

A brief reading of human rights trends in the Arab region

New aspects of human rights crises during the Covid-19 pandemic



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Annual Report 2020

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Co-Founder

Dr. Mohamad Essayed Said

Founded in 1993, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) is an independent regional non-governmental organization which aims to promote respect for the principles of human rights and democracy in the Arab region. For this purpose, CIHRS focuses on analyzing the difficulties facing the application of international human rights law, disseminating a culture of respect for human rights in the region, and engaging in dialogue between cultures regarding the various international human rights treaties and declarations. CIHRS further seeks to attain this objective by developing, proposing, and promoting changes to policy and practice in the Arab region in order to bring them in line with international human rights standards. In addition, CIHRS conducts human rights advocacy at national, regional, and international human rights mechanisms, carries out research, and provides human rights education, both for youth and for established human rights defenders seeking ongoing professional development. CIHRS is a major publisher of information related to human rights in the Arab region, and its publications include a magazine, an academic quarterly, and scores of books dealing with various human rights-related issues.

A key component of CIHRS' mandate is to help shape the understanding of and discourse around the most pressing human rights issues in the Arab region. CIHRS then seeks to coordinate and mobilize the key players and NGOs across the Arab world to work together to raise public awareness about these issues and to reach solutions in line with international human rights law.

CIHRS enjoys consultative status with the United Nations ECOSOC and observer status with the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights. CIHRS is also a member of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX). CIHRS was awarded the French Republic Award for Human Rights in December 2007.

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Lessons from 2020 to the Arab Region

Introduction to the 2020 Annual Report

Bahey eldin Hassan

The Arab Spring erupted a decade ago, yet the reasons behind this wave of uprisings remain unaddressed. The Arab Spring's aftermath continues to ripple across the region, even in Tunisia, the only country that had progressed to democratic transition. These ripple effects have coalesced into unique forms, depending on the country. In countries such as Egypt, political repression has deepened, while the struggle over societal values are simply surface indicators of deeply entrenched issues. Meanwhile, armed conflict prevails in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, where civil society has embraced a heroic role in its traditional and modern forms of organization. In Tunisia, Sudan, and Lebanon, where there is relative freedom, the political frontlines are clearer.

The issue of transforming political power or changing the governing regime was brought to the forefront by the Arab Spring. Although many major uprisings have taken place over the past half century, they were relatively isolated acts of protest against economic, political or security issues. Perhaps the obstinate resistance of most Arab governments to reform has led peoples throughout the region to view political revolution as the only option for change, thereby elevating fundamental political change as the central demand in both the first and second waves of the Arab Spring. Yet the majority of political parties and groups behind these demands were ill-equipped to implement genuine reform, as evidenced by their failure to formulate a viable strategy for reform before and after the first wave Arab Spring. It is feared that these parties remain unprepared for genuine change.

Given the paucity of willing or capable reformists among the political opposition, the urgency of redefining the role of political parties in the Arab region is apparent, a redefinition that includes distinguishing their role from that of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations do not aspire to rule, but only to formulate demands on governments or the opposition (when governing) for implementation. The role of human rights organizations is limited to monitoring and evaluating implementation. Conversely, the role of political parties in the Arab region does not end with the formulation of public demands, even if the demands are valid and supported by the majority of citizens.

Opposition political parties' efforts should not be limited to formulating catchy slogans, capturing the imagination and enthusiasm of the public in order to garner support, and to protest against the ruling parties' failure to adopt policies embodying these slogans. Opposition political parties also cannot be circumscribed within the scope of movements demanding change. The main concern of the opposition must be to develop a detailed and well-studied roadmap, and to convince governments and public opinion of the merit of this alternative path, which should then be implemented upon taking office. Political parties that shrink their role to the raising of demands should consider restructuring their entities as civil associations or social movements.

The decline in the role of political parties in the Arab region is not only a consequence of tyranny. After ten years, secular and Islamic political elites and parties in Tunisia have failed to fulfill their basic functions in the most democratic political context in the Arab region. These functions include setting a realistic economic plan that adopts the social demands raised by the Arab Spring. Such a plan would not limit itself to simply articulating demands, it would instead extend beyond this articulation to genuinely address the demands of citizens for dignity. The suicide by self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was a tragic plea for a dignified life that was heard and heeded throughout the region, setting aflame an unprecedented revolutionary movement ten years ago. A democratic system is undoubtedly the best system for governing, but it is not a magic formula for solving all challenges arising from different facets of life and governance. Regardless, an integrated detailed scientific vision and plan drafted by specialized professionals and experts is crucial for enabling the governing system to address the main challenges in each field independently.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shed light yet again on this two-tiered truth: the need for democratic governance and the need for technocratic or expert management, whether in democratic countries with a relatively strong economies, such as the United States, or in authoritarian countries such as the majority of those in the Arab region. In the Arab region, the pandemic has brought the dysfunction and fragility of national health systems to the front and center of citizens' attention. When citizens attempted to defend their right to life – jeopardized by some Arab states' bungling healthcare systems – they found no audible platform from which to address governments and public opinion. Thus, they resorted to social media, the only apparent available platform through which they could express their concerns and criticisms. Their opinions were indeed sometimes heard by the authorities in their countries, who responded not with remedy or redress, but with repression. Nonviolent persons, journalists, and even doctors on the frontlines of the pandemic found themselves thrown into prison, often for the first time.

It is difficult to foresee any progress in economic, social, and cultural rights without at least a minimal standard of civil and political rights in developing countries, especially while facing the most dangerous pandemic in nearly a century. Upholding fundamental rights requires a freely elected parliament or legislature with the power to monitor public spending priorities, and the ability to compel governments to reprioritize in favor of their constituents' dignity and demands. It is imperative for countries to have independent popular institutions like media, unions, and syndicates -to effectively defend the rights of all, especially those most vulnerable to having their rights restricted or denied. There must be independent state and civil society institutions capable of exposing institutional corruption and enforcing accountability. Most Arab countries do not possess these institutions and conditions, subjecting even nonviolent citizens demanding non-political rights to prosecution and imprisonment. The pandemic has further widened the scope of repression, with authoritarian governments in some Arab countries, most blatantly in Egypt, Algeria, and Syria, treating the public health crisis as an opportunity to tighten their security grip, rather than as a threat to the lives of millions of their citizens.

Throughout 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy. The United Nations¹ and international financial institutions expect these adverse economic repercussions to worsen throughout the Arab region in 2021. The massive collapse in oil prices and the long-term failure of economic development have led to the highest rate of youth unemployment in the region in a quarter of a century - with over eighty percent of working age persons in the region not stably employed, a rate higher than that of anywhere else in the world. In addition to endemic economic insecurity, the region is also saturated with pervasive distrust² among citizens towards their governments. With state credibility undermined by decades of non-transparent

1 United Nation, Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region An Opportunity to Build Back Better, July 2020. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf

2 WORLD BANK MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION, MENA ECONOMIC UPDATE APRIL 2020, How Transparency Can Help the Middle East and North Africa? <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33475/9781464815614.pdf>

and negligent governance, international institutions anticipate an onset of severe political turmoil in 2021.

Do secular and Islamist opposition parties have alternative visions and projects, and deliberate policies, to counter this looming crisis? Or will these parties be content to just take to the streets and chant impassioned slogans alongside the crowd, in protest of their suffering?

Holding a position of leadership has a duty, at minimum an obligation to provide thoughtful and viable alternatives, instead of only smothering the hopes and aspirations of the oppressed and marginalized. Political actors that substitute the task of formulating alternative comprehensive visions and projects, with that of drafting slogans for dignity and social justice, are political actors that have failed in their most fundamental duty, regardless of whether they are subjected to police repression like in Egypt, or enjoy relative freedom, like in Tunisia.

The human rights situation has progressively pervaded nearly all facets of life in the Arab region, becoming more deeply embedded in the struggles and quotidian interactions of peoples, especially ethnic and religious minorities. Moreover, defenders of human rights have become more esteemed in comparison to oppositional political actors, becoming of greater concern to authoritarian governments. Nevertheless, most opposition and reformist political parties and groups, both secular and Islamic, must seriously reassess their role in the twenty-first century, in order transform into modern parties, and develop their work methods, political discourse, and relations with civil society, especially human rights organizations. These parties and groups should also reconstruct their worldview in regards to negotiating relationships with the international community and its institutions.

Political initiatives taken toward reassessment have been very limited; neither proportionate to the historic magnitude of the Arab Spring nor to the enormity of the human price paid, a price still being paid to this day. Most of the initiatives are either individual in nature – launched by academics, writers, or activists; and when they

emerge from within political parties, these initiatives also originate from individuals rather than collectively or institutionally. The most important of recent political initiatives may be in Syria, including the publications of the Al-Jumhuriya website, and intellectual Burhan Ghalioun's book "Self-Destructiveness: The Facts of an Unfinished Revolution." Published two years ago, the book is based on Ghalioun's experience as chairman of the National Transitional Council, the first coalition representing the Syrian political opposition during the Arab Spring.

In Egypt, a limited number of leaders from the April 6 Youth Movement attempted a reassessment initiative six years ago; the initiative was never completed. In addition, there have been important indications of re-evaluation by current or former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, outside the group's institutional framework. Within Tunisia's Islamist movement, Ennahda, an important pragmatic review is underway. Its completion has been stalled by an apparent power struggle within the movement over the succession of its leader, Rached Ghannouchi.

An important qualitative step on the path to reform is represented by the Hope Coalition in Egypt, initiated by Zyad el-Elaimy, a leading figure of the January 25th revolution. The Hope Coalition – an alliance representing an array of oppositional political forces in Egypt – can be considered the first political initiative in the country of an institutional –rather than an individual–nature that structured itself upon an evaluation process. Although this process wasn't announced, it was discernible from the nature and formation of the coalition, its objectives, and ways in which it represented itself. This likely explains why Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al -Sisi smothered the coalition in its infancy, before it could grow into a viable political opposition force.

Overall, these limited intellectual and political initiatives reflect the urgency of collective efforts to reassess and draw upon lessons, not only in relation to the past decade, but also for the purpose of materializing new visions for the future, including realistic plans of action and modes of operation in the twenty-first century. These reassessments may not only be useful for a specific political group, but they may also

prove valuable to the process of shaping the region's future, or at least the future of some of its countries.

Why do we, as rights' advocates, care about this seemingly political issue and always urge oppositional political entities to undergo a process of revision? Simply because we, as advocates, can only appeal, and mobilize pressure to reject antiquated human rights standards. But it is politicians who possess the means necessary to either adapt countries to the current century or keep them mired in the dark ages for even longer.

The call of the Arab Spring cannot be demarcated as simply a call for the ouster of presidents, nor as only a call for reform or legitimate elections. Rather, the call of the Arab Spring was and continues to be a manifestation of a long-term historical process, driven by the aspiration of the peoples of the region to live according to the actual times. In doing so, the erstwhile era, and its outmoded values and systems of rule, must be buried while a new social contract is developed. Only then can the region rid itself of the decaying social contract inherited from the national liberation era over half a century ago. There must be an intellectual component to this political process; hence also rendering a cultural revolution as necessary in the Arab region. Yet the chronic collapse of education systems in most countries of the region over the past half-century has not helped produce an adequate number of reliable intellectuals. Thus, the peoples of the region still primarily consume the works of the Arab intellectuals who were educated in the first half of the twentieth century.

The year 2021 may constitute another important milestone in the struggle of peoples in the Arab region to determine their political trajectory, and thus the future of their economic, healthcare, and educational systems. Their struggle this time is not against foreign occupation but against their own ruling governments. The scale of crimes and violations committed by Arab governments against hundreds of millions of their own people would put some former colonial powers to shame.

Some foreign powers are, however, still complicit in this repression; perhaps none more so than the US administration of Donald Trump, which had bestowed

unconditional political support to several authoritarian governments in the region as well as the Saudi-Emirati coalition in Yemen, acting to reinforce counterrevolutionary forces against the proponents of the Arab Spring. Thus, the Trump administration's departure represents a key opportunity in 2021. To make the most of this opportunity, not only must political and cultural elites learn from the lessons of the recent past, but they must also learn about their historic task at the present moment, and rise to this task.

Despite the existent threat of terrorism in the Arab region, the dominance of the counterterrorism narrative over the discourse of some political parties or groups and human rights organizations must be denounced. Terrorist activity has been retreating in the region over the past five years, yet the counterterrorism discourse continues to predominate, directly and indirectly functioning to grant political and moral legitimacy to the authoritarian projects and policies of governments and militias. These repressive and corrupt policies and projects are an underlying cause of terrorism in the Arab region. Yet rather than move away from the draconian practices and practices that provoke acts of terror, countries such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria continue to invest in the counterterrorism discourse as "legitimate" cover for their widespread repression and corruption.

Even in Palestine, the site of the only remaining foreign occupation in the world, it is difficult to conceive of achieving liberation from Israeli occupation upon the shoulders of rulers that - for nearly a quarter of a century since the Oslo Accords - have been inspired by patterns of authoritarian rule in the Arab region³. Local governing authorities in Palestine deliberately suppress Palestinians every day in the Bantustans of the West Bank and Gaza, whether by honing their own repressive⁴ capacities or

3 Al-shabaka, "Palestine and COVID-19: Lessons for Leadership During Times of Crisis", September 10, 2020.
<https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/palestine-and-covid-19-lessons-for-leadership-during-times-of-crisis/>

4 Metras, "The Palestinian judiciary .. How does Abbas secure himself?", February 2, 2021.
<https://bit.ly/3b1AVAy>

supporting the Israeli occupation⁵ and its apartheid system, instead of supporting the empowerment and liberation of the Palestinian people.

Palestinians are facing challenges compounded by diminishing material conditions for implementing the “two-state solution,” amid metastasizing settlements. Israel rejects the establishment of a bi-national state, given that Palestinians are the demographic majority. This may pave the way to ethnic cleansing in one form or another. In addition, Arab popular and governmental support for the Palestinian cause appears to be at its weakest in seventy years.

There are indications of a peaceful Palestinian Spring. But it will likely require a painful critical review of previous positions by segments of Palestine's political elite, beginning with their support of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait three decades ago. Another necessary reckoning for some Palestinian elites must be on their hostile stance towards the Arab Spring, which included the glorification of political thugs and symbols of tyranny in the Arab region, such as Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, and Qasem Soleimani, among others.

In his previous submission to the annual report of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), the author had referred to the political responsibility resting upon civil society in the Arab region, including in Palestine. Perhaps the severe defect in the performance of traditional political parties, as aforementioned in this introduction, doubles the weight of this political responsibility. A political role is not new for civil society, which unlike conventional political parties, has always been the engine behind important transformations before and after the Arab Spring, in its first and second waves. It is civil society - and the younger generations belonging to it - that infused fresh ideas crossing ideologies into these parties, renewing their lifeblood. Today, there is a gaping gulf- between state and society, between the rulers and the ruled - that cannot be bridged by new uprisings alone. Instead, it must be bridged by new, original, and qualitative initiatives, differing from one country to the next in the

⁵ Arabi 21, "Israeli Centre: Defeating Abbas in the elections is not in our interest", February 4, 2021.
<https://arabi21.com/story/1333423/>

Arab region. Civil society may be best-qualified to undertake this task, over any other entity.

New aspects of human rights crises during the Covid-19 pandemic

A brief reading of human rights trends in the Arab region¹

The human rights situation in the Arab region, which has already been deteriorating for years, is deteriorating even more rapidly in 2020 with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially afflicting economic and social rights, and humanitarian conditions. In many Arab countries, the pandemic has further exposed structural imbalances encumbering the efficiency of public institutions and facilities, particularly in the health sector, amid an absence of social justice and equal opportunities for

¹ This summary report monitors the most important human rights indicators in the Arab region during 2020. The report does not aim to provide any exclusive monitoring of human rights violations, but rather seeks to read the most important patterns of these violations in their local and regional political contexts.

citizens. The pandemic has also displayed the state's weakness and fragility in providing social and economic security to its citizens, while increasing the pressures and risks burdening the most vulnerable groups in Arab societies, including women, minorities, foreign workers, irregular migrants, millions of refugees and displaced persons, and about fifty-five million people surviving on humanitarian aid.² Taking into consideration the pandemic and its repercussions, the amount of irregular migration from the southern Mediterranean has surged, reaching more than 11,800 people as of July 2020. This is triple the number of irregular migrants in 2019, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.³

In the Arab region, years of scant public spending has led to the underdevelopment of the health sector, weakening its ability to meet the needs of citizens, in addition to the stark disparity in health care service provision between different cities and regions within the same country. Eight countries from the Arab region - Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, and Somalia- are classified by the World Bank as "fragile and conflict-affected" and host fifty-six percent of the people facing poverty in the region.⁴ The pandemic has laid bare the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the festering conflicts in these countries, incapacitating health sectors and undermining public facilities. Several countries in the region were neither prepared nor had the resources, equipment, and medical personnel to effectively cope with the pandemic.⁵

2 Rowaq Arabi (2020) 'Views: Covid-19, the Crisis Compounding the Fragility of an Exhausted Region', Rowaq Arabi, November 27, 2020.

<https://rowaq.cihrs.org/views-covid-19-the-crisis-compounding-the-fragility-of-an-exhausted-region/?lang=en>

3 Ibid.

4 Brookings (2020) 'Governance in the Arab region: Experts discuss public responses to COVID-19, September 3, 2020.

<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/governance-in-the-arab-region-experts-discuss-public-responses-to-covid-19/>

5 Goldstein, Eric (2020) 'When Health Care is Decimated by War: COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa' April 16, 2020 .

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/when-health-care-decimated-war-covid-19-middle-east-and-north-africa>

Ten years have passed since the onset of the Arab Spring revolutions and uprisings, which to this day have shaped the trajectories and profound crises facing the political and human rights situation in the Arab region. Due to the faltering and retreat of the Arab Spring revolutions, human rights violations – and the erasure of any potential alternatives to their perpetuation - underpin the continuity and stability of regimes and their beneficiaries. The most prominent violations are arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial execution, enforced disappearance, torture, and the imprisonment of opposition in cruel and inhumane conditions; in addition to political trials, harassment of human rights defenders and peaceful political opposition, and restriction of civil society and media and online platforms used for expression.

Many of these grave human rights violations and crimes in the region, including the killing and displacement of civilians, directly stem from protracted armed conflicts. Fueled by accumulated internal causes over decades, this ongoing warfare has prolonged the suffering of millions of people in countries such as Yemen, Libya and Syria. Regional and international powers, and the understandings or divisions between them, has influenced the trajectories of these conflicts, and the severity of their human costs. In Libya, the year 2020 closed with renewed hopes of achieving a peace settlement in the near future between the warring factions, following the signing of the ceasefire agreement and the continuation of dialogue for a political solution. Meanwhile, the hotbed of conflict in Yemen -with its intervening regional and international parties- continues indefinitely. In Syria, the government of Bashar al-Assad, backed militarily and politically by its allies in Iran and Russia, succeeded in imposing its political agenda within and beyond Syria's borders, despite wreaking a heavy humanitarian toll on the Syrian people.

There are indications of a reemergence of the Arab Spring's values, evidenced by many widespread and ongoing popular protests over the last two years in several Arab countries including Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon, and to a limited extent Libya and Egypt. There has been an accompanying increase in demands for social justice and radical political reform, and against corruption, as the political factors and social

disparities that ignited the first wave of the Arab Spring have persisted or worsened. Large sectors of Arab societies participated in the new wave of protests, especially the youth, who were especially hard-hit by counterrevolutionary repression, as well as the poorest and most marginalized population groups outside the capitals of major cities.

Although the pandemic has impacted and stalled popular movements, this appears to be limited to the short-term. Mobilization and protests have been recurring over the past year and the beginning of the new year, with the pandemic further exacerbating the grim social and economic contexts in which the protests occurred while highlighting governments' inefficient management of public affairs and resources.⁶ According to United Nations data for the month of July, the pandemic has led to the contraction of Arab economies for the first time in fifty years, with declines between 5.7 percent and 13 percent in countries experiencing armed conflicts, while a quarter of the region's population fell into poverty, and more than seventeen million people lost their jobs. The plummet in oil prices in the first half of 2020 has also had ramifications for the energy-exporting economies in the Gulf region, Iraq and Algeria, and those receiving aid or labor remittances from oil-rich countries.⁷

Protests continued in Iraq and the Kurdistan region, amid an escalation in the killing and assassination of protesters and activists by armed groups, and in the absence of a centralized authority able to counteract impunity. In Lebanon, large-scale protests resumed following the deadly explosion of 4 August in Beirut Port. In Egypt's poorest and most marginalized areas, a wave of sporadic protests lasting for several days erupted in September. Meanwhile in Jordan, there was a revival of teachers' protests demanding salary increases and an improvement in living conditions after the

6 Rowaq Arabi (2020) 'Views: Understanding Risks and Investing in Opportunities while Defending Human Rights in the Time of COVID-19', July 22, 2020.

<https://rowaq.cihrs.org/views-understanding-risks-and-investing-in-opportunities-while-defending-human-rights-in-the-time-of-covid-19/?lang=en>

7 See United Nations, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region' July, 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/>

[SG%20Policy%20brief%20COVID-19%20and%20Arab%20States%2C%20English%20version%2C%20July%202020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SG%20Policy%20brief%20COVID-19%20and%20Arab%20States%2C%20English%20version%2C%20July%202020.pdf)

government retracted its agreements with the teachers' union in September 2019, due to the economic repercussions of the pandemic.⁸

Protests centered on social and political demands began in Sudan, calling for the fulfillment of the goals of the revolution that toppled President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and the improvement of living conditions. Despite the transitional authorities' adoption of several political and human rights reforms over the past year, multiple concerns about country's democratic transition remain. In Tunisia, renewed social protests erupted despite the longevity of democratic institutions in the country over the past decade since the revolution's ouster of then-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. These protests stemmed from the public's dissatisfaction with the performance of successive governments in improving social and economic conditions and completing institutional reforms. The Tunisian government responded to these protests with security restrictions and a disregard for their demands.

At the same time, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and its spread in a number of other western countries, has reverberated throughout the Arab region. Deep, systematic and institutional discrimination based on racism is a reality for many groups of people across the region, especially foreign workers, immigrants and refugees. Campaigns for racial justice have stoked public debate in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states.⁹ 2020 concluded with the election of a new Democratic administration in the US, raising hopes for the reversal of Donald Trump's policies, which have contributed to a global climate hostile to human rights. The four years of the Trump presidency has buffered America's authoritarian allies in the Arab region, none more so than Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The new US President Joseph Biden has pledged that America's return to global

⁸ Al Jazeera (2020) 'Jordan arrests leaders of teachers' union in opposition crackdown', July 25, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/25/jordan-arrests-leaders-of-teachers-union-in-opposition-crackdown>

⁹ Dadouch, Sarah (2020) 'Black Lives Matter Protests Spark Debate over Racism in the Arab World', The Washington Post, July 8, 2020.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/black-lives-matter-protests-spark-debate-over-racism-in-the-arab-world/2020/07/07/83234c5e-b7ab-11ea-9a1d-d3db1cbe07ce_story.html

leadership will be premised upon an anti-authoritarian agenda that prioritizes human rights within the United States and internationally, including at the United Nations.

Exploiting the pandemic to deepen repression

Many governments in the Arab region have sought to cover up their lack of transparency on data regarding Covid-19, while restricting the right of citizens to assess the effectiveness of measures enacted to confront the pandemic. Security measures were strengthened, and activists and bloggers prosecuted in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These measures far exceed the exceptional circumstances permitted by international human rights law. In March, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates published an alert threatening legal prosecution against anyone spreading data or misinformation or rumors.¹⁰ In Egypt, midway through 2020, a number of doctors and healthcare personnel were arrested for their criticism of the government's response to the pandemic; their criticism included grievances about a lack of medical equipment and unsafe working conditions. Most of them were charged with “spreading false statements and news,” “misusing social media,” and “belonging to a terrorist group.”¹¹

In April during the state of emergency in Jordan, the government issued a decree stipulating a penalty of up to three years in prison and/or a fine for circulating any news in media or online social networking platforms about the pandemic that would

10 Amnesty International (2020) ‘COVID-19 is New Pretext for Old Tactics of Repression in GCC’, October 15, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE0431362020ENGLISH.pdf>

11 Amnesty International (2020) ‘Egypt: Health Care Workers Forced to Make Impossible Choice Between Death or Jail’, June 18, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/egypt-health-care-workers-forced-to-make-impossible-choice-between-death-or-jail/>

cause panic and fear among the public. Journalists and a former parliamentarian were among those arrested under this decree.¹²

Covid-19 has represented an opportunity for most governments in the region to pass measures hostile to rights and freedoms.¹³ In Algeria, amendments to the penal code restricting the work of human rights organizations and political activists were adopted in June. Several other attempts to enact repressive legislation were also made in Morocco and Tunisia but civil society resistance in both countries managed to thwart it. In Egypt, a broad amendment was passed to the emergency law in April, expanding the powers of the president and the military. In Libya, the Civil Society Commission adopted strict procedures in October for the work and registration of local and international NGOs.

The pandemic has also imposed challenges on protest movements that have been erupting since February 2019 in Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria, considered by some analysts to be the second wave of the Arab Spring uprisings. In mid-March, protesters in Algeria temporarily halted their weekly protests due to health safety concerns, while the government imposed a ban on public activities and gatherings, movement and loitering. During the same period and under the guise of the pandemic, the Algerian government expanded the arrest and prosecution of members and leaders of the movement. The European Parliament condemned the arrests and trials in a November resolution.

In Libya, the Government of National Accord, headed by Fayeze al-Sarraj, imposed a total curfew for four days at the end of August under the pretext of confronting the pandemic. The curfew coincided with the call of youth movements for protests condemning spiraling corruption and deteriorating living conditions. Meanwhile in July

12 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Jordan: Free Speech Threats Under Covid-19 Response', May 5, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/jordan-free-speech-threats-under-covid-19-response>

13 Thiry, Alexis (2020) 'Will COVID-19 Create a Human Rights Crisis in the Middle East and North Africa?', October 1, 2020.

<https://www.justsecurity.org/72643/will-covid-19-create-a-human-rights-crisis-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

and August, the government of Jordan exploited the pandemic to use force to disperse demonstrations in solidarity with teachers. Protest leaders and trade unionists were arrested while the teachers' union was suspended, with its headquarters shutdown for two years.¹⁴

The predicament of prisons and prisoners under the pandemic

Fears heightened in regards to the wellbeing of prisoners and the conditions of prisons under the Covid-19 pandemic in Arab countries. Prisons in the region, including those of the Israeli occupation, are already notorious for violations, overcrowding and inhumane conditions. The pandemic did not discourage most governments in Arab countries from continuing to arrest and detain their citizens, in appalling conditions, for reasons related to politics or free expression despite calls by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights¹⁵ and other international humanitarian agencies to urgently release prisoners of conscience, and anyone detained without adequate legal basis, to ease overcrowding and ensure the health safety of detainees.

Following many reports of the virus's spread in prisons throughout the Arab region, in many cases transmitted by prison staff, accurate data on the pandemic – together with information on health safety measures taken by prison administrations to protect detainees- was concealed by the authorities from the public and detainees' families. Political detainees in Egypt, including prominent journalists, intellectuals, and human rights defenders, suffer from abysmal prison conditions and the denial of healthcare, putting their health and lives acutely at risk. Hunger strikes were initiated over the past year by detainees in Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon,

14 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Jordan: Teachers' Syndicate Closed; Leaders Arrested', July 25, 2020.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/30/jordan-teachers-syndicate-closed-leaders-arrested>

15 OHCHR (2020) 'Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 "rampaging through places of detention" Bachelet', March, 25, 2020.
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25745&LangID=E>

Algeria and the disputed Western Sahara region, to pressure the authorities to improve prison conditions.

The risks and tribulations in prisons and detention centers are doubled for detainees in countries experiencing armed conflict, such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Detainees are neither protected by any regulations nor given access to any means of communication. Prolonged enforced disappearance or incommunicado detention is common in these conflict-riven countries.

When governments did pardon prisoners or release detainees, they excluded human rights defenders, political activists and media workers from the scope of these decisions, as was the case in Bahrain, the UAE, Egypt, and Algeria.¹⁶

Targeting digital rights and freedom of expression online

2020 saw an upsurge in internet censorship and the violation of digital privacy, taken as measures to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. In both Morocco and Iraq, laws were drafted on cybercrime, the articles of which imposed broad restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression on the internet, and increased censorship of blogs and social media platforms. In Lebanon, the Cybercrime Bureau of the Internal Security Forces was particularly active during the year in summoning bloggers, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens for interrogation - some were arrested and brought to trial - over critical comments, blogs or online posts about the corruption of politicians and state officials. The Lebanese authorities forced some bloggers and activists to sign pledges to halt their online activities in exchange for their release. About 140 activists came under investigation between 2015 and 2020, during a wave of social protests against corruption and abuse of power.¹⁷

¹⁶ Al Jazeera (2020) 'Calls to release Prisoners of Conscience in the Arab world amid Covid-19 pandemic' March 17, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3eoGU4u>

¹⁷ Daraj (2020) 'Lebanese authorities' crackdown on social media activists' November 30, 2020. <https://daraj.com/60918/>

Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq issued a decree in June establishing the Cyber Defense Center “to combat activities that affect the Sultanate’s security and stability.” The decree granted Internal Security broad powers to control internet users, phones, and computers in a country known for its security and judicial prosecution of bloggers and advocates for years in response to their online publication of commentary.¹⁸ Since March 2020, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria have intensified censorship of the internet and social media, issuing threats against the publication of any inaccurate data about the pandemic. These measures have resulted in dozens of investigations and prosecutions against bloggers, private citizens, and news sites, especially in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.¹⁹ The Jordanian authorities blocked the video broadcasting service on Facebook during the teachers' protests at the end of July.²⁰

Meanwhile, authorities in Egypt continue to use the Cybercrime Law to arrest and prosecute activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders, with widening security and judicial tracking under the pretext of protecting public morals and “Egyptian family values” from bloggers and YouTubers, women in particular.²¹ The Egyptian government blocked over six hundred websites since May 2017, including media, human rights and cultural sites. The laws issued in 2018, regulating press and media and combating

18 Gulf Centre for Human Rights (2020) ‘Oman: Internal security service establishes new mechanism of control over the Internet’, July 13, 2020.

<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2428>

19 Amnesty International (2020) ‘COVID-19 is New Pretext for Old Tactics of Repression in GCC’ October 15, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE0431362020ENGLISH.pdf>

20 Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘Jordan: Arrests, Forced Dispersal at Teacher Protests’, August 1, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/27/jordan-arrests-forced-dispersal-teacher-protests>

21 Al Jazeera (2020) ‘Egypt’s rising digital authoritarianism’, September 24, 2020

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/9/24/egypts-rising-digital-authoritarianism/>.

& Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘Egypt: Spate of ‘Morality’ Prosecutions of Women’, August 17, 2020

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/17/egypt-spate-morality-prosecutions-women>.

information technology crimes, granted the authorities legal cover to expand internet censorship.²²

22 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Egypt: Government called on to end internet censorship and website blocking', November 4, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/egypt-government-called-on-to-end-internet-censorship-and-website-blocking/?lang=en>

Analysis of development indicators on the human rights situation

Egypt

The government of Egypt continues to regularly perpetrate grave human rights violations against an array of victims from diverse backgrounds within Egyptian society. The human rights movement and independent media have persisted in disseminating documentation about these violations, despite facing security risks and a security blockade. Their persistence is a testament to the ability of human rights defenders to resist and adapt, in order to raise awareness in local and international public opinion about the country's human rights situation. Furthermore, the government's relentless arrest campaign during the year reflects the persistence of dissatisfaction with, and resistance to, the government's policies, especially policies

concerning human rights and social and economic rights. The arrests targeted political activists and human rights defenders, media professionals, peaceful protesters, and academics.

Anti-terrorism legislation provided the legal justification used by the government to systematically arrest, indict, and bring to trial opponents, activists, and others exercising their right to free expression. The anti-terrorism laws and the emergency law were amended in 2020, expanding the powers of the executive and the armed forces during the state of emergency, which was imposed throughout this year. Inhumane conditions, and the prevalence of abuse and torture in detention sites and prisons, are among the main concerns regarding the human rights situation in Egypt. These violations prompted a number of Egyptian human rights organizations to request the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to demand access to visit and inspect the condition of detention sites, especially in consideration of the absence of effective and transparent mechanisms in the country to protect the rights of detainees and prisoners.¹

Many deaths of prisoners in ambiguous circumstances accumulated amid suspicions that their deaths were linked to their appalling detention conditions or the denial of healthcare, commonly inflicted as a form of punishment against political prisoners. Mustafa Kassem, an Egyptian-American national, died in January 2020 while serving a fifteen-year prison sentence in Tora Leman prison; he had been prosecuted under the case known in the media as the "Rabaa dispersal" case. Kassem was suffering from diabetes and his health deteriorated after going on a hunger strike to protest his detention conditions. Shady Habash, a young film director who had been held in pretrial detention since March 2018, died from allegedly consuming alcohol used for cleaning in May 2020, according to a vague statement from the Egyptian Public Prosecutor. Reports and testimonies indicate that the prison authorities were slow to

¹ Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Egypt: Rights groups renew demand for Red Cross oversight of prisons', January 17, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-rights-groups-renew-demand-for-red-cross-oversight-of-prisons/?lang=en>

rescue him.² Journalist Mohamed Mounir, and liberal thinker and activist Amin al-Mahdi, died in July and October respectively after their health rapidly deteriorated in the days following their release.

Many other prisoners, of all genders, resorted to hunger strikes inside prisons to protest dire conditions, medical neglect and inadequate healthcare, which had led to the deaths of their cellmates.³ Blogger and human rights activist Alaa Abdel Fattah resorted to a hunger strike in April in protest against his protracted pretrial detention during which he has been prevented from communicating with his family, since 27 September 2019. Abdel Fattah's family described his detention conditions as “the worst of all of his previous detentions dating back to 2006.”⁴ The majority of detained political opponents, activists, and media professionals have been languishing in pretrial detention for prolonged periods without any trial. Some of them, who were ordered to be released, were arrested again pending new cases to ensure their continued detention, a phenomenon known as “recycling cases.”

In January 2020, Mohamed al-Qassas, deputy president of the opposition party Strong Egypt, was ensnared in a “recycled case” when the Supreme State Security Prosecution renewed his detention for fifteen days pending a new case. The renewal of his detention immediately followed an order for his release, after he had spent nearly two

2 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Open Letter to the Egyptian Ministry of Justice’, May 22, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/open-letter-to-the-egyptian-ministry-of-justice/?lang=en>

3 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: Ill-treatment and arbitrary measures trigger new hunger strike at Istiqbal Tora prison’, October 14, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/egypt-ill-treatment-and-arbitrary-measures-trigger-new-hunger-strike-at-istiqbal-tora-prison/?lang=en>

4 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: #FreeAlaa: Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah on hunger strike protesting his continued illegal detention’, April 30, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/freealaa-egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-on-hunger-strike-protesting-his-continued-illegal-detention/?lang=en>

years in solitary confinement pending trial. The new case was based on notoriously biased “national security investigations” lacking any credible evidence.⁵

In light of the risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Egyptian and international human rights organizations demanded the immediate release of prisoners of conscience and political detainees, to reduce the overcrowding of prisons and detention sites. The authorities ignored these demands and deliberately silenced any critics of their pandemic policies; even doctors were not spared from detainment and fabricated accusations.⁶

The Egyptian authorities expanded their security campaigns in 2019, arresting many prominent figures in politics, media and human rights, while charging them collectively under flimsy cases related to peaceful political, human rights or media activities. This has led to the detention of a number of journalists, advocates and politicians under case no. 488 of 2019, including journalists Esraa Abdel-Fattah, Solafa Magdy, Hossam al-Sayyad, and Khaled Dawoud; human rights researcher Ibrahim Ezz el-Din; professor Hazem Hosni; and lawyers Mahienour El-Masry and Amr Imam. They faced the frequently-used charges of “joining a terrorist group,” “spreading false news,” and “misusing social media.”⁷ Although the Cairo Criminal Court released Ibrahim Ezz el-Din on 27 December, pending the case, his detention was renewed in January 2021. He was charged in another case, no. 1018 of 2020, for “joining a terrorist group.” The

5 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: Detainees Ensnared in Prison System by Illegitimate Practice of “Recycling Cases”, January 22, 2020.

https://cihrs.org/egypt-detainees-ensnared-in-prison-system-by-illegitimate-practice-of-recycling-cases-tampering-with-egypts-judiciary-to-keep-government-critics-perpetually-behind-bars/?lang=en#_ftn1

6 Egyptian Front for Human Rights (2020) ‘Second wave of Covid-19 pandemic: prosecution must release all detained doctors and follow the regulations of Doctors Syndicate’, September 11, 2020.

<https://egyptianfront.org/ar/2020/09/corona2-doctors/>

7 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: Close Case 488 and immediately release all defendants’, January 23, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-close-case-488-and-immediately-release-all-defendants/?lang=en>

charges are based National Security investigations, and his lawyer has not been allowed to see the case files.

Lawyer Zyad el-Elaimy, journalist Hossam Mo'anes, and Palestinian-Egyptian activist Ramy Shaath are among the political activists who have been arrested since June 2019 in case no. 930 of 2019, known as the 'Hope Case.' They were charged with "joining the Muslim Brotherhood to achieve their objectives," and "spreading false news on social media, to disrupt peace and overthrow the regime." In April, some of the defendants in case no. 930 of 2019, including Zyad el-Elaimy and Ramy Shaath, were placed on a terrorist list for five years. El-Elaimy was previously sentenced on 10 March to one year in prison and a fine of 20,000 LE in another case for "insulting the President," on the basis of comments he made during a televised interview with the BBC in 2017.⁸

Human rights lawyer Mohamad el-Baquer also remains detained after he was arbitrarily arrested at the State Security Prosecution office in September 2019, while attending an investigation as a lawyer defending his client, activist Alaa Abdel Fattah. El-Baquer was charged under Criminal Case 1356 of 2019 by State Security Prosecution, in the same case as Abdel Fattah; they were both accused of "belonging to a terrorist group," "funding a terrorist group," and "spreading false news undermining national security." In November, the Cairo Criminal Court added Mohamed el-Baquer and Alaa Abdel Fattah, among others, on the terrorist list, which also includes former presidential candidate and head of the Strong Egypt Party, Dr. Abdel Moneim Aboul-Fotouh and his deputy, Mohamed al-Qassas. Being listed as a terrorist activates the seizure of funds, the freezing of assets, a ban on travel, dismissal from work for government employees, and a revocation of membership in professional syndicates.⁹

⁸ Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Grave concerns over prominent activists Ramy Shaath and Zyad al-Elaimy being added to Egypt's "terrorists list", April 25, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/grave-concerns-over-prominent-activists-ramy-shaath-and-zyad-al-elaimy-being-added-to-egypts-terrorists-list/?lang=en>

⁹ Almanassa (2020) 'Terrorism lists: absent constitutional guarantees and a loose meaningless term', November 25, 2020.

<https://almanassa.com/ar/story/15437>

Several limited social protests broke out in September in a number of governorates, mainly concentrated in spread-out marginalized and poor districts.¹⁰ Over one thousand people were arrested in connection with these protests, including sixty-nine children, whom were later released by the prosecution. This wave of protests resulted in the death of at least one person due to torture. Journalists were also arrested over these protests, including Islam el-Kalhy, a journalist at the independent local news website Darb.¹¹

Researchers have also faced abuse by the authorities; Patrick George Zaki, a researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and graduate student at the University of Bologna, was arrested upon his return to Cairo in February 2020. Zaki was detained and interrogated by National Security, and subjected to torture and electric shocks, before appearing before the prosecution. The prosecution levied fabricated charges against him, including “spreading false news and statements, inciting unauthorized demonstrations, inciting to overthrow the regime and promoting principles and ideas to change the basic principles of the constitution, managing and using an online account with the aim of disturbing public order, endangering societal safety and harming national security” and finally, “promoting the commission of a terrorist crime and promoting the use of violence.”¹²

The judiciary has also intensified its prosecution of political activists and human rights defenders. Bahey eldin Hassan, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, was sentenced in absentia to fifteen years imprisonment on 25 August, over his

10 Allinson, Tom (2020) ‘Egypt: Crackdown Intensifies as Protests spread to Rural Poor’, DW, October 7, 2020.
<https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-crackdown-intensifies-as-protests-spread-to-rural-poor/a-55184682>

11 Egyptian Front for Human Rights ‘EFHR monitor the investigation of 1,474 people over protests of September 20’
October 30, 2020.
<https://egyptianfront.org/ar/2020/10/20sep-arrest/>

12 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: Government retaliates against rights researcher with electric shock torture and false charges’, February 12, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/patrick-george-zaki/?lang=en>

commentary on human rights posted on his personal Twitter account.¹³ This ruling yet again calls into question the role of terrorism circuit courts. Although approved in 2013 to combat terrorism, the terrorism courts are primarily used to punish and silence legitimate criticism or commentary on government policies.¹⁴ On 26 October, the terrorism circuit court sentenced engineer Mamdouh Hamza to six months in prison, and added to him to the terrorist list, over accusations of “publishing false news that harms national security,” for his social media posts in 2017.¹⁵

The Egyptian authorities also arrested three staff members of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in November; executive director Gasser Abdel-Razek, administrative manager Mohamed Basheer, and director of the criminal justice unit Karim Ennarah. Charged with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and misusing social media; they were held in pre-trial detention until their release on 3 December. The prosecution also issued decisions to freeze their accounts and properties, and to seize the funds and property of the EIPR. The arrests occurred days after the EIPR held a meeting in early November attended by a number of ambassadors

13 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: State security threats and security-dominated judiciary will not discourage human rights defenders from protecting the rights of Egyptians’, August 25, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-state-security-threats-and-security-dominated-judiciary-will-not-discourage-human-rights-defenders-from-protecting-the-rights-of-egyptians/?lang=en>

14 OHCHR (2020) ‘Egypt uses terrorism trials to target human rights activists, say UN experts’, October 8, 2020.

[https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26364&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR24sV9yEANqie__wLDIPu4PCM2H3Wwf_A494muYqqEdvgL0Hx5Bfribnn0)

[NewsID=26364&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR24sV9yEANqie__wLDIPu4PCM2H3Wwf_A494muYqqEdvgL0Hx5Bfribnn0](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26364&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR24sV9yEANqie__wLDIPu4PCM2H3Wwf_A494muYqqEdvgL0Hx5Bfribnn0)

15 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Egypt: Days before a verdict in the trial of engineer Mamdouh Hamza, government’s vindictive use of terrorism charges against peaceful critics denounced by human rights organizations’, October 22, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-days-before-a-verdict-in-the-trial-of-engineer-mamdouh-hamza-governments-vindictive-use-of-terrorism-charges-against-peaceful-critics-denounced-by-human-rights-organizations/?lang=en>

and diplomats accredited to Egypt from Europe and Canada, as well as a representative of the European Union.¹⁶

The disappearance, torture and murder of Italian researcher Giulio Regeni in Cairo returned to spotlight at the end of 2020 when the Italian authorities announced their intention to commence trial procedures in absentia for four senior National Security officers after evidence of their involvement in the crime was uncovered. This provoked renewed discussions about widespread torture, enforced disappearance, and extrajudicial execution under the rule of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The European Parliament issued a resolution on 18 December denouncing Egypt's deteriorating human rights situation, calling on the European Union to assess EU-Egypt relations. The resolution also included punitive measures against high-level Egyptian officials responsible for the most egregious violations in the country, and called for the United Nations Human Rights Council to set up a monitoring and reporting mechanism on the grave human rights violations in Egypt.¹⁷ Concurrently, the use of the death penalty doubled during the year 2020. In October alone, fifty-three people were executed; exceeding the number of executions carried out in Egypt over the past three years, according to the EIPR.¹⁸

16 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Egypt: NGOs call on authorities to release leaders of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights', December 2, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-ngos-call-on-authorities-to-release-leaders-of-the-egyptian-initiative-for-personal-rights/?lang=en>

17 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Egypt: European Parliament demands accountability for officials involved in rights violations and calls for leadership on UN mechanism to examine rights abuses', December 18, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/egypt-european-parliament-demands-accountability-for-officials-involved-in-rights-violations-in-egypt-and-calls-for-leadership-on-un-mechanism-to-examine-rights-abuses/?lang=en>

18 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2020) '53 persons executed in October 2020: The number of executions carried out in October exceeds the annual total of executions carried out for year of the past three years', November 3, 2020.

<https://eipr.org/en/press/2020/11/53-persons-executed-october-2020-number-executions-carried-out-october-exceeds-annual>

Syria

The suffering of Syrians continues to be prolonged under the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the ongoing civil war and armed conflicts, enflamed by an array of regional and international forces and actors from multiple countries, including non-Syrian militias. These multiple interventions have prolonged the war and its humanitarian repercussions. The Russian military intervention in Syria has been salvaging the regime of Bashar al-Assad since 2015, inflicting a horrific humanitarian toll on civilians. The Russian army has deliberately directed and supported indiscriminate military strikes on civilian districts and infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and markets. Such strikes amount to collective punishment, with the apparent objective of terrorizing the

population and depriving civilians of the means to sustain themselves, forcing them to flee from specific areas.¹ Forced displacement has brought evident demographic changes to some areas in Syria, and in favor of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Syrian and Russian armed forces' repeated attacks on civilian infrastructure in the Idlib governorate of northwestern Syria between April 2019 and March 2020 triggered mass displacement of civilians, according to Human Rights Watch.²

The civilian death toll in Syria from March 2011 until September 2020 reached 226,779, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Syrian government forces and affiliated armed groups were responsible for 88.16 percent of these deaths. By the end of 2020, the war had forced the migration of more than seven million Syrians to about forty-four countries around the world, and over six million Syrians were internally displaced. During 2020, extrajudicial killings claimed the lives of 1734 civilians, including 326 children, media personnel and a number of medical and civilian personnel.³ The Idlib and Aleppo governorates experienced the highest rates of civilian casualties in the country this year.

Armed attacks continued in Idlib at the beginning of 2020, with the escalation of armed attacks carried out by the Syrian government with Russian and Iranian support; creating a new humanitarian catastrophe, leaving dozens of civilians dead, including children, and injuring hundreds. Over 900,000 people have been displaced from their homes, in appalling humanitarian and living conditions. Residents of Idlib have endured incessant indiscriminate bombing and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. Armed rebel and jihadist groups have also attacked

1 Wille, Belkis (2020) 'Why are Russians Paying for Bombing Schools in Syria?', Open Democracy, December 17, 2020.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/why-are-russians-paying-bombing-schools-syria/>

2 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure', October 15, 2020.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/syria/russia-strategy-targeted-civilian-infrastructure>

3 Syrian Network for Human Rights (2021) 'Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, Including 99 in December', January 1, 2021.
<https://sn4hr.org/blog/2021/01/01/55788/>

border villages under Syrian government control in Idlib, endangering civilian lives. In a recent incident, intercepted radio communications revealed that Syrian government forces deliberately fired upon and killed a group of elderly women. Turkey's use of drones to target Syrian military sites in Idlib marks a dangerous escalation of hostilities that puts civilian lives at risk.⁴

Armed conflicts erupted in northeastern Syria along the Syrian-Turkish borders, with frequent military clashes between Kurdish forces, the Syrian National Army (SNA), and Turkish forces; resulting in violations and crimes committed by these warring parties against civilians. For the past two years, Turkish-backed SNA factions have unremittingly practiced arbitrary detention and forced disappearance against civilians in the city of Afrin, be they Arabs or Kurds, within plain sight and earshot of Turkish forces. According to estimates, Syrian organizations documented more than five hundred cases of arbitrary detention in Afrin during the second half of 2019, finding that at least fifteen women have been forcibly disappeared in the Afrin region since the beginning of 2020.⁵ Meanwhile, the headquarters of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Aleppo and Idlib have continued to brutally impose their rigid ideologies on local civilians, including through acts of arbitrary detention, torture, and execution, and the harassment of media professionals.⁶

4 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Syria: Escalating "Humanitarian Horror" Must Be Countered by International Community', March 13, 2020

<https://cihrs.org/syria-escalating-humanitarian-horror-must-be-countered-by-international-community/?lang=en>

& Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure', October 15, 2020

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/syria/russia-strategy-targeted-civilian-infrastructure>.

5 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies 'Syria: Women kidnapped by Turkish-backed factions in Afrin must be immediately released', June 16, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/syria-women-kidnapped-by-turkish-backed-factions-in-afrin-must-be-immediately-released/?lang=en>

6 Human Rights Council (2020) 'Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic', August 14, 2020.

<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/45/31>

More than 130,000 Syrians are still arbitrarily held in government-run detention centers, for participating in peaceful protests or expressing a dissenting political opinion, or due to random arrest. Thousands of these detainees were forcibly disappeared after the Syrian government refused to acknowledge their detention and reveal their fate or whereabouts. Meanwhile, armed groups throughout the country are detaining thousands of civilians arbitrarily without any legal justification, which prevents these civilians from benefiting from the frequent amnesty decrees issued by the president, which often exclude prisoners of conscience and political detainees.

Systematic torture and denial of healthcare has cost the lives of many civilians in Syria's detention centers. Prison administrations fail to provide medical services or release medically-compromised detainees for treatment. Detainees are concentrated in cramped spaces without proper hygiene or ventilation, with negative implications for their immune systems and health, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Syrian government refuses to share the health records of detainees, whether those that died in prison or those recently detained and suffering from chronic disease, or in need of specialized healthcare. The fate of 99,479 forcibly disappeared persons remains unknown. Evidence indicates that Syrian government forces are responsible for the disappearance of about eighty-four percent of them, and the remainder involve ISIS and the armed opposition.

Direct negotiations sponsored by the United Nations between the Syrian government and some opposition factions have not made any progress in reaching a comprehensive political solution to end the conflict. The negotiations aim for a new constitution while preparing the ground for presidential elections in mid-2021. Security Council Resolution no. 2254 issued in December 2015 stipulated a ceasefire and the start of negotiations for a political settlement in preparation for holding free and fair general elections administered under United Nations supervision.

However, with ongoing armed attacks throughout the country, progress in these negotiations seems rather scant, with a doubt that its outcomes will address the concerns and demands of significant segments of the Syrian population. Meanwhile, the

Syrian government and its allies desire to use the negotiations to impose a fait accompli policy by ensuring the stability of Bashar al-Assad's rule. The Syrian government reduced the political solution to nothing except the holding of general elections under its supervision, while rejecting any idea of forming a neutral transitional governing body serving the country's political process, and overseeing the transition of government, and transitional justice procedures.

It is likely that the Syrian government will hold formal presidential elections in mid-2021, similar to the mock parliamentary elections that were held on 19 July.⁷ In his speech to the mock parliament at its opening session on 12 August, Bashar al-Assad launched a sharp attack on the initiatives and demands of the Syrian opposition in international negotiations. The Syrian government's military victories reinforced its position in international negotiations. These victories were achieved in recent years thanks to Russian and Iranian support and the political cover provided by Syria's negotiation partners, alongside the receding European and American role in Syria's crisis.

⁷ Duclos, Michel (2020) 'The Syrian Parliamentary Elections were a Mockery', July 19, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-syrian-parliamentary-elections-were-a-mockery/>

Palestine

The Covid-19 pandemic has imposed dire humanitarian conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory amid ongoing political, livelihood and social struggles over the past decades in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The health crisis and its social repercussions have exposed the disruptive and destructive effects of the long-term Israeli occupation on the lives of Palestinians, the extent of damage from the occupation, and the perpetuation of apartheid policies: from the disparate availability of public facilities and services to the fragmented health system between different Palestinian areas. Nowhere is the situation more dire than in the Gaza Strip, where Israel has imposed a comprehensive land, sea and air blockade since 2007, collectively

punishing Gaza's two million Palestinian residents. Essential services have collapsed due to the blockade, causing profound levels of poverty, food insecurity, and aid-dependency, widespread unemployment, and the contamination of most of Gaza's water supply.¹

During the first half of 2020, the Israeli occupation authorities frequently hindered efforts and initiatives of Palestinians to contain the pandemic. The authorities confiscated medical supplies, or arrested participants in local voluntary initiatives to confront the pandemic.² At the same time, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was unable to allocate sufficient financial resources to modernize the health sector, which received only 10.8 percent of the budget, compared to 21 percent for the security sector.³

The pandemic has compounded the suffering of Palestinian prisoners and detainees in Israeli prisons, in regards to both their physical and psychological health. The Israeli occupation authorities have deliberately neglected to enact any appropriate preventive measures in detention and investigation sites. Detention sites have become even more overcrowded due to the continued practice of arbitrary detention. About 5,000 Palestinian prisoners, including 183 children and 432 administrative detainees, remained in Israeli detention during the first months of the pandemic's outbreak, according to Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association. The Israeli authorities hold Palestinian administrative detainees indefinitely without charge or trial, and have detained journalists, human rights defenders, and members of the Palestinian

1 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Palestine: On Land Day, Civil Society Calls for Accountability and an End to Israel's Illegal Closure of Gaza', March 31, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/palestine-on-land-day-civil-society-calls-for-accountability-and-an-end-to-israels-illegal-closure-of-gaza/?lang=en>

2 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Israeli Apartheid Undermines Palestinian Right to Health Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', April 8, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/israeli-apartheid-undermines-palestinian-right-to-health-amidst-covid-19-pandemic/?lang=en>

3 Al Jazeera (2019) 'Massive budget funds for the Palestinian security sector', December 13, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/12/13/%>

Legislative Council.⁴ On 27 March, the Israeli occupation authorities decided to release some four hundred ‘non-violent’ Israeli common law prisoners serving lighter sentences and nearing the end of their time in prison, selected on the basis of health condition and age. Yet thus far, Israel has not established the same release policy for Palestinian prisoners and administrative detainees.⁵

Israel has abused the ongoing emergency measures during the pandemic to racially target Palestinians and place some of them under surveillance. The pandemic has compounded the suffering of Palestinian workers, as the occupation authorities exploit Palestinians as cheap labor while neglecting to take any measures to ensure that they and their families are protected from the ramifications of the pandemic. Israel, the occupying power in the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, has failed to test and ensure medical treatment for Palestinian laborers working in Israel prior to their return to the occupied Palestinian territory; Israel has also failed to ensure the provision of adequate medical intervention.⁶

Israel continues to perpetuate apartheid against the Palestinian people through a set of laws, policies, and practices designed to separate, divide, and isolate Palestinians. Palestinians are intentionally divided into four distinct legal, political and geographic categories, which include Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, Palestinians residing in Jerusalem, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza subject to Israeli military law, and Palestinian refugees exiled abroad. These divisive policies are responsible for the deterioration of living conditions in Palestinian territory. Israel deprives Palestinians of property and natural resources and controls their food wealth and economic

4 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘On Palestinian Prisoners’ Day, Civil Society Calls for Urgent Release of Palestinian Prisoners and Detainees in Israeli Prisons’, April 17, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/on-palestinian-prisoners-day-civil-society-calls-for-urgent-release-of-palestinian-prisoners-and-detainees-in-israeli-prisons/?lang=en>

5 Ibid.

6 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Palestine: Rights and Dignity of Palestinian Workers in Israel Must be Upheld During COVID-19’, April 16, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/palestine-rights-and-dignity-of-palestinian-workers-in-israel-must-be-upheld-during-covid-19/?lang=en>

production, while imposing cruel restrictions on their right to movement, residency, and family reunification.

Palestinian lands continue to be rapidly seized through constant settlement construction, with the aim of transferring Israeli citizens while expelling Palestinians; thereby bringing about a change in the lands' historic demographic composition favoring the occupying power.⁷ For decades, the Israeli occupation authorities have confiscated Palestinian lands, whether the territories occupied in 1967 or 1948 (the establishment of the state of Israel). Discriminatory policies were enacted in the areas of construction to enable towns and regions with a Jewish majority to prosper, while most Palestinians suffer in overcrowded towns and villages, facing crises in housing and public services, according to Human Rights Watch.⁸

On the international level, the policies of American president Donald Trump's administration continued to provide support and cover for Israeli violations and crimes. This support escalated with the announcement of the administration's plan to settle the Palestinian issue, known as the "Deal of the Century." The plan infringes upon the historical and legal rights of the Palestinian people, in violation of international law, and in defiance of the recommendations stipulated by previous Security Council resolutions.

A central aspect of the Trump plan would allow Israel to annex around thirty percent of the West Bank, including preserving the West Bank barrier or Israeli separation wall, which isolates East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, and preserving about 240 Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Michael Lynk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory

7 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Time to Recognise and End Israeli Apartheid over the Palestinian People', March 21, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/international-day-for-the-elimination-of-racial-discrimination-time-to-recognise-and-end-israeli-apartheid-over-the-palestinian-people/?lang=en>

8 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Israel: Discriminatory Land Policies Hem in Palestinians', May 12, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/israel-discriminatory-land-policies-hem-palestinians>

occupied since 1967, described the Palestinian state foreseen by the plan, as “scattered archipelagos of non-contiguous territory completely surrounded by Israel, with no external borders.”⁹

The Deal of the Century plan also includes US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Palestinian refugees and exiles are denied the right to return to their homeland under the plan, which also threatens to displace more Palestinians.¹⁰ Meanwhile, several Arab governments, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, welcomed Trump's plan, which represented a retreat from their commitment to supporting Palestinian rights to self-determination and permanent sovereignty over wealth and natural resources, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands as stipulated in international law. During the second half of 2020, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan decided to normalize relations with Israel, which has escalated fears over the repercussions of normalization, especially in regards to Arab support for human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory.

The United Nations' publication of a database of businesses involved Israel's illegal settlement enterprise in the occupied Palestinian territory in February 2020¹¹ was an important international development aiming to prevent corporate collusion with the occupation's illegal settlements. The report's publication is considered a victory by the international, regional, and Palestinian human rights organizations and movements that advocated for three years for the list's publication. The database includes 112 Israeli and international companies, while demands persist for the inclusion of many other

9 OHCHR (2020) 'Israel/OPT: UN expert alarmed by 'lopsided' Trump plan, says will entrench occupation', January 31, 2020.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25513&LangID=E>

10 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Palestine: United States Plan to Entrench Israel's Apartheid Regime Must be Rejected', February 5, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/palestine-united-states-plan-to-entrench-israels-apartheid-regime-must-be-rejected/?lang=en>

11 Human Rights Council (2020) 'Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan', January 30, 2020.

<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/67>

companies that are still not the list. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is obligated to annually update the database.¹²

The division between Palestinian governing authorities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since 2007 has had severe repercussions on Palestinians' human rights situation, and their humanitarian and living conditions, especially during the outbreak of the pandemic. The two rival governing authorities, Fatah and Hamas, resumed negotiations following the announcement of Israeli plans to annex large parts of the West Bank. The negotiations aimed to activate the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, which was agreed upon in Cairo in October 2017. On 24 September, Fatah and Hamas announced their intention to hold legislative and presidential elections, and to hold elections for the National Council in mid-2021.¹³

The Palestinian Authority continued to implement Cybercrime Law no. 10 of 2018 to restrict freedom of opinion and expression, and to restrict activists and media professionals. Article 39 of the law stipulates the right of the competent authorities to block websites that jeopardize “public security, public order or public morals.” The Ramallah Magistrate's Court blocked about fifty websites in October 2019 using the article, as the court considered them a threat to public security, while the blocked sites only included news sites critical of the Palestinian government. These restrictions were also set to impose surveillance and prosecute human rights defenders. Members of the protest movement against telecommunications companies have been subjected to repeated security harassment and accusations, as the movement's publications on social media sites criticize the corruption and monopoly practices of telecommunications companies.

12 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) 'Palestine: CIHRS and Al-Haq welcome publication of UN Database on businesses involved in unlawful Israeli settlement' February 13, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/palestine-cihrs-and-al-haq-welcome-publication-of-un-database-on-businesses-involved-in-unlawful-israeli-settlements/?lang=en>

13 DW (2020) 'Palestinian Groups Fatah, Hamas Agree to First Elections in Nearly 15 Years', September 24, 2020.

<https://www.dw.com/en/palestinian-groups-fatah-hamas-agree-to-first-elections-in-nearly-15-years/a-55044891>

The crackdown on Palestinian human rights defenders has intensified during the pandemic. In March, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas declared a state of emergency in the occupied Palestinian territory, and ordered the implementation of emergency regulations for a thirty-day period. In November, the president renewed the state of emergency for the ninth consecutive time. These emergency regulations severely restrict human rights activism, and deny detained human rights defenders their right to due process. Several human rights defenders, including Jihad Abdo and Fayiz Swaiti, were detained in July for ten days in connection with organizing a peaceful demonstration calling for an end to corruption and favoritism within the Palestinian government. They were charged with illegal gathering and violating emergency laws. Another group, Lawyers for Justice, was subjected to sustained harassment by the Palestinian Preventive Security Forces. The group's activities were monitored and members repeatedly summoned for investigation.

Despite the catastrophic reality in the Gaza Strip, caused by Israel's strict blockade and aggravated by the pandemic, the Palestinian authorities continue to violate the rights of Gaza's residents. The Palestinian authorities in Gaza issued seventeen death sentences during 2020,¹⁴ in contravention of the State of Palestine obligations. Authorities continued to summon and detain citizens for social media posts and other forms of expression,¹⁵ in addition to using violence and force to disperse protest gatherings.¹⁶

14 Al Mezan Center For Human Rights (2020) 'Gaza courts issue fourth death sentence in nine days', November 12, 2020. <https://www.mezan.org/en/post/23850/Press+Release%3A+Gaza+courts+issue+fourth+death+sentence+in+nine+days>

15 The Independent Commission for Human Rights (2020) 'Calls on the Palestinian authorities in Gaza to respect citizens and their freedom of expression during the pandemic', September 6, 2020. <https://ichr.ps/ar/1/26/2953/>

16 Al Mezan Center For Human Rights (2020) 'PHROC Condemns Attack on Citizens in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Calls for Ending the State of Emergency and Respecting Human Rights', September 15, 2020. <http://mezan.org/en/post/23821/>
PHROC+Condemns+Attack+on+Citizens+in+the+West+Bank+and+Gaza+Strip+and+Calls+for+Ending+the+State+of+Emergency+and+Respecting+Human+Rights

Iraq

The political and human rights situation in Iraq is marred by the profound consequences of regional and international interventions over the years. Iranian-backed militias played a brutal role in suppressing popular protests, claiming the lives of hundreds of Iraqis and injuring thousands. The protests, which have continued sporadically since October 2019, are considered the most noteworthy recent development in the Iraqi political scene, indicating the rise of social and youth movements against the endemic corruption, deteriorating public services, and political stagnation caused by the favoring of sectarian interests in managing the country. The repression of these protests has exposed the catastrophic effects, accumulated over

years, of the militarization of politics in Iraq and the reliance on irregular armed groups. These effects include the weakening of state authority and the rule of law, together with the excessive costs inflicted upon peaceful political activists, human rights defenders, and media professionals.

Protesters have been subjected to violence and killing¹ during the period of July to November 2020. Coinciding with the protests' escalation and enabled by a policy of impunity, many activists and human rights defenders were targeted and assassinated, especially in the Basra governorate. In July, journalist and security expert Hisham Al-Hashemi was assassinated in front of his home in the Zayouna district of Baghdad, after his media interviews on the illegal practices of armed militias in Iraq. In August, unknown gunmen in Basra Governorate, south of Baghdad, killed Reham Yaqoub, a doctor and women's rights defender. The same month, activist Tahseen Osama, a member of Al-Basra Civil Youth Assembly, was killed days following his online criticism of the Basra police for leniency with armed groups and criminals involved in violence and murder in the governorate. On 1 November, civil society activist Sheikh Abdel Nasser Al-Tarfi Al-Tai, known for his support of the protests and defending demonstrators, was assassinated in the city of Amara, in southern Iraq.² Seven UN experts gave warning in October about these recurring assassinations, calling on the Iraqi government to investigate them.

After Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi assumed office in May 2020, he pledged to investigate the murder of protesters, among other pledges to improve human rights conditions in the country. Yet these pledges remain unfulfilled while assassinations continue. Moreover, the decades-long practice of enforced disappearance continues to be common in Iraq, targeting dozens of Iraqis over decades, according to the report of

1 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Iraq: State Appears Complicit in Massacre of Protesters', December, 16,2019.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/16/iraq-state-appears-complicit-massacre-protesters>

2 Gulf Centre for Human Rights (2020) 'Iraq: GCHR's tenth periodic report on violations during popular demonstrations', December 23, 2020.
<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2551>

the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearance issued in November 2020. The Popular Mobilization Forces have been particularly responsible for the crime of enforced disappearance since 2014.

The Iraqi parliament reintroduced a draft law on cybercrimes in November, coinciding with the widespread suppression of peaceful protests. The draft contained open-ended and vague articles, including articles imposing penalties for internet use that harms the state's independence, unity, and integrity, or economic, political, military, and security interests. The law also imposes penalties for internet use in “participating, negotiating, promoting, contracting, or dealing with a hostile party in any way with the intent to destabilize security and public order or endanger the country,” “provoking sectarian and sectarian strife”, or “publishing or broadcasting false or misleading facts.” These phrases can be deployed to restrict freedom of opinion and expression online, and to target bloggers, and political and human rights campaigns on social media.

Prisoners in Iraqi prisons suffer from appalling conditions. One of Iraq’s largest prisons, Nasiriyah Central Prison (known as Al-Hout prison) in southern Iraq, has a particularly grim and growing reputation for death by torture or medical negligence.³

Social protests spread in the Kurdistan region during the second half of 2020, in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Dohuk, against deteriorating economic conditions and delays in salary payments for state employees. In December, regional authorities used live bullets and tear gas against protests in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, killing ten and wounding dozens of others.⁴ During the second half of 2020, the regional authorities in Kurdistan increasingly targeted press and media personnel through arrest, torture,

3 Al-Araby Al-Jadeed (2020) ‘Dozens of deaths in Al-Hout prison: torture or malnutrition?’, October 16, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2PBLmT1>

4 DW (2020) ‘Do the violent protests in northern Iraq signal a ‘Kurdish Spring’?’, November 12, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/do-the-violent-protests-in-northern-iraq-signal-a-kurdish-spring/a-55906950>

raids, and shutting down media headquarters.⁵ Journalist Sherwan Ameen Sherwani was arrested on 7 October 2020, and was subjected to solitary confinement and torture for two months in Erbil. He is currently being charged with “endangering national security.”⁶

5 Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Media Offices Shut Down’, October 6, 2020.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/06/kurdistan-region-iraq-media-offices-shut-down>

6 Reporters Without Borders (2020) ‘Iraq: Concern about Iraqi Kurdish journalist’s fate’, October 14, 2020.
<https://rsf.org/en/news/iraq-concern-about-iraqi-kurdish-journalists-fate>

Lebanon

2020 has been a difficult year in Lebanon, which accumulating social and economic challenges, including substantial challenges to security and public health. These challenges have exposed the disastrous and disruptive effects of the stagnation and corruption of the government's decades-long sectarian system, which has become rejected by the majority of the Lebanese people, especially the youth. On 4 August, a deadly blast struck the Port of Beirut, killing about two hundred people and wounding at least six thousand others. Considered the most catastrophic event of the year, the blast displaced about 300,000 people as destruction swept public facilities and private property throughout Beirut.

The blast was caused by the grossly negligent storage of a huge shipment of ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive substance, which had been left in the Port of Beirut for six years without any adherence to safety requirements, despite the authorities' knowledge of this shipment. The explosion ignited popular anger against endemic corruption and neglect in the public sector, issues that none of Lebanon's successive governments have had the political will or ability to address. Demands for an international investigation into the explosion were increasingly heard throughout Lebanon, amid a lack of confidence in the competence and impartiality of national and judicial institutions to conduct a comprehensive and transparent investigation, especially with initial reports of the highest-ranking state officials' complicity in the negligence leading to this catastrophe.¹

In the aftermath of the port explosion, even the Covid-19 pandemic could not stop the Lebanese people from taking to the streets in protest. These demonstrations were not uncommon to the Lebanese street. Since October 2019, a widespread popular movement, known as the October Movement, had been persistently staging protests focused on political and social demands in response to the collapse of the Lebanese economy, the worst crisis since the country's civil war years. This crisis led to a sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound, soaring poverty rates, and deteriorating living conditions, including basic public and health services. Only eight percent of the population benefit from government-run healthcare; the private sector accounts for over ninety percent of all services, according to Lebanese civil society organizations.² The private sector's domination of healthcare has put citizens and residents of Lebanon at higher risk during the pandemic, especially afflicting the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, including refugees and migrant workers.

1 Amnesty International (2020) 'Lebanon: Only an international investigation can set the course for justice for Beirut blast victims', September 7, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/lebanon-only-an-international-investigation-can-set-the-course-for-justice-for-beirut-blast-victims/>

2 Civil Society Reports 'Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Third Round Lebanon'. (2021)

http://www.annd.org/uploads/publications/English_-_UPR_Third_Round_-_Lebanon_-_Civil_Society_Report_2020.pdf

The Lebanese authorities used force to disperse the demonstrations, arresting dozens of civilian protesters and activists and prosecuting them in military courts. In August, riot police fired tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition at peaceful protesters, wounding 782 people. Security forces arbitrarily arrested protesters and journalists to prevent them from documenting their excessive use of force, alongside confiscating their equipment. Armed Lebanese political parties and groups opposing the popular protests also subjected the demonstrators to violence.

Since the onset of the protests, the Lebanese authorities have investigated and prosecuted bloggers and activists, forcing some of them to sign pledges to halt their online activities in exchange for their release.³ A campaign of intimidation was launched by the Lebanese government in November 2019 through October 2020 during which over eighty activists were harassed, summoned and interrogated for legitimate acts of free expression online, or for participating in protests critical of the authorities.⁴ Despite Lebanon's adoption of the anti-torture law in October 2017, complaints of torture and ill-treatment continue to be filed against detention centers and prisons, without any investigation or accountability for the perpetrators. Victims of torture filed dozens of torture cases between 2017 and 2020, but the cases were closed without investigation. Some of these cases were filed by protesters subjected to torture and ill-treatment during their arrest at the end of 2019 in connection with the protests, according to Amnesty International.⁵

Syrian and other refugees in Lebanon suffer profoundly from legal restrictions, discriminatory procedures, and risks due to the difficulty of issuing or renewing

3 Daraj (2020) 'Lebanese authorities' crackdown on social media activists', November 30, 2020.

<https://daraj.com/60918/>

4 Amnesty International (2020) 'Lebanon: One year after the October protest movement, impunity reigns'.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/lebanon-one-year-after-the-october-protest-movement-impunity-reigns/>

5 Amnesty International (2020) 'Lebanon: Authorities' failure to implement anti-torture law is a disgrace', November 25, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/lebanon-authorities-failure-to-implement-anti-torture-law-is-a-disgrace/>

residency. Many of them endure harassment, security prosecution, and long-term detention. Compounding their hardship, Lebanese government officials have escalated their attacks with hostile media statements against Syrian refugees. Since 2019, Lebanon has adopted stringent policies toward Syrian refugees, allowing the immediate deportation of people who entered the country illegally after 24 April 2019. More than three thousand Syrians have already been deported since the policy was adopted.⁶

⁶ Civil Society Reports, 'Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Third Round Lebanon' (2021)

http://www.annd.org/uploads/publications/English_-_UPR_Third_Round_-_Lebanon_-_Civil_Society_Report_2020.pdf

Libya

The human rights situation in Libya further deteriorated in 2020, as the country continues to be riven by the protracted civil war between the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA), headed by General Khalifa Haftar; with the conflict continuously enflamed by international and regional interference. The lack of internal security and the de-facto rule of militias and armed groups emboldened by a policy of impunity has worsened the humanitarian situation, subjecting residents of Libya to widespread extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, and torture.

Although the Security Council imposed an arms embargo on warring parties in Libya, several international and regional actors continue to violate it, even strengthening their presence in Libya throughout the year 2020. The Russian paramilitary organization, the Wagner Group, deployed about three thousand Russian mercenaries and two thousand Syrian mercenaries to support the LNA while Turkey deployed nearly two thousand Syrian mercenaries, among them minors. There are also an estimated three thousand Sudanese mercenaries in Libya, deployed within the forces of the LNA and GNA.

The number of civilian deaths in Libya has risen since Libyan National Army commander Haftar's April 2019 launch of the military campaign against the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. Civilians have accounted for nearly sixty percent of the total number of deaths caused by armed battles in this campaign. The LNA bears the greatest responsibility for civilian casualties.¹

In the second half of 2020, political negotiations resumed between the warring parties, with a ceasefire declaration reached on 23 October stipulating the departure of foreign forces and mercenaries. The negotiations also stipulated the holding of general elections and a referendum on the draft constitution under the supervision of the United Nations Mission in Libya, within the framework of the Political Dialogue Forum. The forum includes seventy-five participants from the warring domestic parties, representing different segments of Libyan society. Nevertheless, the success of the ceasefire and negotiation process remains dependent on the success of the consensus between regional and international actors that continue to intervene in the conflict. It is also dependent upon the extent to which warring Libyan parties are pressured to implement the agreement.

1 UNSMIL (2020) 'Civilian Casualties Report 1 April-30 June 2020', July 29, 2020.

<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-report-1-april-30-june-2020>

& UNHCR (2020) 'Situation of Human Rights in Libya' January 23, 2020

<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/75>

& Salyk-Virk, Melissa (2020) 'Airstrikes, Proxy Warfare, and Civilian Casualties in Libya', June 2, 2020

<https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/airstrikes-proxy-warfare-and-civilian-casualties-libya/>.

In June, the Human Rights Council decided to establish an independent international fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations committed in Libya by all parties since 2016, and to preserve evidence to ensure accountability for the violations.² Many Libyan, regional and international human rights organizations have long-called for the formation of this fact-finding mission, and the internationally-recognized Libyan government, the GNA, supported it in the Council.

On 11 June, the United Nations Mission in Libya announced the discovery of mass graves in the city of Tarhuna, southeast of Tripoli.³ Twenty-seven mass graves have been discovered since June 2020, and 120 bodies exhumed, including those of children and women. Hundreds of people were forcibly disappeared Tarhuna between 2014 and 2020.⁴

As uncovered by the UN and human rights reports and investigations, horrific violations and crimes have been inflicted for years upon residents of Tarhuna by the Kaniyat militias.⁵ These militias controlled the city for eight years, exploiting the security vacuum and the collapse of state institutions and the rule of law amid the country's long-lasting armed conflict. The Kaniyat had dominated the Government of National Accord from August 2018 until April 2019, then switched allegiances to fight alongside the Libyan National Army under Haftar.⁶

2 Human Rights Council (2020) 'Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 22 June 2020', July 6, 2020.
<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/43/39>

3 UN News (2020) 'UN Chief Calls for Libya Mass Grave Investigation', June 13, 2020.
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066272>

4 Human Rights Watch (2021) 'Libya: Militia Terrorized Town, Leaving Mass Graves', January 7, 2021.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/07/libya-militia-terrorized-town-leaving-mass-graves>

5 Harchaoui, Jalel (2020) 'Tarhuna, Mass Graves, and Libya's Internationalized Civil War', July 30, 2020.
<https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/tarhuna-mass-graves-and-libyas-internationalized-civil-war/>

6 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies 'Libya: Human Rights Briefing (June – October 2020)' November 24, 2020.
<https://cihrs.org/libya-human-rights-briefing/?lang=en>

Popular protests broke out in several regions throughout Libya in August, led mainly by youth movements, against the continuing acts of violence, the violations of militias and armed groups, and the deterioration of living conditions and services, especially during the pandemic. The Libyan authorities in the eastern and western regions responded to these protests with repression. Demonstrations were banned, curfews imposed, and internet services cut off. The authorities also used violence, shooting live ammunition against demonstrators, which led to deaths and injuries. The Libyan authorities and their militias in Tripoli, Tobruk, and Benghazi attempted to quell some protests by forcibly disappearing and arresting demonstrators.

Meanwhile, restrictions on freedom of association multiplied. On 14 October, the Civil Society Commission in Tripoli issued a decree calling on all civil society organizations registered over the past five years to register again, otherwise they will be considered as illegitimate organizations, awaiting dissolution by the commission. Moreover, the new registration process requires organizations to sign a pledge to not engage in any contact with any embassy or international organization without prior authorization from the executive authorities.

The branches of the Civil Society Commission across the country had forced local civil society organizations to re-register in accordance with executive orders and decrees issued during 2016 and 2019. The Civil Society Commission in Benghazi issued decrees no. 1 and no. 2 in January 2016, while the Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord issued executive order no. 286 in 2019. Currently, these decisions regulate the work of local and foreign organizations in regards to procedures for establishment, registration, and administration; the executive authority is granted broad powers to restrict, suspend, or dissolve these organizations. The Civil Society Commission in Misrata issued resolution no. 29 in May 2018, dissolving nineteen local organizations, while the Civil Society Commission in Benghazi suspended the activities of thirty-seven local organizations, implementing resolution no. 3 of February 2019.

Human rights defenders, bloggers, activists, and members and employees of civil society organizations and the judiciary face smear campaigns, raids on their homes and workplaces, arbitrary arrest, and enforced disappearance, because of the nature of their work. They also undergo legal prosecution, interrogation, and harassment at security checkpoints, as well as threats of trial before the military court under the anti-terrorism law issued in 2014.

On 20 November, lawyer Hanane al-Barassi was shot dead in the city center of Benghazi by unknown parties, after posting blogs and recordings on social media criticizing human rights violations and corrupt practices involving leaders of the Libyan National Army and armed groups in eastern Libya. Gunmen kidnapped Seham Sergiwa, human rights defender and a member of the Tobruk House of Representatives, from her home on 17 July 2019. She remains forcibly disappeared, her whereabouts and fate unknown.

Journalists are also subjected to systematic and arbitrary prosecution, especially before military courts in eastern Libya. Thirty-five civilians have been tried before military courts since 2015, among them photojournalist Ismail Bouzriba al-Zoui. His family learned on 28 July that a military court in Benghazi had issued - two months earlier - a fifteen-year prison sentence for his work as a journalist, according to the Libyan Independent Media Organization. Journalist and civil activist Abdul Latif Abu Hamra was arrested by security services in Misrata on 23 August while he was covering a local awareness campaign on the Covid-19 pandemic. On the same day, Director General of Al-Jawhara Radio Network Sami al-Sharif was arrested and allegedly tortured, while preparing a report on demonstrations in Tripoli. On 20 October, Muhammad Baiou, head of the Media Commission for the Government of National Accord, was arbitrarily detained in Tripoli by the armed group Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade.

Detained migrants and asylum seekers continue to suffer in inhumane conditions. At least 3,200 refugees and migrants are under arrest in Libya, while many migrants and asylum seekers have been kidnapped, tortured, or victimized by human trafficking, according to the Libya Platform coalition. Although the UNHCR declared Libya an

unsafe country for refuge, European Union countries cooperated with Libyan authorities and armed groups, forcibly returning nearly 11,000 migrants to Libya. At least 977 migrants drowned while attempting to flee Libya by the end of 2020.⁷

⁷ International Organization for Migration (2021) 'Missing Migrants Project'.
https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?migrant_route%5B%5D=1376

Algeria

After ousting Abdelaziz Bouteflika from the presidency in April 2019, Algeria's pro-democracy protest movement, known as the Hirak, faced a stumbling block in achieving its demands for a radical democratic transition in the country. The Algerian authorities exploited the Covid-19 pandemic to intensify reprisals against the opposition and restrict peaceful demonstrations. The ruling elite, especially military leaders, regrouped and sought to overcome their divisions, aiming to end the protest movement and restore their legitimacy in the government.¹

¹ Al-Araby Al-Jadeed (2020) 'Algeria: The Generals' Reconciliation', December 27, 2020.
<https://bit.ly/38mvACf>

Presidential elections held on 12 December 2019 had a very low popular turnout amid ongoing protests against the political path adopted by the military after Bouteflika's departure. During the elections, the authorities escalated their repression, arresting opposition leaders and members of the Hirak movement. In an attempt to at least temporarily contain the popular protests, the Algerian government has been exploiting the Covid-19 pandemic since its onset in March, using the health crisis as a cover to enact legal amendments that restrict the public. Presidential pardons issued in February and April 2020 did not include any Hirak detainees.

The new president Abdelmadjid Tebboune initiated the drafting a new constitution for the country, which was considered by opposition and civil society forces as an attempt to restore legitimacy of the old regime with its new head Tebboune.² The new constitution³ preserves the broad powers of the head of state over legislation and formation of the judiciary. The constitutional amendments granted the military an explicitly political role in “defending the vital and strategic interests of the state.” Although the constitution provides for the protection of civil and political rights and freedoms, some of these rights are identified with restrictions and vague terms. The approach of the Algerian government is to continually deploy national legislation to restrict constitutional rights, including the Law on Associations, the Law on Public Meetings and Demonstrations, the Information Law, and the Penal Code.⁴ The new constitution was drafted by a committee of experts formed by the president without any broad political or societal participation or input. The conditions under which the constitution was drafted and put to referendum created an exclusionary and intimidating climate for the political groups and actors associated with the protest

2 Al Jazeera (2020) ‘Algerian Parliament adopts draft constitutional reforms’, September 10, 2020.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/10/algerian-parliament-adopts-draft-constitutional-reforms>

3 Presidential Decree 20-442, December 30, 2020.
<https://www.joradp.dz/Jo2000/2020/082/AP3.pdf>

4 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2021) ‘Algeria Change within Continuity: The 2020 Constitutional Revision’, January 21, 2021.
<https://cihrs.org/algeria-change-within-continuity-the-2020-constitutional-revision/?lang=en>

movement.⁵ The draft constitution was approved by the parliament inherited from the Bouteflika era, before it was submitted to popular referendum.⁶

The government of Algeria has intensified repression in conjunction with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country. As Hirak activists halted demonstrations due to public safety concerns, the government banned public gatherings; human rights defenders, journalists, and members of protest movements faced detention and prosecution. The Algerian authorities amended the Penal Code in April 2020 under Law no. 06-20, the provisions of which threaten the work of human rights NGOs. The amendments impose harsh penalties for receiving foreign funding “to carry out actions undermining the security of the state, the stability of its institutions, national unity, territorial integrity, the basic interests of Algeria or public security and order.” The law also increased penalties for the crime of contempt of public authorities, and added the crime of “spreading false news to harm security or public order.”

On 8 October, Amazigh activist Yacine Mebarki was sentenced to ten years in prison and a fine of ten million dinars (about 66,000 euros) for offending the teachings of Islam and possession of war materials without permission. The penalty was reduced to one year in prison and a fine of 330 euros, during the appeal in November 2020.⁷

Member of the Algerian League for Human Rights and journalist Said Boudour has been on trial since February 2020 on charges of defamation and spreading false news, contributing to weakening the morale of the Algerian People's National Armed Forces, insulting the Algerian people and insulting the ruling government. On 26 October, independent writer and LGBTQ+ advocate Anouar Rahmani was convicted for

5 Nossiter, Adam (2020) ‘Hopes Fade for New Political Course in Algeria a Year After Popular Uprising’, January 20, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/04/world/africa/algeria-protests-politics.html>

6 Al Jazeera (2020) ‘In Algeria, a new constitution protesters did not call for’, October 14, 2020.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/14/opposition-skeptical-new-algeria-constitution-will-offer-change>

7 France 24 (2020) ‘Algeria: Sentence reduced on Hirak activist Yassin Mubarak, accused of “mocking the Islamic religion.” November 25, 2020.
<https://bit.ly/3bsGF6w>

insulting state officials, and sentenced to a fine of 100,000 dinars (650 euros). Cartoonist and blogger Walid Kashida, founder of the Hirak Memes Facebook page, has been in pretrial detention since 27 April 2020 on charges of “contempt of the president,” over posting satirical cartoons on social media; he was sentenced to three years in prison in January 2021. Judge Marzouq Saad Al-Din was also referred to the Supreme Judicial Council in May 2020 for his support of judicial independence and the demands of the Hirak movement. Journalist Khaled Drareni, a correspondent for Reporters Without Borders and the French television station TV5 Monde, and one of the founders of the Casbah Tribune, was sentenced to two years in prison on appeal over charges of “inciting illegal gathering” and “endangering national unity,” after covering the Hirak movement protests.⁸

⁸ Al Jazeera (2020) ‘Algerian journalist jailed on appeal over 2019 protests coverage’, September 16, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/16/algerian-journalist-jailed-on-appeal-over-2019-protests-coverage>

Morocco

Repression has intensified against human rights defenders and media personnel in Morocco, especially following the United States' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, disputed since 1975, on 10 December 2020; the Kingdom was further bolstered by the foreign support it received after its decision to normalize relations with Israel on that same day. The year 2020 concluded with the arrest of prominent human rights defender and academic Maâti Monjib, head of the Freedom Now organization, which promotes press freedom, and a member of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights; he was held in pretrial detention on charges related to money laundering. Maâti Monjib has been subjected to many legal prosecutions since

2015, after his trial with others over charges of receiving foreign funding. Investigations against Maati Monjib on charges of money laundering have been ongoing since October 2020, as he faces an unremitting onslaught of defamation campaigns by pro-government media.

The latter half of 2020 has witnessed the pretrial detention of many human rights defenders, in Morocco for their social media activity. Abdel Fattah Bouchikhi, a blogger and writer for the National Commission for Human Rights, was arrested in May for his blog post about corruption; he was sentenced later the same month to four months in prison for defamation. The Cybercrime Unit for Public Security also summoned Omar Naji, vice president of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, in April for interrogation about his critical comments on Facebook about the Moroccan authorities' disrespect for human rights and the measures enacted in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Naji was referred to trial on charges of defamation and spreading false news harming public interests; he was acquitted of these charges in November.

In March, journalist Omar Radi was sentenced to a four-month suspended prison sentence, charged with insulting a judge, because of tweets on his personal Twitter account in which he criticized the harsh judicial rulings against protesters and activists in the Rif region. Radi was re-interrogated on the charge of obtaining foreign funds from intelligence agencies. The Moroccan authorities were involved in surveilling Radi's mobile phone, using the Pegasus spyware program from NSO Group Technologies, an Israeli technology firm, according to Amnesty International. In April, the Moroccan government submitted a controversial bill, no. 22.20, on social media platforms, open broadcast networks, and similar networks. The bill sparked widespread local and international condemnation due to its arbitrary restrictions on free expression online. The government delayed the adoption of the bill until later in the year.

In the Western Sahara territory, the Moroccan government tightened restrictions on human rights defenders and young media activists and bloggers: raiding and searching their homes, threatening their families, and repeatedly summoning them for

investigation. Some Sahrawi activists were arrested, and peaceful protests were banned and dispersed by force.

Sahrawi political prisoners suffer from direly inhumane conditions. Human rights defender Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza, a co-founder of the Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders, is a political prisoner. He was subjected to solitary confinement in an unsanitary cell for a twelve-week period that extended into December, and is subjected to intimidation and threats against his life by prison administrators. The prison administration has deprived Yahya of urgent medical care, adequate nutrition, and communication with his family; who for two months had not been informed of where he was imprisoned. Yahya has been serving a fifteen-year prison sentence since 2008 following a trial marred by numerous grave violations, on charges related to his role in organizing a demonstration, during which a Moroccan police officer died.¹

The Moroccan authorities also imposed restrictions on associations defending self-determination in Western Sahara. In September 2020, the Public Prosecution office in the city of Laayoune announced the opening of an investigation into the activities of the Sahrawi Commission against the Moroccan Occupation, a new pro-independence group established by activist Aminatou Haidar.

The Court of Cassation upheld the verdicts issued against nineteen Sahrawis imprisoned since 2010 in the case known as the Gdeim Izik case. The case is related to clashes at sit-ins between Sahrawi protesters and Moroccan security forces. Security forces dismantled a protest encampment in Gdeim Izik near Laayoune, resulting death of eleven security personnel. The trials were based on confessions coerced under torture, according to many international and Sahrawi human rights organizations. The defendant activists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from twenty years to life after a military trial in 2013, and the case was heard before the appeals court in 2017.

1 Front Line Defenders (2021) 'Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza Detained in Inhumane Conditions', January 6, 2021. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/whereabouts-imprisoned-human-rights-defender-yahya-mohamed-el-hafed-aaza-unknown>

Tunisia

Democratic institutions in Tunisia have maintained their consistency in 2020 amidst a difficult economic, social, security and political context, and a volatile regional environment. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic pressures on the state and society in Tunisia with frail public health institutions and a shortage of medical equipment and products. Meanwhile, internal political divisions between political parties and actors in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections affected the stability of government formation, which witnessed qualitative changes during 2020, due to pressures faced by the Tunisian state. Successive governments failed to address the deterioration of living and economic conditions of

citizens amid an economic downturn, inflation of debts, a rise in unemployment, and lack of economic and social opportunities in the poorest and most marginalized regions and cities of the country. According to an opinion poll, sixty-seven percent of citizens consider the general situation to be worse than in 2010, while eighty-five percent believe that the revolution has harmed the country's economy.¹

The persistence of some patterns of human rights violations in Tunisia indicate the severe cost of stalling the course of legislative and institutional reforms needed to move on from pre-revolution violations. Successive governments and the elected parliament have failed to build the constitutional bodies stipulated in the 2014 constitution, foremost of which is the Constitutional Court. Areas of concern include the legal framework governing freedom of opinion and expression, reform of judicial and security institutions, confronting financial and administrative corruption, protecting sexual and ethnic minorities and defenders of these groups, and ensuring the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

More than forty bloggers and political and human rights activists faced prosecution between 2018 and 2020 for exercising their right to peaceful expression of opinion on the internet, according to Amnesty International.² These prosecutions were carried out on the basis of legal articles from the old authoritarian regime in Tunisia, including the Penal Code and the Communications Law, aiming to prosecute people who criticize public officials or the security services. Blogger Amna al-Sharqi was charged with insulting religions, a commonly-used accusation; the primary court in Tunisia sentenced her to six months in prison in July 2020. In the first half of the year, several bloggers faced prosecutions for their criticism on social media of government policies

1 Romdhani, Messaoud (2021) 'Is it still possible to escape the tunnel?', January 6, 2021.
<https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/%>

2 Amnesty International (2020) 'Tunisia: Freedom of expression at risk as prosecutions rise', November 9, 2020.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/tunisia-freedom-of-expression-at-risk-as-prosecutions-rise/>

responding to the pandemic.³ In November, blogger Wajdi Mahouechi was sentenced to two years in prison for posting a Facebook video deemed offensive by the court. Mahouechi criticized a Tunis public prosecutor's failure to arrest and open an investigation against a Tunisian imam, who appeared to justify killing people who insult the Prophet Muhammad.⁴

In October, the government resubmitted the draft law on the Protection of Internal Security Forces and Customs, which contained articles restricting freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of the media, while granting immunity to security personnel from criminal accountability for using lethal force to protect security buildings. However, the draft law raised controversy locally and internationally, and campaigns were initiated against the draft law by Tunisian civil society, which prompted the Parliament to amend the law and freeze its approval for the time being. The draft law was initially introduced in 2015 and again in 2017 at the request of the security authorities in Tunisia under the name of the “Repression of attacks against armed forces.”

The fear of the potential repercussions of this law was reinforced when Tunisian security personnel continued to use repression and excessive force against peaceful demonstrations, civil disobedience, strikes and social protests, especially in marginalized areas of southern Tunisia.⁵ Ten years after the revolution, successive governments have failed to achieve justice and accountability for grave violations

3 Amnesty International (2020) 'Tunisia: End prosecution of bloggers for criticizing government's response to COVID-19', April 21, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/tunisia-end-prosecution-of-bloggers-for-criticizing-governments-response-to-covid19/>

4 Human Rights Watch (2020) 'Tunisia: Harsh Sentence Against Blogger', November 24, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/24/tunisia-harsh-sentence-against-blogger>

5 Amnesty International (2020) 'Tunisia: Investigate alarming use of force on peaceful protesters demanding jobs', July 21, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/tunisia-investigate-alarming-use-of-force-on-peaceful-protesters-demanding-jobs/>

against protesters participating in the revolution in December 2010 and January 2011. Since May 2018, trials related to the violent repression of the revolution were initiated before the Specialized Criminal Chambers created by the Transitional Justice Law to address crimes of the past, but no verdict has been issued. Former and current Ministry of Interior officials have refused to respond to court summons to appear.⁶

In the last five years, Tunisia has witnessed a movement of defenders of LGBTQ+ rights, and in the activities of organizations advocating for individual rights. However, leaders and members of organizations concerned with sexual minorities have been subjected to many attacks by security personnel, raids on their homes, and direct incitement against them in some media outlets, including by some Parliamentarians without any accountability.⁷ President Kasi Saied, in shocking statements in September, defended the resumption of the death penalty in Tunisia, suspended since 1991, as part of his comments on a horrific murder in Tunisia during a National Security Council meeting. The president's statement contradicts Tunisia's support of the annual resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on ending the use of the death penalty.⁸

6 Amnesty International (2021) 'Tunisia: Struggle for justice and reparation continues for victims 10 years after the revolution' January 14, 2021.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/01/tunisia-struggle-for-justice-and-reparation-continues-for-victims-10-years-after-the-revolution/>

7 Front Line Defenders (2020) 'Tunisia: Charge against Human Rights Defender Hamza Nasri', December 11, 2020.

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/charge-against-human-rights-defender-hamza-nasri>

8 Amnesty International (2020) 'Tunisia: Presidential statement in favour of death penalty is shocking', September 29, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/tunisia-presidential-statement-in-favour-of-death-penalty-is-shocking/>

Sudan

2020 has marked Sudan's second year of its three-year transitional period, amid contradictory indicators reflecting the conflict of interests between political forces managing the country during the transitional phase. There are increasing fears of military domination over the political process, and the continuation of the military's economic influence without prejudice, especially with regional interventions from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, favoring the military establishment and its conflicting branches.

The transitional government succeeded in number of important reforms promoting human rights: the abolition of public order laws restricting women's rights and their

participation in public and political life, the criminalization of female circumcision, and the abolition of an authorization requirement for a wife from her husband before traveling with children. In addition, the death penalty prescribed in law for apostasy in Islam was abolished, security powers during arrest reduced, and some legal guarantees were provided to prevent torture and ill-treatment in detention sites. The authorities have also taken some measures paving the way for judicial reform.

Moreover, the Sovereignty Council of Sudan appointed Nemat Abdullah Khair to the position of Chief Justice, and appointed Tag el-Sir el-Hibir as Attorney General following his nomination by the transitional government. The transitional government has also formed a committee to dismantle monopoly, fight corruption, and recover funds to address the corruption of former regime figures. Sudan witnessed a significant improvement in the freedoms guaranteed to civil society, and the expansion of free opinion and expression, while the transitional authorities showed openness in dialogue and consultation with non-governmental organizations, including organizations defending human rights inside and outside Sudan. The Sudanese government has also accepted to host a country office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In June, the Security Council approved the establishment of a comprehensive United Nations mission to assist the transitional process in Sudan, at the invitation of the Sudanese government; this mission is intended to replace the joint United Nations and African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur.

In October, the transitional government finally signed a peace agreement with the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, which includes political movements and armed groups from the Blue Nile states, South Kordofan and Darfur, after ten months of negotiations. The agreement includes eight protocols in the areas of transitional justice, compensation, land ownership, the pastoral sector and farming development, wealth and power sharing, and the right to return of refugees and displaced persons. However, the negotiations did not include two of the most prominent armed opposition movements; the rebel Sudan Liberation Movement, led by Abdul Wahid Mohamed al Nur, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North, led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu.

On 3 September, the Prime Minister signed a declaration of principles in Addis Ababa with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North, which recognizes, among other provisions, the principle of separating religion from the state in the next constitution, or granting the right to self-determination to the Nuba Mountains region, if this principle is rejected. The signing of the peace agreement brought high hopes of ending the decades-long suffering of the civilians in these areas, some of whom face constant violence, especially in the Darfur region. More than seventy people, including farmers and internally displaced persons, were killed by members of armed groups between July and September 2020 in West, Central and North of Darfur state, areas under the control of Sudanese Security Forces. The burning and looting of homes and markets continued, causing the forcible displacement of about eight thousand civilians.¹

Nevertheless, some alarming practices raised concerns regarding the future of the democratization process in the country, amid an increase in popular protests that revealed growing frustration with the political and social situation. The pandemic has had negative economic repercussions, with the inflation rate exceeding 200 percent in June 2020. Security services also continued to use excessive lethal force against demonstrations in the Darfur region and eastern Sudan, while some activists and media figures were arrested and tried in cases related to the expression of opinion.

In July, the Military Council announced in a public statement that it would not tolerate the defamation of the army and its leaders on social media platforms, warning that it would use freedom-restricting legislation inherited from the era of Omar al-Bashir; the Cybercrime Law issued in 2007 and the Press and Publications Law, used in the legal prosecution of media professionals and bloggers. Five artists were sentenced to two months imprisonment and a fine in September, after being charged with “disrupting social peace” for chanting pro-democracy slogans while in a police station; some of them were physically assaulted during their detention. On 9 November 2020, Waad

¹ Amnesty International (2020) ‘Sudan: UN must extend Darfur peacekeepers mandate by at least six months’, December 2, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/sudan-un-must-extend-darfur-peacekeepers-mandate-by-at-least-six-months/>

Bahjat was arrested by a policeman while she was in her car outside a petrol station in Khartoum, broadcasting a Facebook Live video documenting an incident in which several women were reportedly harassed by police and military men. The activist remained in detention until 9 December; she was then transferred to criminal trial on charges of spreading false news, insulting a public official and public disturbance. Journalist Sulafa Alsidig Alhaj also received a summons for an investigation, regarding interviews she conducted on corruption among Sudan's leaders from the previous Omar al-Bashir regime.²

The continuance of the practice of torture sparked fears as it exposed the lingering legal defect in combating the crime of torture and the abuse of power by security personnel, according to the reports of the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies.³ In December, Khartoum and Omdurman witnessed widespread demonstrations denouncing the killing of political activist Bahaa el-Din Nouri, a member of the Resistance Committee. Bahaa el-Din's death is likely the result of torture following his disappearance and detention for five days by members of the Rapid Support Forces on 16 December.⁴

The transitional government was also late in fulfilling some of the transitional goals stipulated in the transitional constitutional declaration; the appointment of the Legislative Council and the establishment of human rights and transitional justice commissions. The security services have also remained without radical reform, maintaining their practices inherited from the authoritarian era, while the Sovereignty

2 Front Line Defenders "Judicial harassment against Wad Bahjat & Sulafa Alsidig Alhaj", January 6, 2021.
<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/judicial-harassment-against-waad-bahjat-sulafa-alsidig-alhaj>

3 African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (2021) 'Sudan: Urgent Call for Investigation into the Death of Ezz-El-Din Hamid Ali in Omdurman', January 8, 2021.
<https://www.acjps.org/sudan-urgent-call-for-investigation-into-the-death-of-ezz-el-din-hamid-ali-in-omdurman/>

4 African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (2020) 'Sudan: Urgent Call for an Investigation into the Disappearance and Custodial Death of Me. Baha Eldeen Nory Mohamed Ali', December 30, 2020.
<https://www.acjps.org/sudan-urgent-call-for-an-investigation-into-the-disappearance-and-custodial-death-of-mr-baha-eldeen-nory-mohamed-ali/>

Council continues to ignore some of security reform recommendations submitted by the transitional government. The authorities haphazardly managed the file of accountability for the grave crimes committed during the years of Omar al-Bashir's rule, especially in the Darfur region of western Sudan, and during civil disobedience incidents and popular protests in 2018 and 2019. Widespread popular protests took place in several regions of Sudan, under the title "Correcting the Course" on 30 June 2020, calling for justice and accountability.

Sudan still refuses to extradite the defendants wanted to appear before the International Criminal Court in the Hague, the most wanted of whom is former president Omar al-Bashir. Such refusal contradicts statements by several officials in the transitional government and Sovereignty Council, confirming acceptance of cooperation with the ICC; the criminal law was also amended to abolish the criminalization of cooperation with the court. Nevertheless, Ali Kushayb, a senior commander of the pro-government Janjaweed militias who surrendered himself to the court in June, remains the only instance of the Sudanese government authorities' cooperation with the ICC.

Yemen

For the sixth consecutive year, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has continued to worsen as a result of the country's ongoing armed conflict. Human rights crimes and violations continued to be perpetrated with impunity throughout 2020. The countries complicit in the bulk of these violations, in particular the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have not faced any consequences, while the flow of weapons continues to the warring parties. Eighty percent of Yemen's population is in need of humanitarian aid, most of them women and children, while millions live on the brink of starvation, as a direct result of the conflict.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded humanitarian challenges, as hundreds of Yemenis have died from infection by the virus throughout Yemen. The number of Covid-19 and cholera cases increased among the population amid a severe deficiency in the healthcare required for twenty million people. Yemen faces an acute shortage of medicine and medical supplies resulting from the destruction of the country's internal health system and the obstruction of humanitarian aid, food, shelter, and basic services for civilians. Since 2015, the warring parties, especially the Saudi-Emirati coalition, have targeted many health facilities and staff in the health sector. The Houthis, the other primary warring faction in the conflict, have also obstructed the delivery of aid. In March, several international organizations announced the suspension of some aid, due to the misuse of grant funds. On 27 March, the United States decided to cut humanitarian aid, and the World Food Program halved aid in some areas.

The war in Yemen has left at least 3.6 million people displaced and nearly a quarter of a million people dead, including over 112,000 people killed directly during hostilities since March 2015; the actual death toll is believed to be much higher. The Yemeni government, the Houthi (Ansar Allah) armed group, and the forces of Saudi/UAE-led coalition continue to commit egregious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. These violations included unlawful airstrikes, indiscriminate shelling, landmines, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and child recruitment in warfare.

The warring parties in Yemen are involved in the arrest and forcible disappearance of hundreds of civilians, journalists, and human rights defenders, while detaining them in appalling conditions. The detention facilities are overcrowded and unsanitary, rife with infectious diseases, amid an absence of regular healthcare; in some cases, detainees are completely deprived of healthcare. Prison systems also lack the capacity for healthcare, and lack the medical supplies or resources needed to effectively address the pandemic. To this day, the parties to the conflict continue to prioritize the exchange of military detainees over civilian detainees following the Stockholm peace talks in 2018, since the establishment of an executive mechanism for prisoner exchange. Since 2016, there have

been an estimated 1,605 cases of arbitrary arrest and 770 cases of enforced disappearance, with the involvement of various parties to the conflict, including the internationally-recognized Yemeni government, the Houthis, the United Arab Emirates and its affiliated groups, according to the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights.¹

Media workers are also exposed to grave dangers from the warring parties. In April, a court in Sanaa affiliated with the Houthis sentenced four journalists to death on charges of collaborating with the enemy, among ten journalists convicted of publishing false news. According to the Public Prosecution indictment, the ten journalists were convicted on charges of “broadcasting false news, data, rumors, propaganda with intent to weaken national defense, disturbing public security, spreading terror, and harming the public interest by setting up several websites and social networks online to publish news in support of the Saudi-led coalition.” The same journalists have been detained for five years, and their trial was marred by serious violations of their right to defense and legal representation.²

In April, the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition announced a temporary cessation of hostilities, but armed aggression quickly resumed. Since 2016, twelve European countries, including Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, have announced measures to suspend or restrict arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, following the grave violations committed by the two-state led coalition in Yemen. Yet France's response was meeker; it only confirmed the reinforcement of the governmental mechanism for authorizing the transfer of weapons. The French government neither indicated what these reinforced regulations are nor how the regulations ensure that

1 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Yemen: Release of arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared civilians must be prioritized by all parties to the conflict’, September 1, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/yemen-release-of-arbitrarily-detained-and-forcibly-disappeared-civilians-must-be-prioritized-by-all-parties-to-the-conflict/?lang=en>

2 Gulf Centre for Human Rights (2020) ‘Yemen: Four journalists sentenced to death’, April 11, 2020.

<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2363>

French weapons are not used to commit violations against Yemeni civilians.³ Despite the Saudi-Emirati coalition's constant grave violations against children in Yemen, the coalition was removed from the list of parties involved in grave violations against children in contexts of armed conflicts, by a decision of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The United Nations report issued in mid-2020 on children and armed conflict indicated the coalition's responsibility for the killing and maiming of 222 children in Yemen during 2019.⁴

The United Nations Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen (the GEE), established by the Human Rights Council in 2017, acknowledged in a September 2020 report that the international community “should help pave the way towards credible accountability, while Yemen is suffering from an accountability gap.” The experts provided a list of recommendations to the Security Council, including to refer the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court and expand the list of persons subject to Security Council sanctions. The GEE also supported the formation of an investigative body along the lines of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria. The group also specifically called on the Security Council to ensure that the human rights file in Yemen is kept on its agenda, and that adequate resources are provided to the GEE to collect, preserve, and analyze information related to violations and crimes in Yemen.

In the long term, the GEE encouraged further dialogue on the establishment of a special court, such as a “mixed court” to prosecute the most persons most culpable for crimes and violations. It also reaffirmed the importance of victims’ right to redress and

3 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘LETTER FROM 17 NGOS TO THE FRENCH PRIME MINISTER CONCERNING THE SAUDI CARGO SHIP “BAHRI YANBU’, February 7, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/letter-from-17-ngos-to-the-french-prime-minister-concerning-the-saudi-cargo-ship-bahri-yanbu%e2%80%8f/?lang=en>

4 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2020) ‘Yemen: Open letter to the United Nations Secretary-General on the annual report on children and armed conflict’, June 22, 2020.

<https://cihrs.org/yemen-open-letter-to-the-united-nations-secretary-general-on-the-annual-report-on-children-and-armed-conflict/?lang=en>

material reparations. The experts called for human rights to be “at the core of any future peace negotiations,” and for no step to be taken that might undermine rights and accountability, such as “granting a blanket amnesty.”

The Group of Experts also reiterated their concerns regarding states supplying arms to parties to the conflict may violate their obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty. Supplying arms to warring states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE may amount to the crime of aiding and supporting illegal acts internationally.

After many faltering negotiations, the Saudi- led coalition announced on 18 December the formation of a power-sharing government, consisting of figures from the Southern Transitional Council in the government of Moein Abdel-Malek of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. This comes as an attempted effort to end another wave of the armed conflict in Yemen, which had been simmering since 2019 between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council. However, concerns about the stability of this agreement quickly were raised following the bombings of Aden airport on 30 December, coinciding with the landing of a plane carrying members of the new government, which left twenty-five dead and wounded more than one hundred people, most of them civilians working at the airport.

Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC)

2020 has seen a surge in severe restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression in the countries comprising the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain all increased censorship on the internet in conjunction with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic¹. Qatar has tightened restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression in the amendment to the penal code in January 2020, which stipulated imprisonment for “anyone who broadcasts,

¹ Amnesty International (2020) ‘COVID-19 is New Pretext for Old Tactics of Repression in GCC’, October 15, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE0431362020ENGLISH.pdf>

publishes, or re-publishes false or tendentious rumors, statements, news, or exciting propaganda, whenever that is with the intention of harming national interests, stirring public opinion, or prejudicing the social order of the state.”² This amendment strengthens the restrictions already imposed on freedom of opinion and expression in Qatar under other articles in the Penal Code, the Cybercrime Law of 2014, and the Press and Publications Law of 1979.

The issue of statelessness and the consequent blatant forms of discrimination in the privilege of citizenship rights persist in Kuwait and Qatar. Since 1996, the Qatari authorities have arbitrarily stripped the families of the Ghufran clan of their nationality, depriving them of basic rights in the fields of work, social and health care, and property ownership³. Meanwhile, the Bidun community in Kuwait, which includes more than 88,000 people, suffers from the continued denial of their civil status and citizenship rights, as they are considered illegal residents. Activists and human rights defenders belonging to the Bidun community continue to be targeted and harassed, especially if they participate in demonstrations and sit-ins to defend their rights. On 28 January 2020, the Criminal Court in Kuwait sentenced Bidun activists to ten years in prison, and sentenced a third activist in absentia to life imprisonment on charges of incitement to overthrow the government and misuse of communication means⁴.

The imprisonment of human rights defenders continued in Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, with defenders receiving harsh prison sentences following arbitrary trials, or languishing in pretrial detention for their human rights activities or peaceful expression of opinion. The Bahraini authorities released Nabeel Rajab, head of the

2 Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘Qatar: 5-Year Prison Sentence Set for ‘Fake News’’, January 22, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/22/qatar-5-year-prison-sentence-set-fake-news>

3 Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘Qatar - Events of 2020’, May 17, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/qatar>

4 Amnesty International (2020) ‘Kuwait: Heavy prison sentences of activists demanding rights of citizenship’, January 28, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/kuwait-heavy-prison-sentences-of-activists-demanding-rights-of-citizenship/>

Bahrain Center for Human Rights, in June 2020; Rajab had been in detention since June 2016. He was sentenced in 2018 to five years in prison for tweets he posted on his Twitter account criticizing Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemen's war, and exposing the practice of torture in prisons.

Among the numerous other human rights defenders remaining imprisoned in Bahrain are Naji Fateel, a member of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, who has been serving a fifteen-year prison sentence since 2013 for “establishing a group that undermines the constitution.” Fateel endures severely inhumane conditions in prison, which had prompted him to go on an open hunger strike more than once, the last of which was in August 2020⁵. Prominent human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and founder of the Gulf Center for Human Rights, is serving a life sentence after military trial in 2011, with other activists including engineer, blogger, and human rights defender Dr. Abdul Jalil Al-Singace.

The majority of prominent human rights defenders in the United Arab Emirates are in prisons. Lawyer and human rights defender Mohammad Al-Roken, and journalist Ahmed Mansoor, are detained following trials and convictions in cases related to free expression during the last decade. Ahmed Mansoor's health conditions deteriorated during the last months of 2020 as a result of his solitary confinement for over three years, while his fundamental rights were denied during his detention in al-Sadr Prison⁶. Ahmed Mansoor was sentenced to ten years in prison in May 2018 on charges of “insulting the prestige and status of the UAE and its symbols.” The UAE has a well-established practice of inflicting long-term solitary confinement upon many detainees and prisoners, which prompted one woman prisoner to attempt suicide in March 2020.

5 Front Line Defenders (2020) ‘Case of Naji Fateel in Bahrain’, August 14, 2020.
<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-naji-fateel>

6 Human Rights Watch (2020) ‘UAE: Imprisoned Activist’s Health at Risk’, December 16, 2020.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/uae-imprisoned-activists-health-risk>

In Saudi Arabia, five women's rights defenders remain under arrest, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nasima al-Sada, Nouf Abdel Aziz, and Maya al-Zahrani, who were all arrested in May 2018 for their advocacy combating discrimination against women in the Kingdom. Loujain al-Hathloul was subjected to torture, sexual assault and solitary confinement, according to local and international reports. In November, the case was referred to trial before the Criminal Court specialized in terrorism, on charges of spying with foreign entities and conspiring against the Kingdom. On 28 December 2020, al-Hathloul was sentenced to five years and eight months in prison with a suspended sentence of two years and ten months⁷. She was released on 10 February 2021, with a five-year travel ban, and a three-year probation period. Al-Hathloul's release remains conditional on her pledge not to speak publicly about her case and the conditions of her detention⁸.

Many human rights defenders are also serving harsh prison sentences: Mohammed al-Otaibi, founder of the Human Rights Union in Riyadh; Waleed Abu al-Khair, lawyer and founder of the Human Rights Observatory; Raif Badawi, a blogger; and the founders of the Association for Civil and Political Rights in Saudi Arabia (Hasm): Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, Fawzan Mohsen al-Harbi, and Abdulaziz al-Shubaili.

Detainees and prisoners in Saudi Arabia endure severe detention conditions. In April, human rights defender Abdullah al-Hamid, a member of the Association for Civil and Political Rights, died more medical neglect in prison; he had been in custody since 2012 until being sentenced to prison terms of eleven years and ten years, respectively. Al-Hamid suffered a health emergency three months before his death, but he was denied treatment. He was also prevented from informing his family of his health crisis⁹.

7 Front Line Defenders (2020) 'Loujain Al-Hathloul Sentenced', February 10, 2021.

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/crackdown-whrds-saudi-arabia>

8 BBC Arabic (2021) "The Saudi activist may return to prison if she violates the terms of her release," February 17, 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-56101222>

9 Front Line Defenders (2020) 'Abdullah Al-Hamid Dies of Medical Negligence', April 24, 2021.

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/imprisoned-human-rights-defender-abdullah-al-hamid-critical-condition>

In April, Saudi Arabia announced the adoption of some partial reforms to the penal code, restricting the death penalty to persons of the age of eighteen at the time of their crimes, unless they were charged under the terrorism law. The Kingdom has also abolished the punishment of flogging for crimes with a discretionary punishment and replaced it with imprisonment. Saudi Arabia applies the death penalty widely, so frequently so that it ranks as a top country in regards to executing its own citizens. In 2019, 184 people were executed in Saudi Arabia in trials that did not guarantee the rights of defense, as the accused were often tortured and ill-treated during investigation and detention, according to Amnesty International¹⁰.

The perpetrators of the horrific murder of Saudi journalist and reformist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018, remain at large, evading punishment and accountability. Higher ranks of Saudi government have been proven to be involved in inciting and planning the crime, on top of whom are Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; the former deputy head of military intelligence, Ahmed Asiri; and adviser to the crown Prince Saud al-Qahtani. In May, Khashoggi's sons announced a pardon for their father's killers, a few months after death and prison sentences were issued against five defendants in Saudi Arabia¹¹.

With its abysmal human rights record, Saudi Arabia failed to secure a seat on the Human Rights Council during the elections held by the United Nations General Assembly in October to select representatives from the Asia-Pacific region.

10 Amnesty International (2020) 'Death penalty 2019: Saudi Arabia executed record number of people last year amid decline in global executions', April 21, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/death-penalty-2019-saudi-arabia-executed-record-number-of-people-last-year-amid-decline-in-global-executions/>

11 Al Jazeera (2020) 'Jamal Khashoggi's Son Salah Says Family Forgives Killers', May 22, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/22/jamal-khashoggis-son-salah-says-family-forgives-killers>