is longer.

Restrictive sponsorship laws increased workers' vulnerability to forced labor conditions and made many foreign workers reluctant to report abuse. The contract system does not allow workers to change employers or leave the country without the written consent of the employer under normal circumstances. If wages are withheld for 90 days, a ministerial decree permits an employee to transfer his or her sponsorship to a new employer without obtaining prior approval from the previous employer. There were reports, however, that the Ministry of Labor and Social Development did not always approve petitions to transfer sponsorship due to withheld wages, including some cases in which wages had been withheld for more than three months. During the year numerous migrant workers reported being dismissed, sometimes after months of nonpayment of salaries. Some remained stranded in the country because they were unable to pay required exit visa fees. A few countries that previously allowed their citizens to migrate to the country for work prohibited their citizens from seeking work in Saudi Arabia after widespread reports of worker abuse.

The government continued implementation of the Wage Protection System (WPS), which requires employers to pay foreign workers through bank transfers, thereby allowing the ministry to track whether workers were paid appropriately. All employers with more than 10 employees were required to comply with WPS regulations as of 2017. WPS covered five million employees in 34,000 businesses. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development fined companies for delaying payment for employees' salaries on the first occurrence and blocked companies from accessing government services if a company delayed salaries for two or more months. The fines appeared to be insufficient to deter violations.

Throughout the year the government strictly implemented measures to limit the number of noncitizen workers in the country. The government also penalized Hajj tourist agencies that engaged in human smuggling and local companies that abused the country's visa laws to bring individuals into the country for reasons other than to employ them directly. A smaller number came as religious pilgrims and overstayed their visas. Because of their undocumented status, many persons in the country were susceptible to forced labor, substandard wages, and deportation by authorities.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the worst forms of child labor. The law provides that no person younger than 15 may legally work unless that person is the sole source of support for the family. Children between the ages of 13 and 15 may work if the job is not harmful to health or growth and does not interfere with schooling. The law provides that hazardous operations or harmful industries may not employ legal minors, and children younger than 18 may not be employed for shifts exceeding six hours a day. There is no minimum age for workers employed in family-owned businesses or other areas considered extensions of the household, such as farming, herding, and domestic service. Penalties generally were considered sufficient to deter violations.

The HRC and NSHR are responsible for monitoring enforcement of child labor laws. There was little information on government efforts to enforce relevant laws or actions to prevent or eliminate child labor during the year. Authorities most commonly enforced the law in response to complaints of children begging on the streets.

Most child labor involved children from other countries, including Yemen and Ethiopia, forced into begging rings, street vending, and working in family businesses.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Labor laws and regulations do not prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national origin or citizenship, social origin, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, age, language, or HIV-positive status. Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation occurred with respect to all these categories. There are no effective complaint resolution mechanisms present to deter these discriminatory regulations and practices.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Development explicitly approved and encouraged the employment of women in specific sectors, particularly in government (see section 3, Participation of Women and Minorities) and retail, but women faced many discriminatory regulations. The first-quarter *Labor Market Report* by the General Authority for Statistics found that Saudi girls and women (15 years of age and above) constituted 8.4 percent of the country's total labor force (Saudi and non-Saudi, 15 years of age and above). The same report estimated that women and girls, both Saudi and foreign, represented 17.8 percent of all employed persons (15 years of age and above) in the country. Most non-Saudi women were employed as domestic workers. Rules limited the type of work

women were allowed to perform and required them to wear a veil. In practice gender segregation continued to take place in the workplace.

There is no regulation requiring equal pay for equal work. In the private sector, the average monthly wage of Saudi women workers was 58 percent of the average monthly wage of Saudi men. Labor dispute settlement bodies did not register any cases of discrimination against women.

In recent years the government decreased the number of restrictions on women's employment in various sectors (see sections 3 and 6, Women). The most recent reform came in October, when the government announced women could enlist in the military. There were no women working as judges or as members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars. Women are barred from work in mining, oil refineries, construction, and power generation. Nevertheless, some factories and manufacturing facilities, particularly in the Eastern Province, employed men and women, who worked separate shifts during different hours of the day. The law grants women the right to obtain business licenses without the approval of their guardians, and women frequently obtained licenses in fields that might require them to supervise foreign workers, interact with male clients, or deal with government officials. Although it is illegal for a potential employer to ask a female applicant for her guardian's permission when she applies for a job, some employers required them to prove such permission. In medical settings and the energy industry, women and men worked together, and in some instances women supervised male employees. Women who work in establishments with 50 or more female employees have the right to maternity leave and childcare.

By an amended decree effective on September 4, labor and social insurance regulations mandate that employers treat all workers equally and bar discrimination "between workers on the basis of gender, disability, age, or any other forms of discrimination, whether in work, employment or advertising [a] vacancy." The decree expands previous regulations barring employers from firing female workers on maternity leave and includes protection from dismissal for pregnancy-related illness if the absence is less than 180 days per year. The amendments also raised the mandatory retirement age of women to 60, the same as for men.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Development is responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation projects and social care programs increasingly brought persons with disabilities into the mainstream. In June the Ministry of Education stated it had taken measures to integrate disabled

students, including special education programs in regular schools, training faculty members who work with students with disabilities, and providing technological instruments for students with disabilities free of charge.

Discrimination with respect to religious beliefs occurred in the workplace. Members of the Shia community complained of discrimination based on their religion and had difficulty securing or being promoted in government positions. They were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. In predominantly Shia areas, Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police and employees of municipalities and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies (see section 3, Participation of Women and Minorities). Shia were also underrepresented in employment in primary, secondary, and higher education.

Discrimination against Asian and African migrant workers occurred (see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities). The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue continued programs that sought to address some of these problems and provided training during the year to combat discrimination against national, racial, or ethnic groups. There were numerous cases of assaults on foreign workers and reports of worker abuse.

Informal discrimination in employment and occupation occurred on the basis of sex, gender, race, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 2017 the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Passports announced a national campaign to identify, arrest, fine, and deport individuals found in violation of the country's residency laws under the title of "Nation without Violators." The campaign began with a 90-day grace period or general amnesty to allow irregular migrants to depart the country "without penalty," after which authorities extended the grace period in coordination with international organizations. The Ministry of Interior stated that nearly 4.15 million foreign citizens were arrested between November 2017 and November 2019 for violating work, residency, and entry rules. Approximately 1,036,800 violators were deported during the cited period, according to the ministry. The Human Rights Committee reported that law enforcement agencies had been trained in screening vulnerable populations for human trafficking indicators and the campaign was being carried out in accordance with protections against trafficking in persons.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly minimum wage for public-sector employees was above the estimated poverty-income level. There was no private-sector minimum wage for foreign workers, and the government did not mandate a general minimum private-sector wage for citizens.

By law a standard workday is eight hours. A standard workweek is 48 hours but can extend to 60 hours, subject to payment of overtime, which is 50 percent more than the basic wage.

An estimated 9.4 million noncitizens, including approximately 947,000 noncitizen women, made up approximately 76 percent of the labor force, according to the General Authority for Statistics labor market survey for the fourth quarter of 2018. Legal workers generally negotiated and agreed to work conditions prior to their arrival in the country, in accordance with the contract requirements contained in the labor law.

The law provides penalties for bringing foreigners into the country to work in any service, including domestic service, without following the required procedures and obtaining a permit. The penalties were insufficient to deter violations.

The labor law provides for regular safety inspections and enables ministry-appointed inspectors to examine materials used or handled in industrial and other operations and to submit samples of suspected hazardous materials or substances to government laboratories. The government effectively enforced the law. The Ministry of Health's Occupational Health Service Directorate worked with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development on health and safety matters. Regulations require employers to protect some workers from job-related hazards and disease, although some violations occurred. These regulations did not cover farmers, herdsmen, domestic servants, or workers in family-operated businesses. Foreign citizens privately reported frequent failures to enforce health and safety standards. The ministry employed nearly 1,000 labor inspectors.

The law requires that a citizen or business must sponsor foreign workers in order for them to obtain legal work and residency status, although the requirement exempts Syrian and Yemeni citizens who overstayed their visas. According to the IOM, 32,532 Yemenis were deported between January and July due to their immigration status. The ministry implemented measures allowing noncitizen

workers to switch their employer to a new employer or company that employed a sufficient quota of Saudi citizens. Despite these revised measures, some workers were unaware of the new regulations and had to remain with their sponsor until completion of their contract or seek the assistance of their embassy to return home. There were also instances in which sponsors bringing noncitizen workers into the country failed to provide them with a residency permit, which undermined the workers' ability to access government services or navigate the court system in the event of grievances. Sponsors with commercial or labor disputes with foreign employees also could ask authorities to prohibit employees from departing the country until the dispute was resolved. Authorities, however, would not jail or forcibly return fleeing workers who sought to exit the country within a 72-hour period or coordinate with their embassy for repatriation as long as the employees did not have criminal charges or outstanding fines pending against them.

Bilateral labor agreements set conditions on foreign workers' minimum wage, housing, benefits including leave and medical care, and other topics. These provisions were not drafted in line with international standards, and they varied depending on the source country's relative bargaining power. The labor law and the law against trafficking do not provide penalties to deter abuse of such workers.

The government engaged in news campaigns highlighting the plight of abused workers, trained law enforcement and other officials to combat trafficking in persons, and worked with the embassies of labor-source countries to disseminate information about labor rights for foreign workers. As in previous years, during Ramadan the HRC broadcast a public awareness program on television emphasizing the Islamic injunction to treat employees well.

The government did not always enforce the laws protecting migrant workers effectively. There were credible reports that some migrant workers were employed on terms to which they had not agreed and experienced problems, such as delays in the payment of wages, changes in employer, or changed working hours and conditions. Migrant workers, especially domestic workers, were vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and conditions contravening labor laws, including nonpayment of wages, working for periods in excess of the 48-hour workweek, working for periods longer than the prescribed eight-hour workday, and restrictions on movement due to passport confiscation. There were also reports of physical and verbal abuse.

There were credible reports that some noncitizen workers, particularly domestic employees, were unable to exercise their right to remove themselves from

dangerous situations. Some employers physically prevented workers from leaving or threatened them with nonpayment of wages if they left. Sponsoring employers, who controlled foreign workers' ability to remain employed in the country, usually held foreign workers' passports, a practice prohibited by law. In some contract disputes, sponsors asked authorities to prevent the employee from leaving the country until resolution of the dispute to coerce the employee into accepting a disadvantageous settlement or risking deportation without any settlement.

While some foreign workers were able to contact the labor offices of their embassies for assistance, domestic workers experienced challenges when attempting to gain access to their embassies, including restrictions on their freedom of movement and telephone access, confiscation of their passports, and being subjected to threats and verbal and physical abuse. During the year hundreds of domestic workers, the majority of whom were female, sought shelter at their embassies, some fleeing sexual abuse or other violence by their employers. Some embassies maintained safe houses for citizens fleeing situations that amounted to bondage. The workers usually sought legal help from embassies and government agencies to obtain end-of-service benefits and exit visas.

In addition to their embassies, some domestic servants could contact the NSHR, the HRC, the governmental Interministerial General Secretariat to Combat Human Trafficking, and the Migrant Workers' Welfare Department, which provided services to safeguard migrant workers' rights and protect them from abuse. Some were able to apply to the offices of regional governors and lodge an appeal with the Board of Grievances against decisions by those authorities.

On October 13, refiner SASREF reported an apparent industrial accident killed two workers and injured two others during maintenance work. On February 11, the General Organization for Social Insurance stated that at least 47 persons working in the private sector died and 291 others were injured as a result of workplace accidents the previous year.