

Time for Change in Saudi Arabia

An Assessment of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud's Reign and the Need for Reform in Saudi Arabia

Norah Ali

Saudi Advocacy Associate, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

Eric Eikenberry

Research Associate, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain



Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain
1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 205 Washington, D.C. 20036
202-621-6141 | www.adhrb.org | @ADHRB

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud died early Friday morning at the age of 90, according to the Saudi Press Agency. King Abdullah formally succeeded to the throne in August 2005 following the death of Fahad bin Abdulaziz, but he had served as the informal executive of the Saudi government since 1995, when Fahad had a stroke. Despite his adopted status as a reformer and peacemaker, King Abdullah's reign was marked by a deterioration of civil, political and human rights in the kingdom.

During King Abdullah's rule, the government gained notoriety for arresting political prisoners and human rights defenders. In 2007, King Abdullah enacted the [Anti-Cyber Crime Law](#), which enables Saudi judges and prosecutors to charge and try citizens for expressing dissenting views via social media. In 2008, he established the [Specialized Criminal Court](#) (SCC) with a mandate to prosecute anyone who "disturbs public order, shakes the security of society or subjects its national unity to danger, or obstructs the primary system of rule or harms the reputation of the state."

In practice, the SCC has primarily been used to prosecute dissent. In October 2014, the SCC targeted three lawyers, [Abdulrahman al-Subaihi](#), [Bandar al-Nogithan](#), and [Abdulrahman al-Rumaih](#), after they criticized the judiciary on Twitter. The activists were sentenced to an additional five to eight years in prison on top of the 1 million Saudi riyals (\$266,666) they had previously been fined for the same offense. In November 2014, the king's authorities sentenced activist [Mikhlif bin Daham al-Shammari](#) to two years in prison and 200 lashes for visiting a Shia Muslim family and tweeting his desire to worship in a Shia mosque. Al-Shammari had already been sentenced to five years in prison and a 10-year travel ban [earlier in 2013](#) for his activism on behalf of Saudi Shia. Most recently, the king's courts [revoked](#) human rights activist and lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair's parole, upholding his [earlier sentence](#) of 15 years in prison and a 15 year travel ban for asking the government to reform its operations, release political prisoners, and expand women's rights.

A repressive new law defined the king's final year in power. At the beginning of 2014, King Abdullah enacted the [2014 Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing](#), which allows the Kingdom to prosecute [peaceful activity](#) and political dissent as terrorism. The law grants security services the [unbridled power](#) to invade homes and track phone calls and Internet activity. [Article 1](#) of the law defines terrorism as "calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based." Human rights activists have [commented](#) that the law was designed to further entrench the control of the al-Saud family and to deflect attention from the type of democratic reforms that have gained popularity since the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011.

King Abdullah was as unforgiving of dissent in his personal life as he was in the public sphere. His four daughters, Sahar, Jawaher, Maha, and Hala have been under [house arrest](#) for almost 13 years as a result of their human rights activism. Sahar told reporters that, "We, along with our mother, have always been vocal all our lives about poverty, women's rights and other causes that are dear to our hearts. We often discussed them with our father. It did not sit well with him and his sons Mitab and AbdelAziz and their entourage." Since the King divorced their mother, Alanoud al Fayez, the princesses have been subject to ill-treatment, including limiting their food, restricting their access to medicine, and repeatedly threatening their well-being.

The last several years of King Abdullah's reign also saw an unprecedented increase in the targeting and harassment of women's rights activists. In 2014, authorities imposed a travel ban on Samar Badawi, a

prominent rights advocate and wife of imprisoned human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair. It is believed that the travel ban was on account of Ms. Badawi's human rights activities. Most recently, Badawi visited Washington D.C. where she met with several Members of Congress, U.S. government officials, and a number of international NGOs. In October 2014, vocal women's rights activist and writer Souad al-Shammari was arrested for allegedly insulting Islam on Twitter. To this day, she remains in detention, and no hearing has been scheduled.

The late King's legacy also includes enforcing the ban on women's driving. On 23 September 2007, Saudi Arabia's National Day, more than 1,100 activists petitioned King Abdullah to eliminate the driving ban. The King refused to approve the petition and openly supported the arrest of anyone who defied the ban. In March 2014, activist Aziza al-Yousef attracted 11,000 followers on [Twitter](#) after being arrested for driving in Riyadh. In October, dozens of women were similarly incarcerated for posting videos of themselves driving. On 1 December 2014, Loujain al-Hathloul became the latest Saudi woman to be arrested after posting a video of herself driving over the border from the UAE to Saudi Arabia with a valid UAE license.

During his rule, King Abdullah empowered the Ministry of Interior to prosecute members of Saudi Arabia's nascent civil society. In March 2013, human rights activists [Mohammed al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid](#), co-founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), were sentenced to 10 and 5 years in prison, respectively, along with a 10-year travel ban for al-Qahtani and a five-year travel ban for al-Hamid. In July 2013, the late king's officials arrested two women activists, [Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Oyouni](#), simply for attempting to bring food to a woman who had been forbidden by her husband from leaving her house. The women were sentenced to 10 months in prison and a two-year travel ban for encouraging the detained woman to defy her husband. In December 2013, [Omar al-Saeed](#) became the fourth member of the ACPRA to be arrested for calling for a constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom. King Abdullah's judiciary denied him access to legal counsel and sentenced him to 300 lashes, four years in prison, and a travel ban. More recently, the late king's government implemented the public flogging of blogger [Raif Badawi](#), who had been sentenced to 1,000 lashes, a 10-year travel ban, and a lifetime ban from appearing in the media for establishing an online debate forum for Saudi liberals.

Human rights violations committed by the King Abdullah's government extend beyond targeting dissent. Authorities regularly subject those convicted of criminal activity to inhumane and unusual punishments. In 2014 alone, the Saudi government [beheaded](#) 87 individuals, many in public. Law enforcement officials and members of the security forces regularly [tortured](#) suspects. Additionally, King Abdullah failed to protect the rights of the millions of migrant workers by upholding the *kafala* system.

In light of these and other human rights violations, ADHRB calls on the new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, to chart a different course for Saudi Arabia. King Salman should ensure the immediate release of the nearly [30,000](#) prisoners of conscience in the kingdom. King Salman should also reform criminal law to prohibit, once and for all, the arbitrary [arrest](#) and unjustified [detention](#) of dissenters that is regularly practiced by Saudi law enforcement. The prohibition against [torture](#), already established in Saudi law, must be implemented. [The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing](#), promulgated by King Abdullah and used to target human rights defenders, must be amended, and the peaceful

reformers prosecuted under the law—including [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#), [Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr](#), and others—must be released from prison, their charges vacated.

In addition to reforming Saudi’s criminal justice system, King Salman should also take steps to end the systemic discrimination that disadvantages certain populations. The rights of all [religious](#) minorities, including atheists, should be upheld. The Saudi Shia population must be granted greater access to civil service jobs and university positions, and they should be able to publicly express their religious beliefs without fear of government reprisal.

Lastly, the government must meet the demands of Saudi women and implement reforms that will guarantee their full civil and political rights. It is time to abolish the [guardianship system](#), thus allowing women to travel, study, marry, and gain employment without first seeking the permission of a male guardian. Other measures to ensure women the right to full and equal citizenship should include immediately ending the ban on driving, continuing to expand their role in the country’s political system, and following through on Abdullah’s promise to allow women [to vote and run for office](#) in the upcoming municipal elections.

To encourage King Salman to improve his country’s human rights record, the United States Government should:

- Launch sustained, high-level public as well as private calls on the Government of Saudi Arabia to adhere to its human rights commitments and respect its position on the United Nations Human Rights Council by enacting meaningful reforms, including:
 - The immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners;
 - The end of all forms of torture;
 - The reformation of laws which restrict the rights of women; and
 - The enactment of laws which shield migrant workers from abuse and exploitation.
- Ensure that the U.S.-Saudi military relationship is in full compliance with the intent of the [“Leahy Law”](#) to avoid complicity with human rights violations.
- Push for the full implementation of protections for freedom of religious belief and conscience.
- Organize, through the appropriate congressional committee, a hearing which examines the human rights violations enabled by the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing.