

Saudi Arabi

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) sought in 2015 to expand its regional influence and establish military and political alliances that serve regime stability in the kingdom. The KSA formed and led two military coalitions, one to defeat the Houthis in Yemen and the second to ostensibly combat terrorism. Both of these operate free of any oversight or accountability for violations committed by any coalition forces. Riyadh is pumping its financial and military resources into the war machine in a battle for influence with Iran, without consideration for the deaths of thousands of civilians and millions of people displaced by these tragedies.

Though the KSA declared war on the Islamic State (IS) as part of a broader war against all terrorist organizations, the scope of this war has been limited. The KSA must reconsider its policies in this regard. There is no marked difference in the way the KSA and the terrorist organization deal with apostates and human rights defenders, or in the two parties' stance on democracy, political participation, multiparty politics, and the ownership of newspapers and media outlets, as well as the right to express opinions at odds with the vision and decisions of the caliphate/royal family or religious interpretations advanced by their respective religious establishments.

Although women were given the right to run and vote in municipal elections and a new law governing civic associations was issued, human rights continue to be systematically suppressed in the KSA. Human rights defenders, reform advocates, and peaceful dissidents are sentenced to prison, lashing, and death, while discrimination continues against religious minorities and people are arrested for their personal beliefs.

Changes by King Salman and Undermining Reform:

When King Abdullah assumed the throne in 2005, he inaugurated his reign as a reformer with substantial popularity among Saudi citizens. This enabled him to hold local elections in 2005, grant broad powers to the Shura Council, and appoint the first woman to a high-level ministerial position. With a 2010 royal edict, he also took steps to limit the authority of Council of Senior Scholars. During his rule, “the influence of the religious police, especially in the kingdom’s western region, the Hijaz, significantly diminished, and press censorship was eased, especially on controversial social issues such as gender segregation.”¹

After the eruption of the Arab Spring, which swept away regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, some of the liberal elite, reform advocates, and human rights defenders issued a declaration titled “Toward a Nation of Rights and Institutions,”² as well as a declaration for national reform. Calls went out for “a day of anger” protest, but the protests in 2011 were so weak that the authorities were able to quell them. King Abdullah also issued a set of edicts initiating economic and social reforms, with the goal of appeasing popular anger at social and economic injustice. At the same time, “[w]hatever small window had been created for tolerance for different views was swiftly closed, and Saudi Arabia in fact embarked on a massive

¹ Leigh Nolan, “Managing Reform? Saudi Arabia and the King’s Dilemma,” Brookings Doha Center, Policy Briefing, May 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/05/saudi-arabia-nolan>.

² Read the text of the declaration at <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=247642>.

campaign to intimidate, arrest, jail, prosecute any Saudi citizen who dared to contradict official government policy.”³ Some believed that responding to demands for political and social reform “would strip the royal family of most of their financial privileges and socio-political influence. No king would dare to push through such reforms—even assuming he were convinced of the justice they would bring. Doing so would provoke a crisis right at the heart of the royal family.”⁴

King Abdullah died in early 2015, leaving behind a legacy of human rights violations and fragile, incomplete political and social reforms.⁵ Saudi Arabia also played a role in suppressing the uprising in Bahrain and removing Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, while in Syria, it offered financial and political support to armed opposition groups. In Bahrain, the KSA supports the Sunni regime against Shia protestors and seeks to deny the Shia-majority country democracy and human rights, fearing the repercussions of a democratic transition in Bahrain on its own Shia population, arguing that this would give Iran an opening in the country.⁶ In Syria, Saudi support has been channeled against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s major regional ally. While the KSA supports the armed opposition, it also joined the US-led alliance against IS, which has seized territory in Syria and Iraq.

King Salman Bin Abd al-Aziz, aged 79, inaugurated his rule with a series of significant decrees and fundamental changes, seeking to cement his power. His decisions reflected his conservative bent, his desire to appease the religious leadership, and his hostility to liberals and reform advocates. It is in this context that his decision to fire Justice Minister Mohammed al-Eissa and Abd al-Latif Al Sheikh, the

³ Adam Coogle on human rights in KSA under King Abdullah, Human Rights Watch, Jan. 23, 2015,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK2L7ZAaHww&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴ Ibrahim Hatlani, “Unhappy Arabia,” Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jan. 22, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=50706>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2015: Saudi Arabia,”

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>.

⁶ Frederic Wehrey, “Bahrain’s Lost Uprising,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jun. 12, 2012,

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgu>.

head of the religious police, should be read. Both men are prominent opponents of conservatives and militant clerics in the KSA.⁷ King Salman also promoted two princes from the so-called third generation of the royal family, Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, 55, who became the second crown prince and interior minister, and Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, 34, his youngest son, who became defense minister and president of the king's office. Some analysts believe that "Salman's concentration of power in a very few family hands runs the longer-term risk of a backlash among the many members of the third generation who have seemingly been cut out of power by his recent decisions."⁸

In April 2015, King Salman made Mohammed Bin Nayef the crown prince.⁹ The prince is known as a conservative and a security figure, who previously led a campaign to crush the political opposition with the beginning of the Arab Spring. In the wake of the Arab Spring, "the Ministry of Interior under his leadership has carried out a sweeping crackdown on peaceful dissent, using its powers to intimidate, detain, and imprison anyone who dares to criticize the government or call for serious reforms."¹⁰ According to Human Rights Watch, the Saudi authorities, working under the supervision of Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, were able to eradicate nearly all unofficial Saudi rights organizations and punish their activists. He also instituted a new counterterrorism law allowing the authorities to criminalize freedom of expression and association as "terrorist activities." The law gave the authorities broad police powers not subject to judicial

⁷ Iqalat islahiyin wa manh mukafa'at sakhya rubbama tab'ath isharat 'ala tawajjuhat al-'ahil al-sa'udi al-jadid," *Reuters*, Feb. 3, 2015, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/businessNews/idARAKBN0L714L20150203?sp=true>.

⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia's Game of Thrones," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 2, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2015-02-02/saudi-arabias-game-thrones>.

⁹ "Amiran yatamatta'an bi-nufudh kabir sayuhaddidan mustaqbal al-sa'udiya," *Reuters*, Sep. 17, 2015, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0RH2CT20150917?sp=true>.

¹⁰ Adam Coogler, "Dispatches: Don't Be Fooled by Saudi's Reshuffle," HRW, Apr. 29, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/29/dispatches-dont-be-fooled-saudis-reshuffle>.

oversight.¹¹ Mohammed Bin Nayef is the strongman of the kingdom, enjoying Washington's support for offering various services in the war on terror. He is known as "an arch-reactionary. He aligned himself very closely with the most puritanical elements of the clergy, opposed reform and change, rejected demands for more freedom of expression, continued the treatment of the kingdom's Shiite minority...as second-class citizens..."¹²

King Salman's shifts in the ruling family hierarchy, which will have a long-term impact on the kingdom and its political and social conditions, are thus consistent with what is known about the conservative monarch, who believes that democracy is not appropriate for KSA. In a press interview in 2010, he rejected democracy, arguing that "we cannot have democracy in Saudi Arabia, or every tribe would form a party. It would be like Iraq and lead us to chaos."¹³ The promise of reforms for the Saudi people has thus dimmed with the rise of the conservative king.

KSA and Open Fronts with Iran:

As it acts in the Gulf and Arab Levant, Saudi Arabia is always occupied by how to best contain and deter Iran and undercut its foe's influence in the region, in what some analysts have described as a decades-long regional cold war. In the context of this goal, KSA's human rights violations extend beyond its own borders. In fact, the kingdom is a regional prop for Arab dictatorships and uses its extensive diplomatic influence and financial resources to suppress demands for democracy and respect for human rights elsewhere. The exception is dictatorships that are allied with Iran, such as the Assad regime in Syria, which Riyadh sees as Iran's handmaiden in the Arab world, as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen.

Riyadh views Arab Shia Muslims, including its own Shia population, as potential Iranian agents. The country's prevailing

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bruce Riedel, "The Prince of Counter-Terrorism," Brookings, Sep. 29, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism>.

¹³ "al-Malak Salman: muhafiz abta' masirat al-islahat fi 'ahd salafih," *Deutsche Welle*, Jan. 23, 2015.

hardline *takfiri* religious orientation is also hostile to the Shia confession. The Saudi authorities systematically discriminate against Shia citizens, who constitute 10–15 percent of the Saudi population. Saudi Shias face inequality in job opportunities and government positions, and suffer from discrimination in the judicial system. The government suppresses their freedom of worship as well, and Shia citizens are rarely permitted to build mosques.¹⁴

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the KSA interfered broadly in the region, seeking to contain the expansion of Iranian influence, restore the political status quo ante, and quash demands for reform, democracy, and human rights, fearing the unrest would migrate to the kingdom. Most important, it created the Peninsula Shield Force and intervened militarily in Bahrain to put down a Shia uprising, whose success Riyadh feared would inspire its own Shia population. Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia also played a prominent role in supporting movements in Egypt seeking to bring down the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, and it supported the July 3 regime. In Syria, it acted against the Assad regime, claiming to be supporting the Syrian people. King Salman began his reign with a declaration of war on the Houthis in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia led a military alliance in support of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. The KSA is also allied with the March 14 forces in Lebanon, the primary enemy of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah.

Although the KSA and Iran both play the sectarian card in their fierce conflict, some observers believe the conflict should not be reduced to its Sunni-Shia sectarian dimension: “Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game...”¹⁵ These analysts think that in the midst of the shift in the

¹⁴ HRW, “Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens,” Sep. 3, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/09/03/denied-dignity/systematic-discrimination-and-hostility-toward-saudi-shia-citizens>.

¹⁵ F. Gregory Gause III, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, Jul. 22, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/07/22-beyond-sectarianism-cold-war-gause>.

balance of power, “Saudi Arabia is once again asserting itself as the power and security trendsetter in the Middle East.”¹⁶

The conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran in July was not good news for the Saudi regime. It was deeply worrying for Riyadh, which feared that it would end Iran’s isolation and free its economy of the shackle of sanctions, thus allowing Tehran to offer additional support to the KSA’s enemies in the Middle East.¹⁷ The agreement gave Tehran access to major frozen financial resources, which alarmed Arab Gulf capitals.¹⁸ If Iran were already able to throw massive support behind the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, as well as its rumored support for Houthis in Yemen, what would it do as billions of additional dollars flowed into its coffers?

Some observers think that the KSA received more Western support in the wake of the agreement, as a way to appease it “after the kingdom failed to dissuade its Western allies from the deal with Iran.”¹⁹ In expressing its fears and concerns about the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia was able to obtain Washington’s support for its military operation in Yemen, and the international community turned a blind eye to the violation of the laws of war committed by Saudi-led coalition forces in Yemen.²⁰ Following talks between US President Barack Obama and King Salman about the impact of the nuclear deal,

¹⁶ Lina Khatib, “Saudi Arabia’s Comeback Via Yemen,” Carnegie Middle East Center, Apr. 1, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/04/01/saudi-arabia-s-comeback-via-yemen/i5az>.

¹⁷ “Tawattur fi-l-sa’udiya ba’d al-ittifaq al-nawawi al-irani,” *Reuters*, Jul. 14, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCNOPO2EP20150714?sp=true>.

¹⁸ Ibrahim Fraihat, “Iran and Arab World after the Nuclear Deal,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Aug. 16, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/08/16-iran-middle-east-nuclear-deals-sharqieh>.

¹⁹ Farea al-Muslimi, “What Will the Nuclear Agreement with Iran Mean for the War in Yemen?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sep. 21, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=61348>.

²⁰ See the Yemen chapter.

KSA said it was satisfied with assurances offered by Washington that the deal would not endanger Gulf countries.²¹

Saudi-Iranian relations took a dangerous turn in early 2016 that led the KSA to break diplomatic ties with Iran, when the Saudi authorities carried out the biggest mass executions in the country since the 1980s.²² On January 2, 2016, the authorities executed 47 men on terrorism-related charges, most of them al-Qaeda members, as well as at least four Shia, one of them prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who, according to Human Rights Watch, was convicted by a Saudi court “on a host of vague charges apparently based largely on his peaceful criticism of Saudi officials.” Al-Nimr was known for his support of peaceful protests and did not engage in violence. He said in 2011, “The roar of words against the authorities instead of weapons...the weapon of words is stronger than bullets, because the authorities will win the battle of weapons.”²³

Nimr’s execution, following a trial that did not appear to meet international fair trial standards, ignited Shia protests in most Arab countries, as well as in Tehran, where the protestors stormed the Saudi embassy and set fire to it, prompting Riyadh to cut ties with Tehran and inflaming hostilities between the two countries. Remarking on the break, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said that the move came in response to long-festering problems, not solely the attack on the embassy. He said that the Saudi decision was a response to “years of hostile Iranian policies, particularly in recent months. The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism and has established terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia and a number of other states.”²⁴ Bahrain and Sudan also cut ties to Iran, while the UAE scaled down its diplomatic mission and

²¹ “al-Sa’udiya radiya ‘an al-tatminat al-amrikiya bi-sha’n al-ittifaq al-nawawi ma’ Iran,” *BBC Arabic*, Sep. 4, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/09/150904_obama_salman_meeting_ir_an_deal.

²² HRW, “Saudi Arabia: Mass Execution Largest since 1980,” Jan. 4, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/04/saudi-arabia-mass-execution-largest-1980>.

²³ See the BBC televised report, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jja27O68ekc>.

²⁴ “al-Sa’udiya tuwaqqif al-tayran wa taqta’ al-‘alaqat al-tijariya ma’ Iran,” *Reuters*, Jan. 4, 2016, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0UI1H920160104>.

Kuwait summoned the Iranian ambassador,²⁵ in a show of support from KSA's Sunni allies.

In a challenge to Riyadh, Iran's angry president declared that Saudi Arabia cutting ties with Tehran could not cover up the crime of executing a prominent Shia cleric. He warned that the dispute might also impact the war on terror.²⁶ But Riyadh's mobilization of its Sunni allies just days later in broad Islamic counterterrorism alliance to confront Tehran indicates that the break affected not only the regional war on terror, but efforts to reach a consensual resolution of conflict and civil war in Syria and Yemen. It will also have an impact on the support of both the KSA and Iran in late 2015 for a power-sharing agreement in Lebanon, which led Beirut to hope to fill the presidential vacancy.²⁷ Moreover, with the regional superpowers focused on fighting one another, this will undoubtedly give terrorist organizations more room to maneuver, especially the Islamic State.

KSA Fights Terrorism While Embracing its Intellectual Foundation:

While Saudi concern for increasing Iranian influence led it to form a military alliance to fight the Houthis in Yemen, the focus on Iran did not deter it from the Islamic State, which poses a growing danger to the region and the West alike. In mid-December 2015, Riyadh announced it was forming an Islamic military coalition of 34 countries, to be led by the KSA, to fight terrorism; Iran was excluded from the coalition.²⁸ The formation of this coalition prompts questions

²⁵ "al-Kuwayt tastad'i safiraha min tahrān 'ala khalfiyat al-hujum 'ala-l-sifara al-sa'udiya," *AFP*, Jan. 5, 2016.

²⁶ "Iran: al-sa'udiya la yumkinuha al-taghtiya 'ala jarimataha bi-qat' al-'alaqat," *Reuters*, Jan. 5, 2016, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0UJ0T120160105>.

²⁷ "al-Tawatturat tahtadim fi-l-sharq al-awsat ba'd qat' al-sa'udiya 'alaqataha ma' Iran," *Reuters*, Jan. 4, 2016, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0UI1GS20160104>.

²⁸ "al-Sa'udiya tu'lin tashkil tahaluf islami 'askari min 34 dawla li-muharabat al-irhab," *Reuters*, Dec. 15, 2015, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0TY02120151215?sp=true>.

regarding its narrow objectives; particularly because there are no concrete indications about its exact role in countering terror.

The coalition would not only stand up to IS, but to any organization the alliance considered a terrorist group, according to statements of the second crown prince and defense minister, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. But the alliance, which included Turkey, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Gulf and African countries, might also at some point constitute a Sunni alliance to confront Iranian Shia expansion. While the coalition leaders did not announce their intention to confront Iran, the alliance may be currently trying to navigate the political and ideological differences between member states, which some analysts believe may impede a strong regional coalition against Tehran. This “underbalancing” is “the inability or unwillingness of states to form the kind of blocking alliances that balance of power theory would predict.”²⁹

Al-Qaeda seems to be losing ground in the region to its competitor, IS, seen in the outcome of their conflict in Syria and Yemen. Saudi territory itself has been struck by IS terrorist attacks,³⁰ while al-Qaeda threatened to launch attacks in the kingdom if it moved ahead with the execution of imprisoned al-Qaeda leaders.³¹ With the KSA having executed al-Qaeda members in early 2016, the coming year may see reprisals from al-Qaeda inside Saudi territory.

In previous years, the KSA, with its puritanical, Wahhabi ideology, has been accused of sponsoring and financing al-Qaeda and subsequently IS, both of which embrace the jihadi, Salafi thought. While observers believe that “ISIS has certainly drawn support from individuals in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, both in terms of

²⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Isn’t There an Anti-Iran Alliance?” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/03/why-isnt-there-an-anti-iran-alliance/>.

³⁰ “al-Dawla al-islamiya tu’lin mas’uliyataha ‘an hujum ‘ala husayniya fi-l-sa’udiya,” *Reuters*, Oct. 16, 2015,

<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0SA2NL20151016>.

³¹ “Tanzim al-qa’ida yuhaddid bi-shann hajamat fi-l-sa’udiya law u’dimat ‘anasiruhu al-masjuna ladayha,” *BBC Arabic*, Dec. 1, 2015,

http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/12/151201_saudi_alqaeda_executions_warning.

volunteers and monetary contributions,” there is no evidence that the organization has received direct support from the KSA government.³² Opinion polls show that support for IS inside Saudi Arabia stands at about 5 percent, or “nearly half a million potential donors.”³³ In addition to the financial support to which the terrorist group has access, Saudi society offers a fertile climate for IS recruitment.

Systematic Suppression of Human Rights in KSA:

Saudi Arabia is a dangerous environment for human rights defenders. The authorities systematically suppress freedom of expression, belief, and association and minority and women’s rights, as well as regularly violate the right to life with death sentences. The Saudi regime maintains an iron curtain on its domestic scene through its financial control of many Arab and international press and media outlets. While researchers with international rights organizations do not enjoy freedom of movement in Saudi territory, news of ongoing violations has been leaked thanks to modern technology and social media, demonstrating that the KSA’s human rights record is one of the worst in the world.

The kingdom does not tolerate liberal opinions opposed to the ruling political and religious authorities and deals harshly with dissident voices critical of human rights violations in the KSA. The Saudi terrorism court in 2014 sentenced prominent human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair to 15 years in prison.³⁴ Abu al-Khair’s wife Samar Badawi, a women’s rights activist, is banned from travel,

³² F. Gregory Gause III, “ISIS and the New Middle East Cold War,” Brookings Institute, Aug. 25, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/08/25-isis-new-middle-east-cold-war>.

³³ “Hal al-sa’udiya mas’ula ‘an zuhur tanzim al-dawla al-islamiya?” *BBC Arabic*, Dec. 19, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/12/151219_saudi_isis_analysis.

³⁴ HRW, “Saudi Arabia: Prominent Activist Marks Year Behind Bars,” Apr. 15, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-activist-marks-year-behind-bars>.

while blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison.³⁵ Badawi was sentenced to lashes for setting up a website through which he allegedly insulted the religious authorities. In October 2015, a Saudi court sentenced Abd al-Karim al-Khudr and Abd al-Rahman al-Hamid of the banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, as well as Abd al-Aziz al-Sanaidi to between 8–10 years in prison for engaging in peaceful political opposition activities.³⁶

Human rights defender Fadhil al-Manasif is serving a 15-year sentence; he is banned from travel for 15 years after the conclusion of his sentence and was levied with a large fine as well by an unfair judgment issued in April 2014.³⁷ The charges against Manasif included accessing websites and pages hostile to the state, contacting foreign media bodies seeking to exaggerate news and defame the kingdom's government, providing some of these media bodies with his mobile phone number to enable them to contact him, and leading foreign journalists to demonstrations. The charges reveal the extent to which the Saudi authorities fear the news spotlight on abuses in the kingdom. In another demonstration of the KSA's suppression of freedom of expression and belief and its arrest of citizens and others for their personal beliefs, a Saudi court on November 17, 2015 sentenced a Palestinian poet to death on the charge of apostasy.³⁸

The plight of Saudi women is not only seen in their unequal right to occupy public positions or in the patriarchal control they face based on the directives of the religious authorities. Even the right of Saudi women to drive is violated, with Saudi rights defenders channeling much of their energies into claiming this right. Two women's rights activists, Maisa al-Amoudi and Lajin al-Hadhloul, spent two months in detention on charges of contravening public order and superseding

³⁵ HRW, "Saudi Arabia: Possible New Flogging for Prominent Blogger," Jun. 11, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/11/saudi-arabia-possible-new-flogging-prominent-blogger>.

³⁶ HRW, "Saudi Arabia: Long Prison Terms for Activists," Oct. 27, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/27/saudi-arabia-long-prison-terms-activists>.

³⁷ HRW, "Saudi Arabia: Protest Convictions Flawed, Unfair," Sep. 10, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/10/saudi-arabia-protest-convictions-flawed-unfair>.

³⁸ HRW, "Saudi Arabia: Poet Sentenced to Death for Apostasy," Nov. 23, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/saudi-arabia-poet-sentenced-death-apostasy>.

their guardian's right for attempting to drive across the border from the UAE to Saudi Arabia.³⁹ While the end of the year saw a positive, possibly historical development in the struggle of Saudi women, when women were given the right to vote and run in municipal elections, the injustices facing Saudi women persist. The discriminatory guardianship system is still in place, which bars women from traveling abroad, obtaining a passport, marrying, or enrolling in university without the consent of their guardians. Some hospitals even require the guardian's consent before undertaking certain medical procedures with Saudi women.⁴⁰

In November 2015, it was reported that advisors to Mohammed Bin Salman, the second crown prince, had issued a statement in which they alluded to the possibility of the kingdom opening its doors to international human rights organizations,⁴¹ allowing them to review the actual state of human and women's rights in the KSA, which had become the object of a global debate.

Civil society in the KSA is severely constrained, starting with the registration process. It is virtually impossible for independent human rights organizations to function due to security and legal restrictions. But in a surprise move, the Saudi authorities in November 2015 issued a new law regulating civic associations, which establishes a special legislative framework for the establishment, administration, and oversight of such groups.⁴² According to Human Rights Watch, based on information from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the ministry will exercise strong oversight of the boards of NGOs and impose strict controls on donations to organizations it approves.

³⁹ Front Line Defenders, "al-Ifraj 'an mudafi'atayn 'an huquq al-insan kanata tuhawilan qiyadat al-sayyara ila-l-aradi al-sa'udiya," Feb. 2015.

⁴⁰ HRW, "Saudi Arabia: Landmark Elections for Women," Dec. 11, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/11/saudi-arabia-landmark-elections-women>.

⁴¹ Richard Spencer, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia's Manifesto for Change in the Face of Rumours of Coup Plots," *Telegraph*, Nov. 11, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/11989106/Revealed-Saudi-Arabias-manifesto-for-change-in-the-face-of-rumours-of-coup-plots.html>.

⁴² Adam Coogle, "Dispatches: Better Late Than Never—Saudi Arabia Approves NGO Law," HRW, Dec. 2, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/02/dispatches-better-late-never-saudi-arabia-approves-ngo-law>.

Any positive steps the law might prompt are offset as long as human rights defenders, political dissidents, and advocates of reform and democracy languish in prison and are subject to lashes and executions. We should not expect a country controlled by a ruling family hostile to democratic values and the global human rights order, which systematically suppresses minority rights and freedom of expression and belief, to begin to actively support freedom of association and civil society simply because it issued a new law in an undemocratic context.