

Human Rights In the Gulf Region and Neighbouring Countries in the Face of Lockdowns and more Layers of Restrictions

GULF CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (GCHR) | 2020 ANNUAL REPORT | March 2021



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مركز الخليج لحقوق الإنسان

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ABOUT GCHR

MISSION

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides support and protection to human rights defenders (HRDs) in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

WHERE WE WORK

GCHR is based in Lebanon and documents the environment for HRDs in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. GCHR was founded in 2011.

VISION

To have vibrant civic spaces in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries in which human rights are fully respected and HRDs, including journalists, bloggers and Internet activists, can work free from oppression and fear.

DONORS

GCHR is funded by Sigrid Rausing Trust, the Global Fund for Women, the European Union, UNESCO and International Media Support, among other donors. We do not accept funds from any governments in the countries in which we work. Thanks to donor partners for their support for this Annual Report.

See more at: http://www.gc4hr.org/page/about_us

DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to all human rights defenders in the Middle East, particularly women and members of the LGBTQI community, who are under severe stress and threats for their work. As the world copes with the COVID-19 pandemic, we call for their immediate and unconditional release so they can be reunited with their families during this terrible time.

COVER ART

The cover art was made by Maha Al-Omari, a Yemeni artist, for GCHR's event The Prisoner and the Pen, held in October 2020.



Gulf Centre for Human Rights

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107

Appeals, Statements,
Updates On

321

Cases



16

Reports Published

4

I. Executive Summary

The goal of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is to create a safer environment and offer support to human rights defenders (HRDs) – including independent lawyers, academics, journalists and online activists – across the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. In 2020, GCHR issued 107 appeals, statements and updates on the cases of 321 individual HRDs at risk from the countries in which it works - Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Yemen and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) such as Egypt. In addition, GCHR covered mass cases of demonstrations suppressed or attacked in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.

GCHR provides a bridge from the region to the international community by providing research and appeals, as well as coordinating joint actions with local partners and international allies. In 2020, we worked in coalitions with partner organisations to campaign for the freedom of women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia, GCHR's Board member Ahmed Mansoor in the UAE, and GCHR's co-founders Nabeel Rajab and Abdul-Hadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain. A highlight of 2020 occurred in June when Nabeel Rajab was finally freed from prison to serve out the remainder of his sentence at home. In Iran, Narges Mohammadi was freed from prison, but Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was temporarily freed, was returned to prison the day before being presented with the Right Livelihood award in December.

In 2020, GCHR published a dozen reports on countries and themes such as civic space, women's rights and digital rights, including United Nations submissions, in addition to its annual report. In addition, GCHR organises side events during the UN Human Rights Commission, and in 2020, these events were all virtual due to COVID-19 restrictions. GCHR organised many online events throughout the year, including a well-received cultural event *The Prisoner and the Pen*, and celebrated the International Day to End Impunity and International Human Rights Day at the end of the year in Beirut.

GCHR provides support and protection for at-risk HRDs and activists, and feminist movements, irrespective of their gender, religious, racial, or social background by enabling them equally to promote their roles as well as equipping them with the needed tools to maintain their work and activism, facilitating their contribution to and engagement with various international mechanisms, while working tirelessly to protect them. In 2020, GCHR facilitated grants to dozens of W/HRDs from across the region, in addition to providing skills in digital security and investigative journalism to over 200 W/HRDs.

GCHR has a respected advocacy and defence network supporting WHRDs in one of the world's most complex and challenging environments for human rights, where they face sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), and other threats and ill-treatment specifically as women, in addition to judicial and online harassment, arrests, detention, abduction, kidnapping, torture, enforced disappearances and even death. GCHR fights for women's rights in the region, specifically in countries such as Iran, where women's rights activists are jailed for long periods; and Saudi Arabia where women remain in prison for calling for the right to drive, and to live free of control of a male guardian, while highlighting the brave women at the forefront of protests in Lebanon and Iraq, and those impacted the most by atrocities, conflict and more such as Syria and Yemen.

GCHR

has a respected advocacy and defence network supporting WHRDs in one of the world's most complex and challenging environments for human rights

II. Introduction and Summary of Activities and Achievements



16
Reports

7

Joint Reports

5

Urgent Appeals

90
Appeals

20

joint appeals,
statements and letters

6

Through its activities GCHR aims to provide HRDs with the support and advocacy they require to promote and protect human rights without any fear. To this end, GCHR undertakes advocacy work at international, regional, and national levels. Throughout 2020, in addition to 16 reports and 7 joint reports, GCHR issued 5 urgent appeals, 90 appeals, 20 joint appeals, statements and letters, 100 country updates and news alerts on cases of 557 HRDs in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. GCHR works closely with partner organisations to carry out human rights activities and to ensure that it offers the best support to HRDs.

In 2020, GCHR strengthened its partnerships with CIVICUS, FIDH, IFEX, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) SOS-Torture Network, the WHRD-International Coalition and the Global Forum for Media Development – all networks of which GCHR is a member. GCHR and Access Now also initiated efforts to start a coalition to [ban](#) the sale, development and deployment of dual use technologies to governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region that are used for surveillance of journalists and HRDs in the region.

In this annual report, GCHR presents a summary of our efforts in advocating for HRDs, activists, journalists and citizens in exercising their human rights and freedoms and protecting these rights in the region. As the world experiences a pandemic, our work, experiences and advocacy have been affected by the threats augmented by the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the poor conditions of healthcare in prisons where many HRDs are unjustly imprisoned. Moreover, restrictions on mobility limited the capacity of HRDs to escape threats as well as limited the opportunities for in-person meetings which are essential for GCHR and partners' networks of solidarity.

a. Monitoring and publicising cases

GCHR has diverse channels of monitoring and publicising cases, which are key to opening our avenues to monitor cases as well as receiving updates. Social media monitoring allowed GCHR to capture the voices of HRDs at risk when they are targeted. As for publicising, GCHR's website and mailing list, social media accounts are channels for sending news updates, appeals, and urgent actions. GCHR cases and reports are publicised on GCHR's [website](#) (with a reach of over 32,000), Facebook (5000+ followers) and [Twitter](#) (9400+ followers). GCHR's subscriber list is over 2900. GCHR is now on YouTube.

b. United Nations Advocacy

GCHR held six UNHRC online side events: events on [hate speech](#), Bahraini HRDs and the need to free HRDs during COVID-19 [at the 44th session](#) in June/July; and online side events and meetings to carry out advocacy on Yemen's Group of Eminent Experts, Iraqi protests, HRDs detained in Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia, and Digital Rights in Saudi Arabia [at the 45th session](#) in September/October 2020.

On 17 March 2020, GCHR echoed the appeal by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javid Rehman, for the authorities in Iran to free all prisoners of conscience, including WHRDs. GCHR further called on every country in the MENA region to also heed his request. Prisoners in Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are among the countries where prisoners are often held in crowded, dirty prisons with inhumane conditions such as poor hygiene and no access to clean water or proper medical care considering COVID-19 risks.

Work by a large coalition of NGOs, including GCHR, contributed to the successful mandate [renewal](#) for the Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) working on Yemen. The coalition asked that language and resources be added to the ability of the GEE to "Collect and Preserve" evidence, and to report on options for accountability for the war crimes committed in Yemen.

Following extensive advocacy of UN member states by GCHR and partners in the Free Saudi Activists Coalition, in September 2020, Denmark delivered [a cross-regional joint statement](#) at the UNHRC on behalf of 29 states raising their concerns over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.



100

country updates and
news on cases of

557

HRDs in the Gulf region
and neighbouring
countries

7

The states voiced their deep regret for “the continued detention of at least five women’s human rights defenders, arrested in 2018.” During her oral update to the UNHRC on 14 September, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called for their release. The European Parliament, US Politicians and UN experts have also issued statements and resolutions aimed at freeing Saudi WHRDs. As a result of advocacy surrounding Saudi Arabia’s human rights violations, the country was not elected to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

In November 2020, GCHR and partners published two joint submissions to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) during the 37th Session of the UPR Working Group, on [Oman](#) and [Lebanon](#). (See more in country sections.)

c. Advocacy and Online Campaigns



World Press Freedom Day

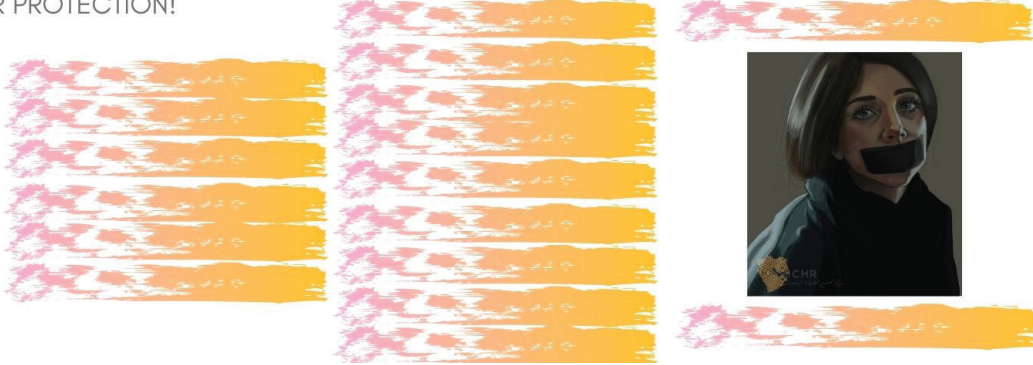
On 03 May 2020, **World Press Freedom Day**, GCHR joined other members of the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) to issue an [urgent appeal](#) to “honour those who work tirelessly to help keep the public informed and call for robust support for independent journalism. GCHR publicised working on cases that are [examples](#) of the extreme lack of freedom of speech in the MENA region.

DAY 16: THE WORK OF WHRDS NEEDS TO BE PROPERLY AND EQUITABLY RESOURCED. WE CALL ON DONORS AND SUPPORTERS TO DIRECTLY FUND THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS WORK OF ORGANISATIONS AND GRASSROOTS WHRDS BASED IN THE MENA REGION AND INVEST IN THEIR PROTECTION!

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

ON 10 DECEMBER, INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, WE HONOUR WHRDS IN THE MENA REGION WHO ARE LIVING IN A PANDEMIC WITHIN AN EPIDEMIC. THEIR LIVES, FREEDOM AND LIBERTY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CHALLENGED BY SERIOUS THREATS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED ON THEM TO RESTRAIN THEIR ACTIVISM AND END THEIR DEMANDS FOR EQUALITY! GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) PERPETUATED BY A COMPLEX SYSTEM OF PATRIARCHY IS OUR MAIN EPIDEMIC, AND MUST BE UPROOTED AND ERADICATED FOREVER!

WEAAM YOUSSEF
GCHR'S WHRDS PROGRAMME MANAGER



#16DaysOfActivism2020

During the #16DaysOfActivism2020 against Gender-Based Violence, which began on 25 November - the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women – and ended on 10 December, GCHR created a twitter campaign. “Through this campaign, we honour WHRDs in the MENA region who are living in a pandemic within an epidemic.

Their lives, freedom and liberty have always been challenged by serious threats and restrictions imposed on them to restrain their activism and end their demands for equality. Gender-based violence perpetuated by a complex system of patriarchy is our main epidemic and must be uprooted and eradicated forever,” said WHRDs Programme Manager Weam Youssef.

GCHR featured Saudi WHRDs on day one, Iranian HRDs on day two, Habiba Al-Hinai of Oman on day 3, Iraqi WHRDs on day four, Hadeel Buqrais of Kuwait on day five, Maryam Al-Khawaja of Bahrain on day six, Maha Qashou of Jordan on day seven, Dayna Ash of Lebanon on day eight, Alaa Al-Siddiq of the UAE on day nine, WHRDs in Syria including Nour Al-Shilo on day ten, WHRDs in Qatar on day 11, Ataf Alwazir of Yemen on day 12, Mozn Hassan of Egypt on day 13, MENA journalists with a quote from Zaynab Al-Khawaja on day 14, Zaina Erhaim, Razan Zaitouneh and Samira Khalil on day 15, and all WHRDs in the MENA region on day 16. The campaign culminated on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. You can read the [summary of the campaign online](#).

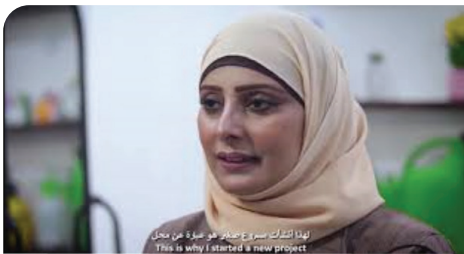


COVID-19 advocacy - #LetThePrisonersOut

In March, GCHR issued two appeals related to the COVID-19 virus. GCHR first [issued an appeal](#) to MENA governments to free all imprisoned human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience, particularly in Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates - which “are among the countries where prisoners are often held in crowded, dirty prisons with inhumane conditions such as poor hygiene and no access to clean water or proper medical care.” GCHR welcomed the appeal by the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran for the authorities in Iran to free all prisoners of conscience, including WHRDs. The appeals were widely circulated and read. On 30 March 2020, GCHR [repeated](#) its call for authorities to release all HRDs in the MENA region. While welcoming the release of some HRDs in Bahrain and Iran, GCHR noted that some of the region’s most prominent defenders remain behind bars in those countries and elsewhere in the region.

GCHR further called for all Internet restrictions to be lifted in the heavily-censored region, so people can communicate with their families. On 07 April 2020, GCHR signed a joint [appeal](#) with 28 organisations urging the governments of the UAE, Qatar, and Oman to permanently lift the ban on all Voice Over IP (VoIP) platforms used for voice and video internet calls in light of COVID-19.

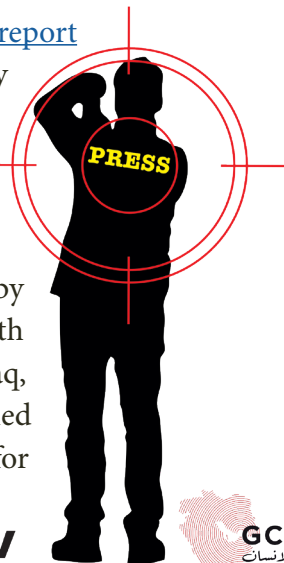
On 08 April 2020, Khalid Ibrahim, Executive Director of GCHR, wrote a [blogpost](#) summarising the effects of COVID-19 containment measures on the situation of human rights in the MENA region. Particularly, the impact of these measures on vulnerable groups such as imprisoned HRDs, migrant workers and independent media.



d. Special Reports and Videos

In 2020, GCHR published a dozen reports including joint Universal Periodic Review (UPR) submissions on [Oman](#) and [Lebanon](#), a [Joint Submission on the United Arab Emirates to the 71st Session of the UN Committee Against Torture](#), a specially designed report to mark the [International Day to End Impunity \(IDEI\)](#), a report with a summary, poetry and art from [The Prisoner and the Pen](#) event, a special report on [Advocacy to free Saudi women's human rights activists detained since May 2018](#), a report on [Yemeni Journalists: The Battle Against the Trio of Hunger, Fear and Disease](#). and our Annual Report: [Reclaiming Civic Space: Documenting the Action of Fearless Human Rights Defenders & Citizens in 2019](#). In 2020, GCHR also issued 10 periodic reports to document the continuing violations of freedom of assembly and expression in Iraq which would otherwise not be reported internationally in English (see country sections for more information).

On 02 November 2020, GCHR published a [report](#) on the International Day to End Impunity to highlight murders and other serious violations against MENA journalists. In the MENA region, journalists continue to face grave violations of their civil and human rights, including murder by governments or armed groups, usually with total impunity. Countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen continue to be classified among the most dangerous places for journalists. During 2019 and into 2020, citizens in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Iran, Sudan, and Egypt



2nd Nov

End Impunity
Protect Journalists

انهاء الافلات من العقاب
لحماية الصحفيين



took to the streets in massive protests, demanding their basic rights, the elimination of corruption and comprehensive political reform. They were confronted by security forces and armed groups with lethal force in Iraq, where hundreds of peaceful protesters lost their lives, and thousands were injured. They have been suppressed in other countries to varying degrees.

At an event on 10 December marking International Human Rights Day, GCHR screened a documentary that was part of a series about [four different journalists](#) in Yemen featured in films produced by GCHR with Yemeni partners about how war and poverty have affected their lives. The films feature two women and two men who hope to have their voices heard beyond the borders of their countries and bring attention and support for the journalists of Yemen in general. “The films focus on the very real problem facing so many journalists that are not necessarily the most shocking, not the killings or kidnappings, which the media usually tends to focus on,” says Zaynab Al-

Khawaja, GCHR’s Journalists Protection Coordinator. [Watch the films on the GCHR’s YouTube channel in](#) Arabic with English sub-titles. GCHR also produced a report on [Yemeni Journalists: The Battle Against the Trio of Hunger, Fear and Disease](#).



e. Capacity Building Workshop & Support

Following the 10 December event to mark International Human Rights Day, GCHR **organised a 3-day training workshop for 18 journalists and HRDs from the region**. GCHR also organised two digital security train-the-trainer workshops online for 12 journalists and activists from the MENA region, with expert trainers.

GCHR facilitated over a dozen emergency grants to W/HRDs at risk, organised online digital security training, attended meetings with 20 UN experts and worked with UN and EU protection mechanisms, including the EU Temporary Relocation Programme, for which GCHR attends regular consultations.

f. Partnerships and Public Events

When marking the 10th anniversary of the “Arab Spring”, GCHR joined activists, journalists, and human rights organisations in [an open letter](#) to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube “to voice our frustration and dismay at how platform policies and content moderation procedures all too often lead to the silencing and erasure of critical voices from marginalised and oppressed communities across the Middle East and North Africa.”

On 22 October 2020, GCHR and Amnesty Westminster Bayswater held an online event, [The Prisoner and the Pen](#), to feature the writing, songs and poetry of imprisoned human rights defenders, and also to celebrate relevant art and literature of activists from Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, the UAE, Turkey and Yemen. The event

was held in English, Arabic and Farsi. The date of this activity was chosen to mark the birthday of **Ahmed Mansoor**, GCHR’s imprisoned GCHR Board member. Writer and activist **Iyad El-Baghdadi** read from one of Mansoor’s poems, “An Excess of Fire”. Among other features, **Maryam Al-Khawaja** read a text from her father **Abdulahadi Al-Khawaja**, GCHR’s co-founder serving a life sentence in prison in Bahrain, as well as her own poem, “Letter to my father.” At the event, documentarian **Shady Habash** was featured with songs by Egyptian singer **Ramy Essam**, and a reading of Shady’s letter from prison before he died. Tweets from the event were seen by tens of thousands of people, thanks to high-profile participants. You can [download the event materials here](#) or watch the event on [GCHR’s YouTube account](#).



Joint Online Event to mark Cybersecurity Awareness Month



On 26 October 2020, GCHR held an [online event](#) for Cybersecurity Awareness Month. Relying on digital communication and devices to stay connected during the pandemic, primes the importance of cybersecurity for HRDs in the Gulf and Neighbouring countries. The event was organised with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), the Omani Association for Human Rights (OAHR), Front Line Defenders, and FIDH.

GCHR held an event in Beirut on 2 November to mark the International Day to End Impunity: "**No to impunity for the crimes committed against journalists in the Arab region**", in cooperation with UNESCO's Beirut office. GCHR made large posters of the journalists mentioned in [GCHR's report, "No to Impunity"](#). **Abeer Bader Yassin**, a Yemeni journalist, said, "A journalist needs backing and support, for a journalist does not work for an institution or a specific media, but works for all people." [You can watch the event on GCHR's YouTube channel.](#)

On 10 December 2020, GCHR celebrated **International Human Rights Day** at an event held in Beirut in partnership with IFEX, FIDH, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Maharat Foundation, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the Media Association for Peace (MAP).



The event was moderated by Khalid Ibrahim, Executive Director of GCHR, and Mary Lawler, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs who said, "It's important that we meet like this in solidarity. One of the major priorities for the mandate is the issue of the killing of human rights defenders and it will be the focus of my next report to the UNHRC to be presented in March 2021. Another priority for me is the issue of human rights defenders who are serving long prison sentences, and ... I know that Mohammed Al-Roken, Ahmed Mansoor and Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja are at the heart of GCHR."

On 16 December 2020, a group of NGOs argued that the sale of surveillance technology to oppressive governments in the MENA region should be halted, because it puts activists at risk of imprisonment and harassment. The event was organised by Access Now, ALQST for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Citizen Lab, GFMD, GCHR, Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Citizen Lab released a report documenting how the Israel-based spyware company NSO Group has been used to hack the phones of 36 journalists from two Arab media channels, according to new research released by Citizen Lab. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have previously used Pegasus software made by the NSO group to hack Human rights defenders and journalists and Citizen Lab believe the two countries are behind this new attack as well. "The latest attack shows the need for NGOs to band together in a coalition to help stop spyware attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and activists," [said GCHR in a press release](#).

III. Country Summaries

Bahrain

GCHR published six updates, three appeals, and one joint appeal covering the cases of 14 HRDs, including its co-founders **Nabeel Rajab** and **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**. In both its regional MENA appeals about the pandemic in March, GCHR noted that while Bahrain [released 1486 prisoners](#) starting on 11 March for “humanitarian reasons” related to COVID-19, under a royal amnesty that allows alternative sentencing, **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja** and **Nabeel Rajab** were not among those released, nor were those in poor health, such as Dr **Abduljalil Al-Singance** and **Naji Fateel**.

On 10 March, the Denmark Mission to the UN made an intervention on General Debate – Item 4 at the UNHRC 43. [Denmark stated](#): “we reiterate our call for the release of all arbitrarily detained persons in Bahrain, including the Danish-Bahraini citizen Mr. **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**; a victim of torture who needs treatment and rehabilitation.”

By 17 March 2020, 901 prisoners received royal pardons on “humanitarian grounds” and 585 were given non-custodial sentences. Following this news, on 06 April 2020 GCHR joined 20 organisations [demanding](#) the release of 11 Bahraini activists imprisoned for their human rights activism citing their underlying health conditions and unsanitary prison conditions in Bahrain.



On 09 June 2020, GCHR welcomed the news that prominent HRD **Nabeel Rajab**, the Founding Director of GCHR and co-founder and President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), was freed from prison in Bahrain. Rajab, who was arrested on 13 June 2016, was serving a five-year sentence for human rights tweets and had already served a two-year sentence for media interviews about human rights violations in Bahrain. Rajab serves the remaining three years of his sentence at home under a provision of the law allowing non-custodial sentences. He will not be allowed to get involved in any human rights activities during this period of time.

On 31 July 2020, **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja** released a [statement](#) on Bahrain's "Alternative Punishment" Law, saying that "alternative penalties' are a continuation of the unjust penalties against political prisoners who were imprisoned without due cause."

On 30 June 2020, the Bahrain Court of Appeal issued a [verdict](#) against prominent HRD **Abdullah Al-Shamlawi** in which the Court sentenced him to eight months in prison over two tweets. The sentence was suspended upon payment of 200 BD (USD\$530) bail. He was also facing jail time for comments on [his Twitter account](#) but on 14 September 2020, Bahrain's Third High Criminal Court suspended his sentence on charges of "inciting hatred of a religious sect".

On 01 July 2020, GCHR hosted an online [side event](#) titled "No prosperous future or sustainable peace in Bahrain without the protection of HRDs" held during the 44th session of the UNHRC. Participants including former UN Special Rapporteur Michel Forst welcomed the release of **Nabeel Rajab** on 09 June 2020 and called for the Bahraini government to release all HRDs and others detained solely for peacefully expressing their opinions. The event was attended by 80 people and organised by GCHR, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights (ADHRB), CIVICUS, International Media Support and OMCT.

Bahrain

Iran

GCHR published four updates, two urgent appeals, and three appeals covering the cases of 14 HRDs, mostly focused on WHRDs in prison.

In mid-March 2020, **Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe**, who was imprisoned in 2016 after being sentenced to five years, was released temporarily from Evin prison in Tehran. Her release came following the serious threat of the COVID-19 spreading through Iran's prison system.

In April 2020, UN [human rights experts](#) called on Iran to expand its temporary release of thousands of detainees to include prisoners of conscience and dual and foreign nationals who are still behind bars despite the serious risk of being infected with COVID-19, following concerns raised from inside the country. At this point, considering risks associated with the COVID-19, the Iranian judiciary said it released 85,000 prisoners, half of whom were political prisoners. Yet, it was unknown what proportion of WHRDs and activists are among those who were released, or even those who are still in prison.

In June 2020, imprisoned WHRD **Atena Daemi**, who is serving seven years in prison, was charged with “disturbing order” after being accused of chanting anti-government slogans on the anniversary of Iran's 1979 revolution. She was sentenced to five years in prison in 2016 and in September 2019, a court added two years and one month to her sentence for “insulting” and “disseminating anti-government propaganda” after she wrote an open letter from prison criticising the execution of political prisoners. [Daemi's family said](#) the new charges meant she would no longer be eligible for furlough on 04 July 2020 under the law, nor could she be freed under the current furloughs being offered during the pandemic.

On 1 June 2020, women's rights activist **Saba Kord Afshari** was [sentenced to 15 years](#) in prison by an appeals court after having been acquitted on 17 March 2020 by the Evin Prosecutor's Office. She was sentenced for “promoting corruption and prostitution through appearing without a headscarf in public,” for her role in the White Wednesday protest movement against mandatory veiling. Kord Afshari is already serving a nine-year sentence. She was also ineligible for a furlough during the pandemic.

On 22 June 2020, GCHR issued an [appeal](#) to permanently release **Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe**, **Narges Mohammadi**, **Mehdi Mohammadi**, **Atena Daemi**, and **Saba Kord Afshari** demanding their release amidst fears of COVID-19 in Iranian prisons. The appeal came in reaction to a new trend in Iran of adding sentences to already imprisoned women HRDs, leaving them ineligible for furlough during the pandemic.

Journalist and HRD **Narges Mohammadi**, the spokeswoman for the Centre for Human Rights Defenders in Iran, was imprisoned on 05 May 2015, and sentenced to a combined 16-year prison sentence. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison for establishing the Step by Step to Stop Death Penalty group (also known as LEGAM), as well as five years for “gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security,” and one year for “spreading propaganda against the system.” In May 2020, human rights groups [reported](#) that Mohammadi was facing up to five years more in prison and 74 lashes for various charges. On 23 July 2020, GCHR called for the [release](#) of Mohammadi after receiving reports that Mohammadi started showing symptoms of COVID-19, which put her already poor health at further risk.

In a rare piece of good news, Mohammadi was [released](#) from prison on 08 October 2020 after a 10-year sentence was commuted due to health concerns. She was reported to have caught COVID-19 in prison.

On 11 September 2020 GCHR [called](#) for the release of **Nasrin Sotoudeh**, a lawyer, writer and WHRD who has been on hunger strike in Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison for a full month since 11 August 2020. The campaign also included **Narges Mohammadi**, and **Atena Daemi**. A number of women who participated in the [#WhiteWednesdays](#) campaign against compulsory veiling laws, such as **Saba Kordafshari**, **Yasaman Aryani**, **Monireh Arabshahi** and **Mojgan Keshavarz**, also remain in prison. GCHR used online advocacy hashtags [#FreeNasrin](#) and [#StandUp4Nasrin](#).



#FREENASRIN

On 02 December 2020, Sotoudeh was [returned](#) to Qarchak prison, from which she had been freed temporarily on medical leave on 07 November 2020 following a COVID-19 outbreak in Qarchak prison. Sotoudeh tested positive for COVID-19 after arriving home, so was not able to receive any medical treatment. She was returned to prison on the eve of being honoured with the Right Livelihood Award.

Iran

19

Iraq

GCHR published 20 updates, 16 appeals, two joint appeals, and 12 reports covering the cases of 319 HRDs, journalists and civil society activists kidnapped, murdered, arrested and attacked, including 10 periodic reports on systemic violations of the Iraqi authorities of the Iraqi people's right to peaceful assembly and association. Countless other demonstrators were affected by the actions of security forces, who used lethal force against protests. Many civil society activists who were kidnapped in 2020 remain incommunicado. Women activists were kidnapped, murdered, threatened and persecuted.

In the [1st report](#), GCHR documents the killing, kidnapping and assassination attempts targeting numerous civil society activists in January 2020. On 05 January 2020, activist **Ahmed Salah Al-Harishawi** was assassinated in Baghdad after returning from demonstrations in Al-Tahrir Square. On 20 January 2020, security forces shot and [killed](#) activist and photojournalist **Yousif Sattar** when he was covering the protests in Baghdad. On 28 January 2020, Dr. **Mohammad Hussain Al-Quraishi**, a human rights professor at Al-Mustansiriya University, was assassinated in Baghdad.

On 10 January 2020, in Basra, unidentified gunmen on a motorbike shot and killed journalist **Ahmed Abdul Samad**, a correspondent of the Dijlah satellite TV channel. His colleague, photojournalist **Safaa Ghali**, later died of bullet wounds. On 13 January 2020, unidentified gunmen on a motorbike assassinated civil society activist **Hassan Hadi Muhallal** south of Nasiriyah.

In the [2nd report](#), GCHR documented the kidnapping, murder and targeting of WHRDs, journalists and civil society activists, attacks on sit-ins in Najaf and Karbala and the repression of media freedom in February 2020. On 05 February 2020, armed militias attacked the sit-in square in the city of Najaf using live bullets, batons, and knives against peaceful protesters, and also burned their tents. The security forces were watching the situation without interfering to protect the demonstrators or to stop the militants. The death toll reached 11 and the number of wounded 181. Among those who lost their lives were peaceful young demonstrators **Muhannad Al-Qaisi**, **Karar Uday Al-Yasiri**, **Hussain Fadel Al-Kalabi**, **Khalil Ibrahim Al-Qazwini**, **Hassan Salman Al-Ziyadi**, and **Hassan Ahmed Al-Sa'abri**.

On 11 February 2020, journalist and general supervisor of the [Al-Rasheed Satellite TV](#) Nizar Thanoun was assassinated in his car in Baghdad.

On 13 February 2020, thousands of Iraqi women participated in massive demonstrations in Baghdad, and the central and southern Governorates. They renewed their support for the current protests focused on anti-corruption efforts and calling for comprehensive reforms, while also condemning the attacks and mutilation campaigns that targeted their fellow activists and protesters. Civil society activist and paramedic **Hoda Khudair** died in hospital on 16 January 2020, possibly after being assassinated by unidentified gunmen after she left the sit-in square in Karbala.

The [3rd report](#) documents the use of targeted violence by riot police against bloggers and civil society activists in February and March 2020, as well as the use of targeted violence to disperse peaceful protestors, including children. On 18 February 2020, peaceful protester **Fahd Al-Khazali** was killed by riot police in Baghdad. On 25 February 2020, riot police killed 20-year-old civil society and artist **Mohammad Ali Al-Mukhtar**, directly targeting him with a smoke bomb that hit his head, and riot police in Al-Khilani Square in Baghdad shot and killed civil society activist **Alaa Kamel Al-Shammari**. On 02 March 2020, peaceful demonstrator **Ahmed Hassan Al-Lami** was shot in the face by riot police with hunting rifles, in Al-Khilani Square, and died the next day. On 06 March 2020, 14-year-old protester **Sajad Uday** was shot in the head and killed by riot police with hunting rifles in Al-Khilani Square. On 08 March 2020, riot police, using live bullets, hunting rifles and tear gas canisters, launched a violent attack on protesters in Al-Khilani Square. Several local reports said that the number of protesters killed in the attack had reached eight, with 43 wounded, some of them in very critical condition. Civil society activist and volunteer paramedic **Amer Mahmoud Al-Ethawi** was among those killed.

On 14 February 2020, 23-year-old civil society activist **Mohammad Harb** was assassinated by a an unknow armed man in Al-Tahrir Square. On 28 February 2020, civil society activist and education employee **Abdulazim Suwadi Al-Rubaie** was killed after being stabbed repeatedly in front of his house in Al-Qadisiyah Governorate by an unknown group.

On 02 March 2020, unidentified gunmen in north-eastern Basra Governorate assassinated civil society activist **Ali Al-Halfi**. On 10 March 2020, an unidentified armed group [assassinated](#) human rights defender **Abdulqudus Qasim**, a theatre/television producer and actor, and **Karar Adel**, a human rights lawyer.

The [4th report](#) records the measures taken by peaceful protestors to continue their exercising their right safely, and the continued targeting of protestors, paramedics and activists from March to April 2020 through arbitrary detentions. On 05 April 2002, an armed group in Nasiriyah stormed the house of prominent civil society activist **Anwar Jassem Mhawwas (Um Abbas)**, and killed her and wounded her two sons.

Iraq

The [5th report](#) documents cases of sexual assaults and physical torture of protestors participating in Al-Tahrir Square demonstrations and kidnapping of prominent HRDs and activists in May 2020. On 21 April 2020, three protesters were wounded and **Mahdi Al Saadi** was killed when armed men in civilian clothes used machine guns against protesters and their tents in Al-Tahrir Square. The security forces did not intervene to prevent the attack nor to arrest the perpetrators.

On 09 May 2020, unidentified gunmen fatally shot prominent human rights defender **Azhar Al-Shammari** in Nasiriyah. Thousands participated in his funeral. In Basra, a militia attacked a protest and killed civil society activist **Moamel Osama Khalaf** on 10 May 2020.

The [6th report](#) documents the kidnapping and killing of academics and civil society activists, attacks on demonstrators and activists in the city of Basra, as well as demonstrations in Iraqi Kurdistan from May to June 2020. On 10 June 2020, Dr. **Ali Mezher Al-Ghazzi**, a 60-year-old professor of history, was attacked by an unknown armed group, and died in hospital two days later.

On 06 July 2020, armed men on motorcycles [fatally shot](#) journalist and well-known security expert Dr. **Hisham Al-Hashemi** in front of his house in Baghdad.

In the [7th report](#), GCHR documents further attacks and violations committed against protestors, and targeted assassinations and kidnappings of members of civil society, including activists, academics and journalists from July to August 2020. On 21 July 2020, German civil society activist **Hela Mavis** was kidnapped for several days by an unknown armed group following a meeting with protestors in Al-Tahrir Square.

On 26 July 2020, the Law Enforcement Forces attacked protestors in Al-Tahrir Square, killing four peaceful demonstrators, **Mahdi Abdullah Al-Tamimi**, **Latif Osama Al-Salman**, **Sajad Haider Hassan Al-Jumaili**, and **Karar Haider Yas**.

On 30 July 2020, Hisham Daoud, an advisor to the Prime minister, [announced](#) that the government would provide support to the families of hundreds who lost their lives during protests across Iraq. Daoud said, "The government will establish a fact-finding committee to uncover the circumstances of the events that accompanied the demonstrations."

On 14 August 2020, two masked gunmen stormed the office of an Internet service in Basra run by human rights defender **Tahseen Osama Ali** (also known as **Tahseen Al-Shahamani**) and fired 21 rounds, killing him immediately.

Iraq



On 19 August 2020, unidentified gunmen [murdered Riham Yaqoub](#), a doctor and activist who also advocated for the right of women to physically exercise in public spaces. The targeted killing came on the heels of a massive online hate campaign against Dr. Yaqoub. On 17 August 2020, **Lodya Remon Albarti**, a defender of women's and environmental rights, and civil society activists **Fahd Al-Zubaidi** and **Abbas Subhi** were [shot](#) during an assassination attempt. "It is outrageous that women in Iraq have to risk or lose their life to defend human rights," said seven United Nations experts [in a statement](#) calling on Iraq to investigate the cases of the two WHRDs.

On 21 August 2020, 18 diplomatic missions in Baghdad [issued a press release](#) about assassinations in Iraq stating, "The embassies of Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, accredited to Iraq, wish to express their deep concern about the recent escalation in cases of violence against Iraqi civil society activists. We condemn in particular the assassinations that targeted activists in the city of Basra and Baghdad under a systematic campaign of overt threats and intimidation."

On 30 August 2020, the International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearance, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a [report](#) calling for independent investigations to uncover the fate of about 1,000 civilian men and boys who were forcibly disappeared between 2015 and 2016 in Anbar province, in western Iraq.

Iraq

The [8th report](#) documents judicial targeting of the [Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq](#), the need to introduce laws protecting women from domestic violence, and attacks on press and journalists, in addition to the murders of civil society activists and their families. On 15 September 2020, civil society activist **Sheelan Dara Raouf** was killed along with her father, lawyer **Dara Raouf**, and her mother, retired government employee **Alia Rashid Najem**, in their apartment in Baghdad. The next day, the killer was arrested in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region.

On 31 August 2020, a group of people broke into and burned the headquarters of the [Dijlah satellite channel](#) in Baghdad, in protest against the broadcast on one of its channels, Tarab Channel, of singing during Ashura. 75 people lost their jobs as a result.

In the [9th report](#), GCHR documented the killing of demonstrators and activists who have been killed since the start of the protests in 2019 which reached a toll of 600, in addition to 30,000 others who have been wounded.

On 26 October 2020, Anti-Riot Forces stormed Al-Tahrir Square using live bullets and smoke bombs, killing paramedic and peaceful demonstrator **Mortada Al-Gharib**. On 01 November 2020, unknown gunmen on a motorbike assassinated civil society activist Sheikh **Abdul Nasser Al-Tarfi Al-Tai** in Al-Amara. On 06 November 2020, civil society activist **Omar Fadel** was killed after an armed force attacked a number of demonstrators in Basra. The next day, the Ministry of the Interior announced that the killer had been arrested.

Women activists face gender-based violence including kidnapping, assault and being forced to make offensive videos by armed militias to tarnish the image of civil society activists participating in the popular movement.

In its [10th report](#), GCHR documented at least 43 activists who were threatened with death in southern Iraq, forcing all of them to leave their cities and flee to other cities. Protestors were systematically targeted by armed groups while exercising their peaceful right to assembly. On 01 November 2020, unidentified gunmen assassinated tribal leader Sheikh **Abdul Nasser Al-Tarfi Al-Taie** in Al-Amara, southern Iraq. On 20 November 2020, retired Brigadier General **Ghazi Al-Tamimi Abu Mohammed**, who was in charge of the tent for retired people in Al-Tahrir Square, died in hospital after being shot on 06 November 2020.

On 02 December 2020, activist **Mustafa Al-Jaberi** was assassinated in Al-Amara. On 16 December 2020, Dr. **Ahmed Abdul-Zahra Al-Sharifi** was assassinated in Al-Amara. On 03 December 2020, unknown gunmen assassinated comedic actor **Ahmed Al-Hakim** in Baghdad. On 15 December 2020, unknown gunmen killed prominent civil society activist **Salah Hassan Al-Iraqi** in Baghdad.

In November 2020, the Iraqi Parliament discussed the Cybercrimes Law which restricts freedom of opinion and expression online. The new draft law introduced is very similar to the draft law presented by the Iraqi parliament in its previous session in January 2019, which includes extreme provisions imposing life in prison, as an attempt to legislate the Internet and impose government control over it.

On 10 December 2020, International Human Rights Day, GCHR honoured HRDs in Iraq at its second annual [awards](#) ceremony, which was named in honour of assassinated researcher and journalist Dr. **Hisham Al-Hashemi**. The ceremony was held online due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In [a joint appeal](#), GCHR and seven partners also called for the Iraqi authorities to end impunity for the murders of journalists, activists and HRDs including Al-Hashemi and Riham Yaqoub.

The joint statement [also noted](#) that in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, local authorities have been targeting civil society activists by [arresting them](#) for their work and curtailing public [freedoms, including media freedom](#) and freedom of [peaceful assembly](#), including since August 2020. Dozens of activists, teachers, and peaceful protesters have participated in protests to demand an end to corruption in the region, the improvement of public services, payment of salaries of employees that were delayed for months, and the implementation of comprehensive reforms. Although some have been released, [many remain in detention](#).

Iraq

Jordan

GCHR published five updates and five appeals covering the cases of 12 HRDs, journalists, teachers and civil society activists, along with violations of freedom of expression. Jordan also introduced a new law at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic which could restrict rights.

On 20 March 2020, Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz [announced](#) that Defence Law No. 13 of 1993 would be used as the basis to help confront this virus and stop it from spreading, according to which 11 defence orders have been issued to date. The Defence Law gives the prime minister broad powers to restrict basic rights, however, he pledged to implement it "in a strictly limited manner," and stated that he would not infringe on political rights, freedom of expression, or private property.

On 07 April 2020, Jordanian authorities [arrested](#) **Salim Al-Batayneh**, a former member of parliament, and his relative, **Mutasim Al-Batayneh** on suspicion of "undermining the regime," which is considered a crime according to the Anti-Terrorism Law, which is under the jurisdiction of the State Security Court. Previous documented cases have proven that this charge is abused by the Jordanian authorities to curb both political activism and criticism.

On 14 April 2020, the authorities also arbitrarily [arrested](#) **Salim Akash**, 40, a Bengali journalist residing in Jordan, for sharing a televised report on his [Facebook account](#) that addresses the difficulties faced by many Bengali workers in Jordan during the lockdown because of the Coronavirus. A family member said that Akash called on 17 April from Al-Salt prison, saying that he would appear before the court "for violating a serious law," which he did not specify.

On 15 April 2020, under the state of emergency, Defence Order No. 8 was issued, which rights groups deemed as violating Jordan's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Public Prosecution issued summonses to teachers to [interrogate](#) them on various charges. The acting head of the Teachers Syndicate (JTS), **Nasser Al-Nawasrah**, was charged with incitement due to a speech he gave on 22 July 2020 in which he criticised Prime Minister Al-Razzaz. In addition, other charges were directed at JTS members related to alleged financial and administration misconduct.

On 25 July 2020, the Jordanian judiciary [suspended](#) the operations of the JTS and closed its branches in all twelve governorates for two years. In addition, the General Prosecutor of Amman issued a decision to cease the work of the members of the Syndicate Council, the members of the Central Committee and the branch bodies and ordered the formation of a temporary governmental committee to manage the JTS. This was followed by the arrest of all members of the Syndicate Council and many JTS leaders, who went on an open hunger strike.



On 29 July 2020, the security forces arrested dozens of teachers who demonstrated in protest against the arrests and closures, near the Prime Ministry compound in Amman. Any attempt to gather was dispersed by the security forces on the pretext of applying the defence order related to preventing gatherings, which prohibits the gathering of more than 20 people.

In the Governorate of Ajloun, human rights activist **Moaz Wahsheh**, Vice President of the Al-Sindyan Association for Political Development, Democracy and Human Rights, was administratively [arrested](#) by the Governor on the grounds that he refused to sign a pledge not to participate in nor call for protests that support the cause of Jordanian teachers.

On 26 August 2020, the Public Prosecutor of Amman [issued](#) an order to arrest prominent cartoonist **Emad Hajjaj (Abu Mahjoub)** pending investigation after he published a cartoon that was deemed offensive. On 27 August 2020, the case was referred to the State Security Court's Public Prosecutor. On 30 August 2020, an official at the State Security Court ordered his [release](#) without bail. The case was sent back to the Public Prosecutor and the charge was modified from "publishing writings that would disturb relations with a friendly country" to a charge of defamation and insult under the Cyber Crimes Law. He was then released from Al-Salt prison.

On 24 December 2020, the Public Prosecutor of the State Security Court [ordered](#) the detention of journalist **Jamal Haddad**, owner of the Al-Waqa'ai news website, for publishing an article about government officials receiving the COVID-19 vaccine in secret, which contradicts public statements on the topic.

Jordan

Kuwait

GCHR published six updates and six appeals covering the cases of 22 HRDs, including Bedoon rights activists



In the country's biggest case, on 28 January 2020, the Fourth Circuit Criminal Court [issued](#) rulings against 16 Bedoon rights activists, describing them as "illegal residents", and sentenced two of them to ten years in prison, followed by deportation, and one defendant in absentia to life in prison. The ruling constitutes a violation of their right to obtain Kuwaiti citizenship as they have lived with their parents in these countries for too many years. The 16 Bedoon HRDs are **Mohammad Wali Al-Anezi**, **Reda Thamer Al-Fadhli**, **Hamoud Rabah Hamoud (Hamoud Al-Rabah)**, **Abdualhakim Al-Fadhli**, **Abdullah Al-Fadhli**, **Hamid Jamil**, **Ahmed Majeed Al-Onan**, **Yousif Obaid Al-Bashiq**, **Khalifa Al-Anezi**, **Awad Salih Al-Onan**, **Jarallah Al-Fadhli**, **Yousif Badr Al-Osmi**, **Mutaib Sebhan Al-Onan**, **Ahmed Shaya Al-Anezi**, **Mohammad Khudair Al-Anezi**, and **Badr Khudair Matar**.

The verdict was issued in the presence of all the activists, except for **Mohammad Wali Al-Anezi**, who left the country and was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment with labour. **Reda Thamer Al-Fadhli** and **Hammoud Rabah Hamoud** were also sentenced to ten years in prison with labour. The court decided to refrain from pronouncing punishment against **Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli**, **Abdullah Al-Fadhli**, **Hamid Jamil**, **Ahmed Majeed Al-Onan**, **Yousif Obaid Al-Bashiq**, **Khalifa Al-Anezi**, **Awad Saleh Al-Onan**, **Jarallah Al-Fadhli**, **Yousif Badr Al-Osmi**, **Mutaib Sebhan Al-Onan**, **Ahmed Shaya Al-Anezi** and **Mohammad Khudair Al-Anezi**. The Court instructed them to submit a bail of 1,000 dinars (approx. US\$3290). The Court also ordered their phones and computers to be confiscated.

On 08 February 2020, security personnel from the General Directorate of Residence and Foreigners Affairs (GDRFA) in Kuwait [arrested](#) **Hamza Al-Hammadi**, a HRD and journalist from Yemen. He had just finished a speech at a symposium organised by the Gulf Development Forum. Al-Hammadi's speech was about, "Civil Society Working in the Field of Human Rights in the Arab Gulf". He was held in the administrative deportation prison, but was not deported.

On 19 February 2020, the authorities [arrested](#) human rights lawyer **Hani Hussain** and imprisoned him. On 04 March 2020, the judge in charge of detention renewal refused to release Hussain and ordered his continued imprisonment until the hearing of his trial on 23 March 2020. State security made two charges against him, the first linked to broadcasting news about the area separating Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and the second allegedly violating the law of national unity. On 09 April 2020, the Criminal Court ordered the release of Hussain on a [bail](#) of 5000 dinars (approx. USD\$16,000).

The authorities [targeted](#) three bloggers for expressing their views on Twitter. On 28 February 2020, employees of the Electronic and Cyber Crime Combatting Department (ECCCD), which is managed under the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Ministry of Interior, arrested the blogger who runs the "[Marxist Patron of People](#)" account after they were able to identify him, breaching his right to privacy. On 04 March 2020, he was released on a bail of 1,000 dinars (approx. USD\$3260), after being accused of insulting people with his tweets.

On 29 February 2020, blogger **Alyaa Khraibut** posted a tweet after being summoned for investigation by the Cyber Crime Department. She was released on 02 March after being investigated over a tweet on 27 November 2019 in which she commented on information published in some local newspapers about "a lawmaker trying to release a suspect accused of rape." Khraibut uses this account to address issues of concern to citizens, including the policy of censorship of books, respect for freedom of the press and freedom of expression, as well to expose attempts to cover up rape crimes.

Blogger **Fayez Al-Otaibi** announced on [Twitter](#) that the CID had summoned him to appear for investigation. On 02 March 2020, he completed an investigation at the ECCCD and was then released without bail. The case is related to a total of 22 tweets and was referred to the Public Prosecution's Expression, Guidance and Social Communication Department.

On 10 March 2020, journalist **Abdulaziz Al-Shaban** was [summoned](#) by the ECCCD where he was interrogated about a [tweet](#) expressing his rejection of normalisation with Israel.

On 18 November 2020, well-known woman human rights defender **Hadeel Buqrais** was [summoned](#) by the ECCCD to investigate tweets posted on her Twitter account, which she uses to defend the civil and human rights of citizens, especially the Bedoon community in Kuwait. Buqrais is expected to appear before the ECCCD at a later time but has been informed that her lawyer will not be allowed to accompany her during the investigation. This violates Article 75 of the Code of Criminal Procedures and Trials (1960/17) which states: "For the accused and defendant has the right to attend all preliminary investigation procedures, and each of them has the right to accompany his [or her] lawyer."

Kuwait

Lebanon

GCHR published four updates, three appeals, and one joint report covering the cases of 10 HRDs and civil society activists, among incidence of excessive force used against protests.

On 24 January 2020, GCHR [condemned](#) the use of excessive force by the anti-riot police against peaceful demonstrators and called on the authorities in Lebanon to work harder to stop the use of force against peaceful demonstrators and activists. Demonstrations continued into 2020 in Lebanon as protesters demanded comprehensive change, the eradication of corruption, and the reform of the political system. On 18 and 19 January 2020 in Beirut, Lebanese anti-riot police used rubber bullets directly against protesters at close range, as well as violently hitting them with batons, and used tear gas intensively, resulting in injuries amongst dozens of peaceful protesters.

On 28 April 2020, activist **Fawaz Fouad Al-Samman** [died](#) from his wounds after he was shot with a live bullet in front of the Lebanese French Bank in Al-Nour Square in Tripoli during the confrontations between the army and the protesters.

On the occasion of International Workers' Day, on 01 May, dozens of demonstrators gathered in Beirut to protest against the high prices and poor living conditions. Others held marches in the cities of Tire and Nabatiyeh in southern Lebanon. Participants in these demonstrations carried Lebanese flags. They raised several demands, including improving living conditions, addressing unemployment amongst young people, reducing the rising cost of food prices, and eliminating rampant corruption.

The cost to human rights and human lives as a result of rife corruption was manifest in the mournful event of the Beirut explosion on 04 August 2020. GCHR [sent condolences](#) to the families of the victims who lost their lives in the tragic accident when at least 220 people [died](#), more than 6,500 were injured, and 300,000 became [homeless](#). Pushed by dignity, sorrow, anger and demands for truth and justice, thousands of Lebanese people marched on 08 August 2020 in popular [protests](#) in the name of the victims, calling for those responsible to be prosecuted.

GCHR called for immediate action to limit the environmental impact of the explosion, which released toxic gases and dust into the air, and act to help preserve the health of those in the vicinity. As well, the authorities must conduct an independent, transparent, and thorough investigation into the causes of the accident, announce the results, and bring those responsible to trial, according to international legal standards. That has still not happened.

Lebanon



In a joint UPR [submission for Lebanon](#), GCHR, CIVICUS, International Media Support (IMS) and Social Media Exchange (SMEX) examined the Lebanese government's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Specifically outlining concerns related to the Lebanese government's fulfilment of the rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and unwarranted restrictions on HRDs since its previous UPR examination in November 2015.

Lebanon

Oman

In 2020, GCHR published five updates, five joint appeals, and one joint report covering the cases of seven HRDs and journalists, repercussions for Twitter posts and books being confiscated, in addition to a joint UPR submission.

On 09 February 2020, a WHRD announced through her [anonymous Twitter account](#) the suspension of the [Omani Feminists](#) Twitter account that she helped set up. She said in a detailed [tweet](#): “We aimed through the account to spread awareness first, then highlight the reality experienced by the Omani woman, who undoubtedly, as we have previously discussed, is advanced compared to all countries in the region; and this was the starting point, as the elevation of the homeland will not be achieved only by our pursuit of perfection through constructive criticism and then calling for rights.”



GCHR and the Omani Association for Human Rights (OAHR) protested after the Muscat [International Book Fair](#), held from 22 February to 02 March 2020, prohibited and [confiscated](#) over 20 books written by well-known authors – mostly from Oman – directly contradicting a speech by the Sultan of Oman. On 23 February 2020, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq gave a [speech](#) saying, “It is a source of pride for us that citizens and residents of the dear land of Oman live by the grace of God under the rule of law and institutions, a state based on the principles of freedom, equality and equal opportunity, based on justice, the dignity, rights, and freedoms of individuals are protected, including freedom of expression guaranteed by the basic laws of the state.”

On 25 February 2020, television and radio presenter **Adel Al-Kasbi** was [arrested](#) after posting on [Twitter](#): “I dreamed that I had become a minister and built a palace in Crimea but it was very, very expensive. The structure only cost me 13 million Omani riyals.” On 10 June 2020, the Court of First Instance in Muscat sentenced Al-Kasbi and former Shura Council member **Salem Al-Awfi** (who was arrested for the retweet as well as

several other tweets he had posted on his [Twitter account](#)) to one-year in prison each, after they were convicted on a charge of “using information technology to spread harm to public order.” They paid 2000 Omani Rials (US\$5200) bail to remain free pending their hearing at the Appeal Court and no date has been set for the hearing.

The trial of writer and civil society activist **Musallam Al-Ma’ashani** was [postponed](#) indefinitely due to COVID-19. He was released on 25 April 2020, with a bail of 3,000 OMR (US\$7,800). The Public Prosecution in Salalah had asked **Al-Ma’ashani** to appear before the Court of Appeal in Salalah on 06 April 2020 to start the trial of the case No. 25715 of 2019.

On 03 June 2020, Internet activist **Awad Al-Sawafi** [appeared](#) before the Special Division of the Omani Police Command in the city of Ibri and was immediately arrested and transferred to the Public Prosecution office on charges of “incitement” and “misuse of social media.” The Special Division is the executive arm of the Internal Security Service (ISS) in Oman. Al-Sawafi’s detention is linked to a tweet on his [Twitter account](#) in which he criticised government agencies that threaten citizens. In a hearing on 16 June 2020, the Ibri Court of First Instance Al-Sawafi, sentencing him to a suspended one-year imprisonment, a ban on social media for one year and a fine of 100 Omani Rials (US\$260).

On 10 June 2020, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued [decree](#) No. 64 of 2020 establishing the Cyber Defence Centre, and the Official Gazette No. 1345 published the method of work of this centre, which includes 11 articles. GCHR and OCHR expressed their [concern](#) that this new regulatory system will severely compromise Internet freedom and freedom of expression. The Cyber Defence Centre system gives absolute control to the ISS - known for its continuous suppression of public freedoms, including freedom of expression on the Internet - over Internet users inside the country, their devices, and the data they save on these devices.

On 19 July 2020, after being summoned by the Special Division, the executive arm of the notorious ISS, **Ghazi Al-Awlaki** was arbitrarily [arrested](#) and detained at a police station in the Dhofar Governorate for a Facebook post critiquing bot activities online by Arab governments. He was not allowed to contact his family or a lawyer. On 07 September 2020, Al-Awlaki was released.

GCHR prepared a joint UPR [submission](#) for Oman with CIVICUS and OCHR which examines the Sultanate of Oman’s compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Specifically, the submission examines Oman’s fulfilment of the rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and unwarranted restrictions on HRDs, bloggers and online activists since its previous UPR examination in November 2015.

Oman

Qatar

GCHR published one appeal about threats to freedom of expression by an amendment to the Penal Code. On 17 January 2020, the Qatari newspaper “Al-Raya” published what it called amendments to the Penal Code of 2004 which include imprisonment and heavy fines for a broad range of expression and publication. However, the newspaper subsequently corrected itself, leading to confusion and concern over the government’s intentions, particularly as imprisonment for up to five years remains in the proposed amendments. On 19 January 2020, Al-Raya published an apology in which it said, “We apologise to our dear readers for the controversy over the amendments to the Penal Code, which “Al-Raya” obtained from an unofficial source and published without confirmation by the competent authorities.

GCHR [called](#) on the Qatari authorities to respect freedom of expression and opinion and to withdraw any amendments to the law which would violate these rights, or which would lead to imprisonment or other punitive measures for peaceful opinion. The authorities should also abolish oppressive laws

Qatar



DAY 11: CHANGE THE LAWS AFFECTING WOMEN AND PERPETUATING VIOLENCE. INVEST IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND DIVERSIFY PUBLIC AND CIVIC SPACE!

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

WOMEN FACE DISCRIMINATION IN LAW AND PRACTICE. THEY REMAIN INADEQUATELY PROTECTED AGAINST VIOLENCE, INCLUDING WITHIN THEIR OWN FAMILY. SIMPLE DECISIONS SUCH AS MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE ARE WITHHELD FROM WOMEN. WITHIN VERY CLOSED CIVIC SPACE, QATARI WHRDS WILL CEASE TO EXIST OR FACE EXILE. YET, THEY REMAIN AT RISK OF HARASSMENT AND CONSTANT INTIMIDATION BY THE AUTHORITIES, EVEN ACROSS BORDERS.

QATAR



As part of the #16DaysOfActivism, GCHR also noted the threats to women in Qatar who are discriminated against under the law, and harassed if they protest.

Saudi Arabia

GCHR published 15 updates, 13 appeals, two urgent appeals, three joint appeals, and two joint reports covering the cases of 20 HRDs, including women's rights activists who remain unjustly detained, among HRDs held in prisons in poor conditions.



#StandWithSaudiHeroes

On 07 January 2020, GCHR and 14 [signatories](#) released a joint appeal call on Dakar Rally organisers, [participants](#), sponsors and official broadcasters to urge the Saudi authorities to drop all charges against Saudi women's rights activists and immediately and unconditionally release all those detained for their peaceful and legitimate human rights activism. GCHR and partners highlighted the impact these stakeholders could make in Saudi women activists' lives and their struggle for freedom and gender equality. Advocates for Saudi WHRDs participating in the Dakar Rally were asked to show solidarity by wearing a #StandWithSaudiHeroes pink armband during the event as well as sharing support on social media channels using the hashtag #StandWithSaudiHeroes and reaching out to [competitors](#) to participate in the campaign.

On 09 January 2020, human rights lawyer **Walid Abu Al-Khair** was [transferred](#) to King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah after his health deteriorated dramatically. He had started a hunger strike on 11 December 2019 to protest against the ill-treatment to which he was being subjected in Dhaban Prison, near Jeddah. He was held in solitary confinement and banned from having any books. Prior to that, Abu Al-Khair undertook another hunger strike that started on 27 November 2019 and ended on 10 December 2019, but he continued his hunger strike the next day after the authorities did not respond to his demands and kept him in an isolation cell.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia

On 23 March 2020, the German Security Council [decided](#) to renew the suspension of export licenses for arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which was set to expire on 31 March, for a third time until the end of September 2020. This means that the German government will neither issue new export licenses to Saudi Arabia, nor deliver any arms to the Kingdom based on existing licenses. Yet this decision does not exclude exemptions for German component deliveries within the framework of European joint projects, including components for European Typhoons.

On 24 April 2020, prominent HRD Dr. **Abdullah Al-Hamid**, a founding member of the NGO Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), died in hospital two weeks after being [transferred](#) from prison in Riyadh to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) following a stroke. He was left for hours in a coma in his cell, and his family alleged that he did not receive proper medical treatment.



As part of its work with the Free Saudi Activists Coalition, on 14 May 2020, GCHR released a joint report with Lifeline CSO Fund for Embattled CSOs, OMCT, FIDH, Human Rights Watch, PEN America, ALQST, MENA Rights Group, HRC-net and Amnesty International to free women's rights activists detained since May 2018, including **Loujain Al-Hathloul**, **Nassima Al-Sadaa**, **Nouf Abdulaziz**, **Mohammed Al-Bajadi** and **Samar Badawi**. Despite certain political and social reforms, the authorities in Saudi Arabia continue their decades-long clampdown on dissent, human rights activism, and independent reporting through the media.

Loujain AlHathloul

SENTENCED TO

5 YEARS & 8 MONTHS IN PRISON

Among the detained women's rights defenders, prominent WHRD and equality campaigner **Loujain Al-Hathloul** was sentenced to prison after being brought to trial more than two and a half years since her arrest in May 2018. She was held [incommunicado](#) in prison for several months, according to her [family](#) who had not heard from her [since 09 June 2020](#). On 25 November 2020, Hathloul's case was [transferred](#) to the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC – also known as the Terrorism Court), after the judge at the Criminal Court in Riyadh, decided not to have jurisdiction in her case. On 28 December 2020, the SCC [sentenced](#) Al-Hathloul to five years and eight months in prison. The sentence includes a suspension of two years and 10 months in addition to the time already served (since May 2018), and she was released on 10 February 2021. Al-Hathloul is required to serve three years of probation during which time she could be arrested for any perceived illegal activity. She is also under a five-year travel ban.

On 17 May 2020, the Presidency of State Security arbitrarily [arrested](#) Saudi Internet activist **Amani Al-Zain**, on direct orders issued by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. She was detained in an unknown location since her arrest in Jeddah.

On 19 July 2020, writer and journalist **Saleh Al-Shehi** [died](#) in Saudi Arabia from COVID-19. He spent two and a half years in prison before being released on 19 May 2020, while serving a five-year sentence in violation of his right to free expression. Al-Shehi was in intensive care in a medical facility in Arar city since 15 June 2020 and was then transferred to a hospital in Riyadh, where he died.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia

In 2020, GCHR received information about a [case](#) of an online activist who has been forcibly disappeared for over two years with almost no contact with his family. On 12 March 2018, plainclothes members of the General Directorate of Investigation in Saudi Arabia arbitrarily arrested Internet activist **Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan** without a warrant. He was arrested at the main offices of the Saudi Red Crescent Society in Riyadh, where he works as an aid worker. On 12 February 2020, the family finally received a single call from Al-Sadhan, which lasted approximately one minute, during which time he told them that he was being held in Al-Ha'ir prison. The authorities did not confirm his location or allow his family to visit him, nor was he allowed to see a lawyer, and no specific charges have been filed against him.

On 07 September 2020, the Criminal Court in Riyadh, [issued](#) its final verdicts in the case of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on 02 October 2018. The sentences included imprisonment of eight men for periods ranging from seven to 20 years. The court overturned five death sentences originally handed down in the case. The court sentenced five of the convicted to 20 years in prison, one of them to 10 years in prison and two of them to seven years in prison. The former advisor to the crown prince, Saud Al-Qahtani, the consul in Istanbul Muhammad Al-Otaibi, and Major General Ahmed Asiri, the former deputy director of intelligence, were not charged, and they were released. It was a closed trial away from the public and the media, and the names of those who were sentenced were not even revealed.

On 13 October 2020, during the 16th plenary meeting of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, 16 countries - including China, Saudi Arabia and Russia - stood for election to the UNHRC. Saudi Arabia was the only candidate not elected.

On 01 December 2020, the SCC [sentenced](#) HRD **Mohammad Abdullah Al-Otaibi** to another year in prison, including six months for traveling to Qatar in 2017 and another six months for tweets he posted during that period.

On 18 December 2020, prominent HRD Dr. **Mohammed Al-Qahtani**, who is serving a 10-year prison sentence, [started](#) a hunger strike due to the ill-treatment he suffered in prison, including his inability to contact his family, or to receive the books sent to him which have been withheld by the prison administration.

Syria

GCHR published one update, two appeals, and one joint appeal covering the cases of two HRDs, among almost 100,000 detainees in Syria, and one journalist murdered in Syria. On 23 March 2020, GCHR signed a joint [appeal](#) with 45 other organisations concerned for the conditions of incarceration in Syrian detention centres, particularly as the number of detainees is approximately 90,212 as confirmed by the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC).

On 15 September 2020, civil society activist **Nour Al-Shilo** was arrested by the armed group Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS). GCHR issued [an appeal](#) in November about Al-Shilo, after she had been detained incommunicado for over two months since her arrest by HTS, an extremist armed faction operating in northern Syria near the border with Turkey. She was released on 4 January 2021. GCHR was relieved to hear she was safe, given the reputation of HTS for violence.



DAY 15: STOP SILENCING THE VOICES OF TRUTH, THE WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND JOURNALISTS REPORTING FROM VOLATILE REGIONS, CONFLICTS AND WAR ZONES!

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

"ON THIS DAY, 9 DECEMBER, I LOST MY FAITH IN SO MANY THINGS, AS RAZAN WAS KIDNAPPED BY THOSE SHE ONCE DEFENDED, INCLUDING THEIR RIGHT TO FAIR TRIALS, AND RISKED HER LIFE TO STAND UP FOR THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS. I FELT EXPOSED, AS A WOMAN AND AS A JOURNALIST. IF SUCH A VIOLATION COULD HAPPEN TO A WELL-KNOWN POWERFUL FIGURE, MY ROLE MODEL AND FRIEND, I COULD EASILY BE SILENCED AND I WAS."

ZAINA ERHAIM - SYRIA
IWPR COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER



Syria

As part of the #16DaysOfActivism GCHR also commemorated the anniversary of the kidnapping of **Razan Zaitouneh** and **Samira Khalil**, who were taken from their offices by an armed group along with colleagues **Nazem Hamadi** and **Wa'el Hamada** on 9 December 2013.

Syria is still one of the most dangerous places for journalists, who continue to be targeted with murder and harassment while performing their journalistic work. On 12 December 2020, masked gunmen on a motorbike shot journalist **Hussain Khattab** (also known as Kara Al-Safrani), killing him instantly. He was targeted in the city of Al-Bab in the countryside of Aleppo, as he was preparing a media report on COVID-19. His killers were unknown. Khattab, who was a member of the executive office of the Aleppo Media Union, worked in several media outlets, the most recent of which the Turkish TV channel [TRT](#) Arabic, for which he provided video reports.

United Arab Emirates

GCHR published 12 updates, five appeals, two urgent appeals, two joint appeals, one report, and one joint report covering the cases of 50 HRDs, including the country's most prominent HRD Ahmed Mansoor, a member of GCHR's Advisory Board.



#FreeAhmed | #GiveAhmedaBed

On 08 February 2020, GCHR issued [an urgent appeal](#) to the UN, European Union and Embassies in the UAE to seek a visit with **Ahmed Mansoor**, a human rights defender, poet and engineer, in prison, and to help improve his conditions. Mansoor is suffering from poor health conditions. Keeping him in solitary confinement since his arrest on 20 March 2017 is regarded as a form of torture. GCHR asked supporters to circulate news about Ahmed Mansoor's condition widely and tweet tagging the UN Special Procedures, asking for their help to #FreeAhmed and #GiveAhmedaBed. GCHR works with numerous partners to help free Ahmed Mansoor, including via the [Friends of Ahmed Mansoor](#) Facebook group, with almost 300 supporters, and Twitter account.

GCHR joined 63 organisation and prominent individuals in an [open letter](#) to the UAE government during the Hay Festival Abu Dhabi on 25-28 February 2020, calling on the Emirati authorities to demonstrate their respect for the right to freedom of expression by freeing all HRDs imprisoned for expressing themselves peacefully online, including academics, writers, a poet and lawyers. In the context of the Hay Festival, the UAE's Ministry of Tolerance is promoting a platform for freedom of expression, while keeping behind bars Emirati citizens and residents who shared their own views and opinions. A number of festival participants spoke up in favour of all those whose voices have been silenced in the UAE. The signatories called on the UAE authorities to comply with international standards for prisoners, including by allowing prisoners of conscience to receive books and reading materials. The letter called for the release of **Ahmed Mansoor**, Sorbonne academic Dr. **Nasser Bin Ghaith**, and human rights lawyers Dr. **Mohammed Al-Roken** and Dr. **Mohammed Al-Mansoori**.

During the Hay Festival, some signatories to the letter and the Festival's Director took the opportunity to [call](#) for freedom of expression to be respected. Not surprisingly, none of them were quoted in the national media. During [her talk on 27 February](#), well-known Egyptian author **Ahdaf Soueif** mentioned prisoners of conscience, saying, "I speak of people who cannot take part in the Festival, who have lost their liberty simply because of their insistence on their right to freedom of expression and to their support for the principles of human rights."

On 20 March 2020, Amnesty International and GCHR [demanded](#) the immediate and unconditional release of **Ahmed Mansoor**, being held in solitary confinement in an isolation ward in Al-Sadr prison, in [dire conditions](#) with no bed or access to books.

On 05 May 2020, GCHR released a short report [documenting](#) grave human rights violations committed by the authorities in the UAE against 35 activists and HRDs, both in prison and after their release. Authorities demanded the HRDs renounce their human rights work in order to be freed, or risk being held in prison for years past the end of their sentences.

On 06 June 2020, GCHR repeated its [calls](#) on the UAE authorities to release HRDs, amid reports of COVID-19 infection in UAE prisons.

On 26 June 2020, the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, GCHR, the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), the International Campaign for Freedom in the UAE (ICFUAE) and the OMCT released a joint [submission](#) to the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) on the UAE in advance of the review in April 2021 at the CAT's 71st session. The UAE was due to be reviewed during the CAT's 69th session in April/May 2020, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

United Arab Emirates



On 26 September 2020, Emirati writer **Dhabia Khamis Al-Maslamani** was placed under a [travel ban](#) for information posted [on her Facebook page](#) and [her Twitter account](#). Access to her Facebook page from within the UAE was blocked, as well as the websites that mentioned the news of her travel ban.

On 19 October 2020, GCHR [called](#) on the UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, to hold the UAE to account after UK citizen and Hay Festival Abu Dhabi Curator, **Caitlin McNamara**, alleged that she had been sexual assaulted by UAE Minister for Tolerance, Sheikh Hahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, in Abu Dhabi after raising the case of **Ahmed Mansoor** prior to the Hay Festival.

On 21 October 2020, GCHR appealed to the UN and European Union, expressing [concern](#) about the fate of HRDs and other activists imprisoned in the UAE. Since the release of common-law prisoners as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, starting in March 2020, there was no news about how broadly the virus had spread within all prisons. The country is not accessible to human rights NGOs seeking information, and prisoners of conscience remain in prison long past their release date.

The appeal highlighted the cases of **Ahmed Mansoor**, **Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith**, **Dr. Mohammed Al-Roken**, **Dr. Mohammed Al-Mansoori** and members of the group of activists known as the UAE94. As well as, among those who have completed their sentences but remain in prison are: **Ahmed Mohammed Al-Mulla**, **Faisal Ali Al-Shehhi**, **Abdullah Ibrahim Al-Helou**, **Saeed Abdullah Al-Buraimi**, **Abdulwahid Hassan Al-Shehhi**, **Khalifa Rabiaa**, **Abdullah Abdulkadir Al-Hajri**, **Omran Ali Al-Harthi**, **Fahd Abdulkadir Al-Hajri**, **Mahmoud Hassan Al-Hosani** and **Mansour Hassan Al-Ahmadi**.

On 16 December 2020, Human Rights Watch and GCHR released a statement condemning the UAE's maltreatment and unjust imprisonment of Ahmed Mansoor citing health risks following more than three years in solitary confinement without basic necessities. Between December 2017 and March 2018, authorities took away his mattress and denied him adequate warm clothing and access to hot water, leaving him unprotected from the winter cold in his cell. Mansoor, 51, was diagnosed with hypertension later in 2018 and has not been given medication to treat it, putting him at increased risk for heart disease and stroke.

Yemen

GCHR published 12 updates, 12 appeals, two joint appeals, and one report covering the cases of 74 HRDs, including academics and journalists, such as four journalists sentenced to death in Yemen.

On 11 February 2020, Dr. **Hameed Mohammed Yahya Aklan**, President of the National University of Science and Technology and Chairman of the Board of Directors of its Science and Technology Educational Hospital, was arrested. [He remained](#) in the central prison in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, where he faced fabricated charges. Dr. Aklan was arrested along with four of his companions and relatives - his brother **Ammar Mohammed Yahya Aklan**, **Bashir Abdo Ali Al-Barbari**, **Sakhr Nabil Mohammed Awfan**, and **Mokhtar Ali Mohsen**. They were arrested at the Al-Ameerah security checkpoint in Ibb Governorate. His four companions were held for several weeks in detention, before being released without any charges.

On 11 April 2020, [the Specialised Criminal Court \(SCC\)](#) in Sanaa, which is controlled by Houthi authorities, sentenced four journalists to death for spying, among ten journalists convicted of publishing false news. The other six journalists were ordered to be freed for time served, after having been in detention for almost five years. **Abdulkhaleq Ahmed Amran**, **Akram Saleh Al-Walidi**, **Al-Hareth Saleh Hamid** and **Tawfiq Mohammad Al-Mansouri** were sentenced to death on charges of spying and spreading false news. Six other journalists in the same case were ordered to be freed, but only one of them, **Salah Mohammad Al-Qaedi**, was released, on 23 April 2020.

On 01 May 2020, journalist **Assil Mustafa Swid** was [kidnapped](#) after he left his home in Taiz. He was fleeing to Aden after he received many threats via Messenger as well as comments on a Facebook post in addition to a threatening SMS sent to his mobile phone number. On 30 May 2020, **Osama Mustafa Swid** announced on [his Facebook page](#) the news of the release of his brother, saying that he arrived safely in Taiz. He also stated that he was in a state of shock and, "unable to speak, his physical and mental health are poor, and he has signs of severe torture inflicted during the period in which he was detained."

On 04 May 2020, journalist **Abdulhafez Al-Samadi** was [released](#) in Yemen and met with all members of his family for the first time since his arrest on 27 July 2019.

Yemen



Al-Hareth Saleh Hamid

AKram Saleh Al-Walidi

Tawfiq M. Al-Mansouri

AbdulKhaleq Ahmed Amran

Yemeni journalists face **The risk of execution**

On 12 May 2020, GCHR led a [joint appeal](#) co-signed with 152 organisations calling on UN mechanisms and member states to help save the lives of the four Yemeni journalists who were [sentenced to death](#) in April 2020. The official verdict in the case of the ten journalists was received by defence lawyer **Abdulmajeed Sabra** on 09 July 2020, some four months after the journalists were sentenced. On 13 December 2020, GCHR reported on the [deteriorating](#) health of journalist **Tawfiq Mohammed Al-Mansouri**, appealing his death sentence, in a prison in Sana'a.

Five of the journalists, **Hisham Ahmed Tarmoom, Hisham Abdulmalik Al-Yousefi, Haitham Abdulrahman Al-Shihab, Essam Amin Balgheeth and Hassan Abdullah Annab**, were finally released on 15 October 2020, as part of an exchange of prisoners between the Houthis in Sana'a and the Saudi-backed government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

On 27 May 2020, security forces in Hadramout Governorate [arrested](#) journalist **Abdullah Awad Bakir** in Mukalla. The authorities confiscated his car and other belongings upon arresting him.

On 02 June 2020, unidentified gunmen [assassinated](#) photojournalist **Nabil Al-Qaiti** near his house in Dar Saad, one of the southern districts of Aden Governorate who died on arrival to the hospital.

Yemen

GCHR joined 24 organisations [calling](#) on the UNHRC to renew and strengthen the GEE's mandate in September 2020, including to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence related to, and clarify responsibility for, the most serious crimes under international law and violations of international law committed in Yemen since 2014. On 06 October 2020, at the HRC's 45th session, a majority of 22 members [supported](#) a resolution renewing the mandate of the GEE.

Journalist **Mohammed Ali Al-Maqri** was arrested on 16 March 2019 and held in a prison affiliated with the Political Security Directorate in Ma'rib, where his mental health deteriorated, according to former prisoners. On 19 October 2020, **Al-Maqri** was [released](#) from prison, and his first question was about the condition of his sick wife, as he was not informed that she died during his imprisonment.

On 07 December 2020, GCHR released an appeal [calling](#) on all parties to respect freedom of expression in Yemen and end the persecution of journalists, HRDs and academics.

Yemen

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IV. Regional Human Rights Overview and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has augmented the risks faced by HRDs, journalists and academics across the MENA region who have been imprisoned, kidnapped, murdered and attacked; but also increased the number of groups impacted by violations of human rights. Migrant workers in Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain have faced extreme violations of their rights such as healthcare and freedom of movement during the pandemic as a result of governments' repressive sponsorship system ([Kafala](#)). Some migrant workers in Lebanon even committed suicide as a result of violations of their human rights.

Other violations occurred as a result of Gulf governments' restrictions of the internet where citizens are denied free and accessible contact due to their [blockage](#) of Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services. In other regards, the region is affected by the spread of [misinformation](#) about COVID-19 and the voices of netizens of the region should be further integrated in democratically governing social media platforms and their approaches to combating misinformation. Another alarming trend is the lack of accountability of parties involved in the sale, development and deployment of [surveillance technology](#) in Gulf countries which are used to target, spy and incriminate HRDs across the region, such as **Ahmed Mansoor** and **Loujain Al-Hathloul**.

Other systematic targeting of civil society organisations and HRDs continues. GCHR published an [appeal](#) to supporters, UN mechanisms and governments to urge Egypt to overturn a 15-year prison sentence against **Bahey El Din Hassan**, the Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) who has been in exile since 2014 due to death threats and other retribution against him for his peaceful human rights activities. Many more HRDs, journalists and citizens have been arbitrarily detained and/or imprisoned for exercising their right to free expression.

Based on trends, patterns and systemic violent targeting of citizens, civil society activists, HRDs, journalists, academics, protesters and paramedics witnessed across the region in 2020, GCHR makes the following recommendations, which reiterate the points **Abdul-Hadi Khawaja** has [raised](#) in amending the Bahraini Alternative Punishment Law. These demands are relevant to overturning the injustice committed against people of the Gulf and Neighbouring Countries who remain in need of much-needed solidarity especially as the world continues to suffer from a deadly pandemic.

In his statement, Khawaja recommended:

1. If there was a real movement for justice and fairness, the discourse would revolve around reparations for political detainees and ensuring that they receive compensation and would include accountability for those responsible for violating their rights. Their imprisonment, in essence, is null and void, and their right to liberty is fixed and authentic.
2. Conditional freedom in exchange for silence is rejected, and it is not just to have a process of exchange; in the sense that the prisoner be released in exchange for being forced to remain silent and prevented from practicing their right to freedom of expression.
3. The dignity of any person is not subject to bargaining, and it is not acceptable that those released be subjected by the authorities to pressure or extortion.

In addition to this, GCHR reiterates its recommendations regarding:

1. Cooperation of the international community, including the UN mechanism, the European Union, and international platforms such as conferences and entertainment events, to commit to demand respect for human rights as pivotal in relations with the Gulf and Neighbouring Countries.
2. Transparent, meaningful, and diligent investigation and accountability for systemic retaliations, assassinations and enforced disappearance of HRDs, civil society activists, journalists and academics across the region.
3. Reform of the criminal justice system in the region where cases of freedom of expression are not referred to and prosecuted by terrorism courts.



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