

European Centre for Democracy
& Human Rights

ANNUAL REPORT



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Letter from the Executive Director

With the passing of yet more one year in the fight for democracy and human rights in the Gulf, it is once again time for ECDHR to take stock both of changes in the situation regarding democracy and human rights in the Gulf, and of our own position within that struggle.

A generous assessment of the state of human rights and democracy in the Arabian Peninsula is that it has remained about the same. In Bahrain, the country on which our organization was founded and the primary focus of our advocacy, little has changed: most influential democratic activists and human rights defenders remain in chains, peaceful protests are regularly the subject of government-sponsored violence, and real respect for human rights seems further away than ever. In Saudi Arabia, what little hope existed after the Khashoggi affair that the international community might actually hold violators to account has been replaced with apathy and despair, as a world cut off from Russian energy turns to OPEC oil to fuel their winters. The resulting silence on human rights violations – whether it be mass executions or a record number of arrests of pro-democracy agitators – has been deafening.

In the UAE, human rights defenders remain in prison despite having served their entire terms; in Qatar, the World Cup continues to dominate headlines as countries and clubs balk at the opportunity to highlight a human rights record. The violence in Yemen continues as a UN-backed truce expired in October. All across the Gulf, democracy and human rights stagnate or deteriorate.

Such is not the case, however, for our organization, which has bounced back from a slight decline in our funding associated with the pandemic to expand beyond even its augmented mission. Our newly revamped victim's services programs have been redesigned and expanded, and we now work not only with the United Nations to document violations of human rights, but also directly with victims to treat the ailments that result from their abuses. Our program, generously sponsored by the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, has reached over 30 individuals, helping them diagnose their maladies and obtain the treatment that they need to resume their lives. In addition, we have expanded our INTERPOL red notice program to now include dossier requests and therefore proactively search out illegal red notices before they become a problem. With the aid of IFEX, this program now touches every corner of the world and any person that seeks our help, regardless of whether or not they hail from the MENA region.

Of course, advocacy remains at the heart of what we do. While helping victims of human rights violations is commendable, the situation itself must be changed in order to prevent further abuse. For that reason, we have doubled down on our advocacy at the European Union and United Nations levels, having created new programming on the Universal Periodic Review, built fresh reporting on the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain for the UN Treaty Bodies, and built new relationships in Geneva and in Brussels. In the EU, we built a new program to file complaints with the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime – and thereby actually hold human rights abusers accountable by seizing their assets in Europe.

And we have made important changes, even within the organization. In March of this year, Husain Abdulla stepped down as ECDHR's Executive Director, and I assumed the position – marking the first time that our organization has been led by a woman. While Mr. Abdulla still retains a strong

role with our organization as ECDHR's President, we believe this to be an important milestone for our organization, as women deserve a greater and equal seat at the table in the movement for human rights in the Middle East.

Even as the situation around us stagnates or deteriorates, ECDHR continues to evolve in order to best serves the needs of the moment. With no end to human rights abuses in sight, our victims' services programs have necessarily evolved – and yet, we are still ideally placed to advocate for that better future with our political allies. As 2022 draws to a close, we will make every effort to see that 2023 is a better year than before, both for our organization and for everyone in the Gulf.

Sincerely,

Salma Moussawi

Executive Director

UN Activity

At the Human Rights Council

Our organization remained incredibly active at the Human Rights Council. During the 49th session of the Human Rights Council, we delivered 11 interventions under various items, raising attention to issues in Bahrain and Yemen. Among our most important interventions were those relating to poor prison conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the deportation of Ahmed Jafar from Serbia to Bahrain and resulting refoulement concerns, and raising the issue of the health of human rights defender Abduljalil al-Singace. Our interventions also discussed and highlighted systematic discrimination against Shia populations in Bahrain, called on Bahrain to follow its recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review, and the mass execution of 81 individuals in one day in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

At the 50th session for the Human Rights Council, held between 13 June and 8 July 2022, ECDHR launched a joint report with other Bahraini human rights organizations entitled “The Situation of Bahraini Prisons.” The organizations commemorated the report to the the one-year anniversary of the hunger strike started by Dr.Abduljalil Al-Singace to protest his poor treatment in prison. The report covered topics including disease outbreaks, denial of medicine, ineffective supervision, abuse of human rights defenders, and the unfair use of the alternative provisions. The organizations called on the Bahraini authorities to unconditionally release political prisoners and prisoners of conscience prisoners, and to release the confiscated research and the books written by Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace in prison – as well as to hold the perpetrators accountable for their human rights violations, and to allow all the human rights defenders to carry out their legitimate work without any restrictions.

At the 51st session of the Human Rights Council, we delivered 10 oral interventions about human rights violations in Bahrain, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. The interventions brought attention to activists or prisoners of conscience such as Abdulhadi AlKhawaja, Abduljalil AlSingace, Hasan Mushauma, Ebtisam AlSaegh, and Sayed Ahmed AlWadaei, with respect to the different forms of reprisal and mistreatment they face. Other interventions called on Bahrain to meet international standards with respect to political prisoners and to implement UPR recommendations.

Looking outside Bahrain, we condemned the death sentences of two Bahraini men in Saudi Arabia, as well as the Saudi coalition’s violations in Yemen. We also submitted 9 written statements documenting violations in UAE, Oman, and Kuwait. On the sideline of this session, We held an online joint event with Gulf Center for Human Rights and Bahrain Center for Human Rights, titled “Call for Immediate Release of Detained HRDs and other Prisoners of Conscience”, during which speakers shed the light on the human rights situation in Bahrain and called on the government to release all political prisoners and provide them with adequate care.

With the Treaty Bodies

We submitted a report for the 71st session of the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, where the CESCR conducted a review of Bahrain's human rights practices in February 2022. Another shadow report was submitted to the Human Rights Committee which oversees the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ICCPR in light of its 135th session. This session, held on 19 July 2022, covered three main issues pertaining to military courts, death, penalty, and freedom of expression.

Moreover, several reports were submitted to different the Human Rights Committee treaty bodies:

- CERD: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- CAT: Committee against Torture
- CESCR: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- CEDAW: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- CRC: Committee on Rights of the child
- CRPD: Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- UPR: Universal Periodic Review on Bahrain submitted on Mach 2022.
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We submitted these reports on human rights issues in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.

[The Universal Periodic Review](#)

The UPR process invites contributions from civil society in the form of formal reports commenting on the implementation of previous recommendations and examining recent developments in human rights in the country. The comprehensive nature of the UPR – examining as it does the entire human rights situation in a country without exception – necessitates a comprehensive report and campaign. At the same time, however, formal submissions are limited to approximately 5,500 words.

For this reason, during this cycle we developed two reports on the UPR. The first, a comprehensive report that we made available on our website, examined the human rights situation in Bahrain in unabridged detail, commenting on the implementation of every single recommendation from Member States. The second report presented an abridged version of our main report, and was formally submitted as a Stakeholder Report for consideration by the UPR Committee.

This year, we also developed an online interactive platform for our UPR report, which allows a user to sort the report by recommendation type, implementation status, and country that made the recommendation. This database was made available to the general public through advertisement on social media.

In the leadup to Bahrain's UPR consideration, we undertook a coordinated advocacy campaign in Geneva, in Brussels, and in major European capitals. This campaign ensured that our report's findings were read by the right people and reported back to the people and positions in government with the power to affect policy.

EU Activity

At the EU Parliament

Our advocacy efforts in the European Parliament and parliaments of European countries have raised concerns over human rights violations in Bahrain, most notably was the British MPs' discussions of the continued detention of Bahraini political prisoners, such as Dr. Abduljalil AlSingace and Hasan Mushaima as well as the use of torture and unfair trials, discrimination against the Shia community, and use of the death sentence, during a session of the House of Commons, which was held on 13 January 2022. The deputies directed a set of questions to the Minister of the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly, demanding that the United Kingdom exert pressure on the Bahraini government to release all political prisoners.

On 16 March 2022, 90 European parliamentarians addressed a letter to the President of the FIA, Mohamed bin Sulayem, to draw his attention to the fact that the FIA and Formula 1 are "whitewashing the reputation of the Gulf states through their activities", and that their failure to address the violations committed by Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the UAE create "blatant double standards" compared to the FIA's stance on the war in Ukraine, calling on FIA to "apply the same ethical standards" everywhere and adopt a human rights policy.

The case of Dr. Abduljalil AlSingace was raised by 4 Irish MPs in the Irish Parliament on 1 January 2022, through parliamentary questions aimed to put pressure on the Irish government to take action against the egregious violations committed by the Bahraini government. In June 2022, two Irish MPs brought to the attention of Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney the urgent case of Jaafar Mohamed Sultan and Sadeq Majeed Thamer, two Bahrainis who were sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia and have exhausted all legal remedies.

Finally, at the end of October 2022, three members of the French National Assembly, from three different political parties, spoke about the human rights violations taking place in Bahrain, while publicly scrutinizing the close relationship between the French and Bahrain governments and citing the restrictions on freedom of movement, denationalization, as well as torture and other forms in mistreatment in detention.

EU Global Human Rights Sanction Regime

As part of our ongoing efforts to evolve our advocacy and hold the perpetrators of human rights violations accountable for their actions, our organization began in 2021 to work on targeted Magnitsky sanctions submissions in the United States against members of the Bahraini Ministry of Interior. In 2021, the European Union created its own version of the Magnitsky sanctions, called the Global Human Rights Sanction Regime (GHRM) in order to punish human rights violators and seize their European assets. In 2022, the EU operationalized that process.

In working with this new initiative, our organization partnered with the Open Society Foundations (OSF), who have a service for small civil society organizations to use in perfecting their GHRS communications. As a result of that partnership, in November we submitted a complaint to the European External Action Service against six members or former members of the Bahraini Ministry of Interior for involvement in or complacency in allowing human rights violations, chiefly including acts of torture and incommunicado detention, within the Criminal Investigatory Directorate in Bahrain.

We believe that holding human rights abusers accountable for their actions is not only the right thing to do, but also discourages potential future perpetrators from committing further acts of abuse. In submitting our complaint to the GHRS, we hope to contribute to a future free of torture in abuse in Bahrain.

Victim's Services

UN Complaint Program

We submitted eight complaints to various United Nations Special Procedure Offices regarding human rights issues in Bahrain. Among them, one was a thematic communication on religious repression raised to the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief; three were individual complaints each about a person who faced severe violations to their basic human rights and were raised, depending on the issues in question, to the WGAD and the Special Rapporteur on torture, Rapporteur on freedom of expression, Rapporteur on freedom of assembly, Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, as well as the Rapporteur on executions. Finally, four were group complaints each on behalf of four to six individuals who were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, and/or medical negligence with the complaints being raised to the WGAD and the Rapporteurs on torture, independence of judges and lawyers, health, education, and assembly, where relevant.

In turn, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention formed three Opinions on cases of arbitrary detention in Bahrain, one on an arbitrary detained individual in Saudi Arabia, and one on seven Palestinians detained by the Israeli occupation. These opinions were formed based on communications raised by us in the years prior.

Torture Program

Over the last decade of our work, we have always had the goal of providing more than the capacity to document and communicate. The documentation program has made it evident to us that victims not only suffer at the moment of their abuse, but often – much more often than not – continue to suffer after the physical act of abuse has ended. It is even further apparent to us that the victims of the physical acts of abuse are not the only victims of torture; parents, friends, and loved ones share in the psychological burden that a single act of torture can create – a burden that becomes even weightier with every subsequent act of abuse.

It is, however, impossible to provide this type of psychological care in the GCC. Therapists do not work on issues relating to torture out of fear of government retaliation. Torture victims do not seek therapy out of fear that the therapists will turn them into the government. As a result, torture victims languish in their agony, unable to obtain the psychological treatment that they need to escape the aftereffects of their torture.

That being the case, WE applied for and received funding from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture for a program that began in 2022 to treat diseases caused by torture through

an online medium. That program – a pilot program – began by treating victims of torture in Bahrain through teletherapy provided by therapists in the United States.

When we announced the creation of the program to our target population, the response was overwhelming: all of our slots within the program filled up within a week, and we quickly added equally as many names to the waitlist. In 2022, we treated over 30 individuals for long term mental health diseases caused by torture, chiefly including post-traumatic stress disorder.

With the immediate response having been so positive, we believe that the program should be replicated elsewhere, and we therefore intend to bring the program to every country in the GCC. We maintain interlocutors not only in Bahrain, but also in Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman. All of our interlocutors report on torture in their respective countries, and our analysis indicates that a program similar to that employed in Bahrain would also be beneficial in the remainder of the Gulf.

Providing psychological services for countering the effects of torture has heretofore been impossible in the GCC context. By expanding a program that is already successful in Bahrain, we will be able to bring our services to people who have needed therapy for years, but have been otherwise unable to obtain it.

Ombudsman, NIHR, and SIU

Between 2020 and 2022, WE submitted 24 complaints to the Bahraini National Institution for Human Rights and the Ombudsman Office regarding prisoners who were denied medical treatment, forcibly disappeared, denied contact with their family, or tortured. We received a response in 14 of those cases, though these responses entailed assurances that the prisoners were fine and denials of any mistreatment or violations. Moreover, only 5 of the cases were raised to the SIU, and the outcome was never disclosed. Considering authorities' lack of proactivity in improving the situation of prisoners whose cases are brought to their attention as well as the families' distrust and dejection toward communicating with these mechanisms, WE scaled down these efforts, and had followed up on one of the cases previously raised in 2021, in February 2022.

INTERPOL

The INTERPOL Red Notice and diffusion program provides governments across the world with an easy-to-use tool to arrest and extradite suspected criminals back to their territory for trial. Used legitimately, the program can result in the extradition of a dangerous criminal from one country to face trial for known crimes in another. Over the last decade, however, autocratic governments engaged in oppressive rule have used the Red Notice program to retaliate against dissidents, political opponents, and human rights defenders in exile that regularly criticize their government's activities.

They do so by imagining an offense against the victim in question, filing a case in court against them, and then presenting that case as evidence of the necessity of extradition to INTERPOL. INTERPOL subsequently issues the Red Notice, thereby communicating to police worldwide that

the victim should be arrested and extradited. When that victim is inevitably extradited, he or she is usually found guilty and imprisoned for an indefinite period, and may be tortured or even killed at some point after the extradition.

The first arm of the project is to prevent the use of INTERPOL Red Notices to accomplish the extradition and refoulement of journalists from countries outside of the MENA region, including their countries of residence or countries in which they may temporarily find themselves for whatever reason, to their countries of origin. The importance of this project cannot be understated – many MENA countries use INTERPOL as a tool to exact vengeance against their citizens that criticize their governments from exile, filing Red Notices to accomplish their extradition back to their countries of origin, where they are then often tortured, convicted, and imprisoned. In order to protect the freedom of the press, these Red Notices must be stopped.

Second, we are working to prevent the use of Red Notices against journalists from the MENA region in the future. According to INTERPOL, any person in the world can file a request with INTERPOL to see if INTERPOL retains any information or open files concerning them. Our program prevails on journalists in the MENA region to inquire with INTERPOL to determine if their information has been submitted to INTERPOL, and fights any dossiers that appear as a result. In 2022, we submitted over 30 of these requests, finding at least one instance wherein INTERPOL held a secret file.

Finances

List of Donors

Our work would not be possible without the generous contributions of our donors, who provide funding for the important work that perform in advocating for a peaceful and democratic future in the Gulf and for victims of human rights violations in Gulf countries. We would like to take this opportunity to thank those donors for their support.

- The United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture
- IFEX
- CIVICUS
- Lush Charity Pot
- The Alridha Foundation
- Harm Reduction International
- Global Giving

Anticipated 2023 Budget

Category	COST IN DOLLARS
-	-
Salary	167700
Benefits, Payroll Taxes	30000
Rent and Supplies	29192
Programming	246720
TOTAL	473612
COMMITTED INCOME	484180
SURPLUS	10568