



## Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 9: National Human Rights Institutions

### I. Introduction

Throughout 2015, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) has identified the Saudi government ministries and agencies most consistently implicated in human rights violations. The abuses stemming from the Saudi system of criminal justice are particularly serious. Domestic law enforcement officials, under the oversight of the Ministry of Interior,<sup>1</sup> engage in the arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, and even torture of accused individuals. The Ministry of Justice, directing the nation's non-independent judiciary, consistently fails to confront these violations and at times formalizes them through harsh sentencing practices.<sup>2</sup> This criminal justice system enforces the country-wide repression of basic freedoms by further empowering religious police to administer gender segregation<sup>3</sup> and imposing severe restrictions on domestic media.<sup>4</sup>

People within Saudi Arabia have repeatedly organized to publicize and remedy these violations. In recent years, however, these organizers have found themselves under interrogation, at court, and in prison. The founders of the Saudi Arabian Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)<sup>5</sup> and the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA),<sup>6</sup> two organizations that documented human rights abuses and called for major political reforms, are either on trial or serving prison terms of four years or more. The Union for Human Rights and the Adala Center for Human Rights have closed under government pressure.<sup>7</sup> The government has even halted the activities of the Baladi Initiative, a civil society group that trained women to participate in politics at the local level.<sup>8</sup>

Yet these groups do not represent the sum total of human rights activism within the country. Sustained calls for reform in the early 2000s pushed the government to facilitate the creation of two human rights organizations: the Human Rights Commission, a government agency, and the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), a nominally-independent group that operates under government influence. These two organizations have conducted valuable reporting on the status of human rights violations within the kingdom, in addition to hosting human rights-related workshop and symposia. Working within a governmental framework, however, has prevented members of the Commission and the NSHR from advocating on behalf of imprisoned activists, directly criticizing specific government agencies, and curbing the commission of systemic human rights violations within the kingdom.

### II. History

The establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights in 2004 and 2005, respectively, followed a period of political uncertainty within the kingdom. Specifically, the disproportionate involvement of Saudi men in the terrorist attacks on New York City in September 2001 sparked debate within and without Saudi society. Externally, scholars and regional commentators sought the root cause of this extremism in Saudi domestic policy, highlighting the lack of political representation and state support for a hyper-conservative Wahhabi religious ideology as causal factors.<sup>9</sup>

The ongoing presence of a high number of Saudi citizens in extremist militias abroad,<sup>10</sup> in addition to the development of new media that transmitted governmental human rights violations to a global audience,<sup>11</sup> led even strong allies such as the United States to press for internal reforms.<sup>12</sup>

Internally, calls for change also emerged from within Saudi society, many of which centered on introducing reforms to make government more participatory, prevent further radicalization, end official corruption, and ameliorate economic inequalities.<sup>13</sup> In 2003 alone, different reform-minded camps presented a series of petitions to King Abdullah (formal petitioning being one of the few forms of protest traditionally permitted within the kingdom).<sup>14</sup> The possibility of public protest attended civil society's calls for substantial political reform. In October 2003, one hundred protesters marched in Riyadh, a rare occurrence that Saudi security forces quickly suppressed.<sup>15</sup>

In response, the government established the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. While addressing pertinent topics of greater women's freedoms, unemployment, and causes of extremism,<sup>16</sup> the dialogues did not stem further civil society efforts to press for reforms, as demonstrated by the failed attempt of a group of journalists, scholars, and legal professionals to form the Human Rights Social Committee in 2004.<sup>17</sup>

As a partial concession to these continued calls, the government facilitated the establishment of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) in March 2004.<sup>18</sup> The organization outlined its mission as one of protecting human rights in accordance with the kingdom's Islamic Laws and international agreements;<sup>19</sup> Article 2 of its founding charter also made explicit its intention to confront oppression, arbitrariness, violence, torture, and intolerance.<sup>20</sup> Though technically a civil society organization, the group operated under significant government influence: its 41 initial members mostly came from government backgrounds,<sup>21</sup> and a trust of King Fahd's estate financed its activities.<sup>22</sup>

In 2005, the government further conceded to calls for reform by formally establishing the Human Rights Commission.<sup>23</sup> Council of Ministers Decision No. 412 set up the commission to protect and strengthen human rights according to international standards and Islamic Law and to raise human rights awareness.<sup>24</sup> The regulation mandated that the Commission answer directly to the president of the Council of Ministers.<sup>25</sup> The president of the Council of Ministers appointed Turki al-Sudairi to serve as HRC president in 2005, although, according to Saudi historian Dr. Madawi al-Rasheed, the Commission did not begin its work until 2007.<sup>26</sup>

### **III. Structure and Organization**

#### **A. The Human Rights Commission**

The Human Rights Commission is tied to the highest levels of Saudi government. Article 3 of the 2005 Regulation of the Human Rights Commission states that its president serves as a full minister, appointed by royal decree; the king also determines the deputy president.<sup>27</sup> These two figures preside over a board consisting of at least 24 members, all of whom the president of the Saudi Council of Ministers

appoints.<sup>28</sup> 18 are full-time members and vote, while 6 attend the board part-time to participate without voting.<sup>29</sup>

These 26 members have a host of responsibilities, including: monitoring human rights violations committed by government bodies and responding accordingly within its regulatory framework; recommending amendments to regulations in order to make them more human rights compatible; issuing periodic reports; and engaging with international human rights instruments to which the kingdom has joined.<sup>30</sup> The board meets at least once a month, or at the call of the president, the deputy president, or at least one-third of members.<sup>31</sup>

With the board's assistance, the president oversees a series of departments within the commission:

- The Center of Publications and Media, which manages the departments of publication, media, documentation, and translation.<sup>32</sup> The 2005 law sets its primary responsibility as publicizing and spreading the basic principles and concepts of human rights, in line with the government's interpretation of Islamic law and Saudi culture.
- The Administration for Periodic Reporting.<sup>33</sup> This administration appears to have developed since 2005, as reporting used to fall under the purview of the Administration of Legal Affairs, Research, and Study.<sup>34</sup>
- The Administration of Research and Study, which oversees the sub-departments of research and statistics.<sup>35</sup> The 2005 law initially labeled this administration that of "Legal Affairs, Research, and Study," and charged it with consulting the Commission and the wider government on legal and regulatory matters related to human rights, in addition to preparing reports to the relevant bodies on Saudi Arabia's adherence to international human rights instruments.<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether or not the aforementioned periodic reporting administration has assumed this second duty.
- The Administration of Monitoring and Investigation, which oversees the department of investigation and the unit of persons with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> The 2005 law mandated that this administration investigate all authentic complaints, visit prisons, accept investigation requests, and report its findings to the board.<sup>38</sup>
- The Administration of Complaints, which oversees sub-departments that both welcome and follow-up on submitted complaints.<sup>39</sup> The 2005 law charged it with accepting human rights complaints from individuals and organizations, determining their authenticity, and transferring them to the relevant departments within the Commission.<sup>40</sup>

- The Administration for International Organizations and Relations, which oversees eponymous sub-departments.<sup>41</sup> The 2005 law mandates that the administration coordinate with competent governmental and non-governmental organizations in human rights-related matters.<sup>42</sup>
- The Administration for Public Relations. The 2005 law outlines the administration's duty as coordinating between Commission bodies, the board, and the president to the public, and to organize human rights-related conferences and gatherings.<sup>43</sup>

According to its 2014 annual report, the Commission has 280 employees working throughout branches in Mecca, the Eastern Province, Asir, al-Jouf, Hail, al-Qasim, and Tabouk.<sup>44</sup>

## **B. The National Society for Human Rights**

The NSHR does not have any direct administrative connections to the Saudi government; it does, however, receive significant funding from the estate of the late King Fahd.<sup>45</sup> This same king, in March 2004, granted the society royal permission to operate as long as it worked according to the Quran and the 1992 Basic Law of Governance.<sup>46</sup>

The NSHR's constitution clearly sets out its objectives, functions, and basic structure. In terms of organizational goals, the society seeks to protect human rights in accordance with Saudi law, the Quran, the Sunna, and those international organizations and instruments to which the kingdom has acceded, as long as they do not counter Islamic Law.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the organization seeks to cooperate with international human rights organizations.<sup>48</sup>

Among its nine stated functions, the society's most prominent are its enforcement of human rights regulations within existing Saudi law, its program of human rights complaint verification and follow-up, and its periodic publication of specialized human rights reports.<sup>49</sup>

To meet these objectives and carry out these functions, the society is organized into three bodies: the Presidency, the Executive Council, and the General Assembly.<sup>50</sup> The president enacts a series of executive functions, chief among them presiding over meetings of the Executive Council and General Assembly, executing the decisions of these latter two bodies, signing societal decisions, and representing the society before governmental and international organizations.<sup>51</sup> Currently, Dr. Mufleh Rubaian al-Qahtani serves as society president, while Dr. Saleh al-Kahthlan and Dr. Nourah bin Abdullah al-Ajlaan work as vice president and vice president of family affairs, respectively.<sup>52</sup>

The president, the vice presidents, and six other society members comprise the Executive Council, which administers the society.<sup>53</sup> The council meets at least once a month to manage the execution of society projects, including overseeing societal finances, ordering the production of human rights reports, setting up permanent and temporary committees, and proposing new societal rules and regulations.<sup>54</sup>

The General Assembly is comprised of the society's founding and subsequent members.<sup>55</sup> The assembly meets once a year at the president's call, but may hold an emergency meeting if requested by one-third of members.<sup>56</sup> At its meetings, the society elects presidents, the two vice presidents, and executive council members to their four year terms, in addition to adopting the annual budget and approving the entrance of new members.<sup>57</sup>

The NSHR is based in Riyadh, although its website also lists branches in Jeddah, Mecca, Dammam, Jazan, al-Jouf, and Medina.<sup>58</sup>

#### **IV. Human Rights Commission and NSHR Responses to Human Rights Violations**

##### **A. Complaints and Site Visits**

Both the Human Rights Commission and the NSHR run extensive complaint programs that largely (though not entirely) focus upon governmental human rights violations. In its report on the status of human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1433 AH (mostly corresponding to the year 2012), the Commission states that, from 1428 to 1432 AH, it had received some 8,400 complaints.<sup>59</sup> The Commission divides its human rights complaints into ten different categories; over a fifth concern themselves with protection of prisoners' rights, and almost 11 percent relate to workers' rights.<sup>60</sup> Other delineated categories, such as protection from domestic violence and protection from arbitrary detention and torture, cover cases that comprised less than five percent of the commission's received complaints at that time.<sup>61</sup> The NSHR, in its annual report for 1435 AH (mostly corresponding to the year 2014) indicates that it received 2,838 complaints in that year alone, concerning issues of administrative malfeasance, prisoners, domestic violence, labor, judicial, personal status, civil status, and violence against children).<sup>62</sup>

Individuals wanting to file a complaint with the Commission can do so via an online portal after creating a personal profile on the website, which asks for the respondent's full name, gender, telephone number, and identification status and number (citizen or resident).<sup>63</sup> For undocumented individuals with neither citizenship nor residency identification, the form requests that they travel to the nearest Commission branch to present their complaint in person.<sup>64</sup> The NSHR has a more open complaint form on its website, not requiring the complainant to create a private user account but requesting the complainant's name, gender, title, mobile number, age range, type of profession, income range, and the nature of the complaint; the complainant cannot submit this information online, however, and instead must print and mail or fax the information to their nearest branch.<sup>65</sup>

Beyond the directive that the Commission forward complaints to the relevant government agencies, the Commission and the NSHR's processes for investigating and following up on received complaints is not entirely clear, in part due to privacy laws which protect the content and outcome of any individual complaint.<sup>66</sup> The US Department of State's 2014 report on the status of human rights in Saudi Arabia details a case in which the Commission lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Social Affairs concerning ten individuals that remained in juvenile detention despite serving their full terms.<sup>67</sup> The report does not

state how the ministry, which oversees juvenile detention centers, responded to the complaint. In other instances, the Commission appears to defer to the government agency targeted by the complaint. In detailing anonymized information about individual complaints dealing with torture and arbitrary detention, the Commission's 1433 AH report repeatedly states that the complaints are either under the agency's investigation, or that the agency's reply has been satisfactory.<sup>68</sup> Those cases that do have merit are raised to the civil Board of Grievances, which lacks executive authority to enforce compensation claims in cases of arbitrary detention and torture.<sup>69</sup>

For cases deemed less politically-sensitive, however, the Commission does have more room to maneuver. In cases of domestic violence, the Commission and its members have been vocal, and have been able to provide legal aid to women seeking redress for domestic abuse.<sup>70</sup>

As an organization not formally represented in government, the NSHR lacks political leverage. Like the Commission, the NSHR appears to have more concrete successes with violations concerning individual families that do not necessarily affect government agencies. In 2014, the NSHR office in al-Taif stated that it had precluded several child marriages to men over the age of 18 during the prior year.<sup>71</sup>

Relations with government agencies appear to be more challenging. In 2014 the NSHR announced that it had submitted over 940 complaints to the *Mabahith*, the Ministry of Interior (MOI)'s powerful internal security service, since 2009 on behalf of detainees held in *Mabahith*-run prisons. The *Mabahith*, however, is largely unaccountable to civil society actors or other government agencies, and has a record of ignoring the judicial orders of both civil and criminal courts.<sup>72</sup> It is unclear whether or not the NSHR's complaints have had any effect. Additionally, the NSHR headquarters in Riyadh claimed to have sent 601 communications in 2014 to the MOI,<sup>73</sup> receiving some 205 responses. It sent 53 to the Ministry of Justice,<sup>74</sup> receiving 20 responses.<sup>75</sup> Smaller NSHR branches garnered various levels of response from government agencies. For example, the NSHR office in Dammam sent three communications to—and received three responses from—the MOI-controlled Public Prosecution, and also received regular responses from the local police.<sup>76</sup> The NSHR office in al-Jouf, on the other hand, sent 12 communications to the local office of the Ministry of Justice and received no replies.<sup>77</sup> Information contained within these communications is not publicly available.

Complaints can lead to investigative visits to sites of human rights abuse from both organizations, and both state that they conduct visits to prisons and interrogation centers regularly.<sup>78</sup> The Commission, for its part, claims to have made some 842 visits to prisons and detention centers between the commencement of its activities in 2007 and 2014.<sup>79</sup> A substantial portion of the NSHR's 2014 annual report details the organization's various site visits, a number of which concerned centers of interrogation and detention. Positive and negative notes accompanied the record of most of these visits. Concerning a March 2014 visit to the *Mabahith* headquarters in Medina, NSHR members criticized the solitary confinement of, and lack of medical care for, persons with mental illnesses.<sup>80</sup> Following a May 2014 visit to the prison in the town of Dumat al-Jandal, NSHR members criticized its poor management, uncleanliness, and failure to provide for the basic needs of inmates.<sup>81</sup> As with the complaints, however,

it remains unclear what effect these criticisms have, if any, on the administration of Saudi detention centers.

## B. Reporting

Both organizations attempt to collate the information garnered from complaints and site visits and present them in periodic reports. Article 5 of the Commission's regulation requires it to produce two reports annually: one on the status of the Commission, and the other on the status of human rights in the country.<sup>82</sup> The Commission's reporting appears to have been irregular. Currently, the Commission's website lists only two Commission-produced reports: the organization's annual report for 1435 AH (mostly corresponding to 2014),<sup>83</sup> and its report on the status of human rights for 1433 AH (mostly corresponding to 2012).<sup>84</sup> Therefore, of the 16 annual reports that the Commission should have published between the beginning of its operations in 2007 and 2014, 14 are not publicly available.

Lack of public availability, however, may not indicate a failure to produce the mandated reports. Periodically, Saudi newspapers will discuss the release and findings of a Commission report that does not appear on the organization's website. A May 2015 article from the Saudi domestic newspaper *Okaz* states that the Commission's Asir branch produced an annual report concerning just the Asir region, although the article fails to divulge significant information about this report's content.<sup>85</sup> Neither this report, nor any other locally-focused reports from the Commission's various branches, appear on its website.

The NSHR, by contrast, has produced an annual report on its activities every year since 2007, publishing them in full on its website.<sup>86</sup> It has published annual reports on the status of human rights less frequently, publishing three since its founding.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, the NSHR has supplemented these periodic reports with standalone publications, including a 2013 report detailing the kingdom's progress in conforming to international human rights law<sup>88</sup> and a report detailing the organization's monitoring of the 2005 municipal elections.<sup>89</sup>

The publications of both organizations contain positive, human rights-focused analyses of ongoing issues within the kingdom. In its 2012 report on the status of human rights, the Commission outlines 22 basic rights and how existing Saudi laws and regulations protect, or can be invoked to protect, them.<sup>90</sup> The Commission also offers a series of recommendations to the rest of the government, a number of which, if enacted, would reduce recurrent governmental abuses. The first recommendation, for example, requests that the Saudi government formally delineate the crimes of *Hadd*, *Qisas*, and *Diyya*<sup>1</sup>, and that it codify sanctions for current "discretionary" punishments;<sup>91</sup> the state's lack of a formal penal code, and the judiciary's freedom from any system of precedence, has led to a myriad of unfair sentencing practices throughout the kingdom.<sup>92</sup> Another recommendation, that the government modify the Law of

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<sup>1</sup> *Hadd*, *Qisas*, and *Diyya* are Quranic punishments applied within the Saudi system of jurisprudence. *Hadd* (pl. *hudud*) is one of six major crimes, including theft and apostasy, that have fixed punishments such as lashing, amputation, and stoning. *Qisas* is retributive punishment for the crime of murder. *Diyya* is money paid by a murderer to the relatives of the victim so as to avoid a *Qisas* punishment.

Criminal Procedure to explicitly guarantee the accused's right to legal counsel at every stage of detention, interrogation, and trial,<sup>93</sup> would close a loophole that various Saudi authorities have used to undermine the defendant's right to legal representation.<sup>94</sup>

NSHR reporting tends to be more critical, even if it levels this criticism cautiously. The US State Department has noted that NSHR reporting on prison conditions in Saudi Arabia reveal a number of serious deficiencies, including few properly-trained wardens, lack of access to medical treatment, the prolonged detention of detainees, and a failure to inform detainees of their basic legal rights.<sup>95</sup> Like the Commission, the NSHR sets out detailed, actionable recommendations for the improvement of human rights protections within the kingdom. In its 2012 report, the society recommended expanding the powers of the Shura Council from those of a largely advisory body to one which oversees the projects of various government bodies and has greater say in setting the nation's budget.<sup>96</sup> It also demanded the release of prisoners who had overstayed their sentences and those detained whom the government had failed to convict.<sup>97</sup>

Despite these positives, the organizations' reporting is limited by ties to a government that it is ostensibly required to hold accountable. As a non-independent entity, the Commission's limitations are apparent. It is committed to upholding human rights within a framework defined by the government,<sup>98</sup> and thus defers to other government agencies in contentious cases.<sup>2</sup> The NSHR's nominal independence, however, does not prevent it from being almost equally deferential to government claims. In a 2007 interview with the Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, then-NSHR President Dr. Bandar al-Hajjar welcomed the publication of the society's first report by stating how well it reflected upon the government. Furthermore, when the interviewer twice pressed Dr. al-Hajjar to explain the NSHR's criticism of the Saudi religious police's governing regulation, he twice declined, only reaffirming that the government would not sign an international agreement that encroached upon the administration of Islamic Law.<sup>99</sup>

This unwillingness to criticize government agencies for their systemic shortcomings compromises the reporting of both agencies, and can be most concisely demonstrated in their respective treatments of the MOI. When discussing the status of the right to physical security and protection against arbitrary detention and torture, the Commission, in its 2012 report, outlines those laws that protect individuals and briefly details the number of related complaints that it has received;<sup>100</sup> it fails to mention that arbitrary detention and torture are violations committed in Saudi Arabia almost exclusively by organizations affiliated with the MOI, which, ultimately, oversees all police forces, domestic intelligence services, and prisons. When the report does explicitly address the MOI, it does so in neutral terms, briefly listing the ministry's general responsibilities before moving onto the next section.<sup>101</sup> The NSHR levels more specific criticisms in its 2012 report, noting that the MOI's *Mabahith* forcibly disappears detainees without informing family members for days, and that cases persist of prisoners remaining in jail past the expiration of their criminal sentences.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See previous section.



Whether more or less critical, both organizations limit their discussion of the MOI's violations to the most general terms. 2012, the year covered by the aforementioned reports, was the year that forces under the MOI's oversight violently arrested dissident cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr and 6 other protesters from Qatif, subjecting several of them to torture and denying all of them regular access to legal counsel.<sup>103</sup> 2012 also witnessed the detention of Turki al-Hamad and Hamza Kashgari for controversial tweets, and the arrest of Raif Badawi for founding and running an online forum, the Free Saudi Liberals Network.<sup>104</sup> The Commission and the NSHR do not comment on these or other high profile cases that are politically sensitive in their reporting.

### C. Education

Both the Commission and the NSHR have organized, and continue to organize, events and trainings to raise awareness of human rights issues within the kingdom. Much of this comes in the form of educating Saudi residents about their basic rights. Supplementing its other reporting, the NSHR explicitly produces material intended to raise awareness of those rights guaranteed by Saudi domestic law. In 2015, the NSHR reprinted and publicized the 2013 domestic violence law,<sup>105</sup> the full text of which proved difficult to find in other government venues. In 2013, the organization produced a coloring book, *These are My Rights*, geared toward small children.<sup>106</sup> As children progress through the coloring book, they learn of their rights to care, equality, expression, and security.<sup>107</sup>

The Commission, in turn, produces a host of educational and awareness-raising materials, including a monthly periodical.<sup>108</sup> In 2013, the Commission sponsored television programming with the aim of "emphasizing the Islamic injunction to treat employees well."<sup>109</sup> The Commission also publishes a series of short videos on its website illustrating different human rights issues which may materialize in the life of a Saudi resident.<sup>110</sup>

Both institutions also organize awareness-raising events. In October 2015, the Commission convened a seminar in Riyadh concerning Saudi Arabia's adherence to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The seminar invited UN officials to interchange with Saudi human rights experts and invited over one hundred Saudi men and women to attend.<sup>111</sup> The Commission has long used events to raise awareness of—and push for more protections against—domestic violence, holding seminars on violence against women in 2008.<sup>112</sup> Similar examples from the NSHR abound. In May 2012, the NSHR visited a series of schools in al-Jouf to discuss the human rights situation in the kingdom.<sup>113</sup> In November 2015, an NSHR delegation visited Shaqra University to present and discuss a joint research project on racial discrimination.<sup>114</sup>

The most significant of the organizations' awareness-raising activities remain their trainings of, and production of training materials for, MOI security forces and the religious police.<sup>115</sup> The content of these trainings, however, remains unclear. In September 2015, the Commission announced a plan to train 6,200 civil and military employees across 14 provinces beginning in 2016.<sup>116</sup> Apart from a desire to raise awareness of the culture of human rights, however, the specific lessons and modules of the training are unknown.

Additionally, ongoing and systemic human rights abuses committed by government actors casts doubt on the effectiveness of this training. Saudi authorities have executed over 150 individuals in 2015, many of whom were charged for nonviolent offenses and subjected to unfair trials.<sup>117</sup> In July 2015, Saudi security forces violently arrested columnist Dr. Zuhair Kutbi from his home in Mecca without presenting a warrant;<sup>118</sup> he is currently on trial before the Specialized Criminal Court on charges related to the free expression of his opinion.<sup>119</sup> In November 2015, a Saudi court confirmed the death sentence for poet Ashraf Fayadh, whose conviction for apostasy was based largely on the testimony of one individual.<sup>120</sup> Ongoing violations such as these indicate that a substantial number of Saudi law enforcement and judiciary employees are either not receiving, or are failing to act upon, training provided for by the Commission.

## **V. Conclusion**

In the mid-2000s, Saudi officials facilitated the establishment of government-run or government-influenced human rights organizations in an attempt to ward off broader calls for greater participatory governance and less corruption. Even as the Saudi government has violently suppressed independent human rights groups and other civil society activists in recent years, it has allowed the Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights to conduct their work with some freedom. Today, these organizations oversee extensive complaint programs, develop educational and programmatic material, and release reports that raise pertinent shortcomings in the state's protections of basic human rights.

This work, however, remains ineffectual. The organizations avoid criticizing malfeasant government agencies directly, refrain from commenting on politically sensitive cases, and speak of abuses in general terms. For redress, they appeal to government bodies that lack executive authority, or they accept explanations from the agencies under their investigation. Individual Commission and NSHR members hardly have a choice; a critique too pointed, or an approach too systemic, would leave them out of a job, if not worse.

Because of these limitations, the overall value of these organizations' work is dubious. The fact remains that Saudi Arabia's best human rights advocates, from the founders of ACPRA and the MHRSA to the protesters demanding peaceful change in the country's Eastern Province, are behind bars. Government-approved reports and unmet complaints cannot match the effect of forceful truth-telling and targeted civil disobedience in promoting respect for human rights. If the members of the Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights are seriously interested in promoting and protecting human rights, they will call for the release of imprisoned activists, challenge corrupt government agencies, and play a part in mobilizing civil society in pressing for concrete, effective reforms.

## **VI. Notes**

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- <sup>2</sup> Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, *Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 8: The Ministry of Justice*, November 2015, <http://www.adhrb.org/2015/11/mapping-the-saudi-state-chapter-8-the-ministry-of-justice/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, *Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 1: The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice*, April 2015, <http://www.adhrb.org/2015/04/mapping-the-saudi-state-ch-1-the-commission-for-the-promotion-of-virtue-and-the-prevention-of-vice/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, *Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 4: Media Censorship*, July 2015, <http://www.adhrb.org/2015/07/mapping-the-saudi-state-chapter-4-media-censorship/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the Kingdom Silences Its Human Rights Activists," 10 October 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/025/2014/en/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Prominent Activist Marks Year Behind Bars," 15 April 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-activist-marks-year-behind-bars>.
- <sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Rights Groups Blocked from Operating," 29 August 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/29/saudi-arabia-rights-groups-blocked-operating>.
- <sup>8</sup> Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, "My Country': How Saudi Arabia is Undermining Women's Newfound Right to Vote," August 2015, <http://www.adhrb.org/2015/08/my-country-how-saudi-arabia-is-undermining-womens-newfound-right-to-vote/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Saudi Arabia: Steps Toward Democratization or Reconfiguration of Authoritarianism?" *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Volume 41 (5/6), pg. 463.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Dr. Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pg. 250.
- <sup>12</sup> Kapiszewski, "Saudi Arabia," 464.
- <sup>13</sup> "Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?" International Crisis Group, July 14, 2004, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Saudi%20Arabia/Can%20Saudi%20Arabia%20Reform%20Itself.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Saudi%20Arabia/Can%20Saudi%20Arabia%20Reform%20Itself.pdf), 9-12.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 251.
- <sup>18</sup> "نشأة الجمعية" National Society for Human Rights, <http://nshr.org.sa/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9>.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> "النظام الأساسي" National Society for Human Rights, <http://nshr.org.sa/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A>.
- <sup>21</sup> Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 251.
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