

SAUDI ARABIA 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is both head of state and head of government. The government bases its legitimacy on its interpretation of sharia (Islamic law) and the 1992 Basic Law, which specifies that the rulers of the country shall be male descendants of the founder, King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman al-Saud. The Basic Law sets out the system of governance, rights of citizens, and powers and duties of the government, and it provides that the Quran and Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) serve as the country's constitution. In December the country held elections on a nonparty basis for two-thirds of the 2,106 seats on the 284 municipal councils around the country. Independent polling station observers identified no significant irregularities with the election. For the first time, women were allowed to vote and run as candidates. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most important human rights problems reported included citizens' lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination and lack of equal rights that affected all aspects of women's lives.

Other human rights problems reported included: a lack of equal rights for children and noncitizen workers; abuses of detainees; overcrowding in prisons and detention centers; a lack of judicial independence and transparency that manifested itself in denial of due process and arbitrary arrest and detention; investigating, detaining, prosecuting, and sentencing lawyers, human rights activists, and antigovernment reformists; holding political prisoners; and arbitrary interference with privacy, home, and correspondence. Violence against women; trafficking in persons; and discrimination based on gender, religion, sect, race, and ethnicity, as well as a lack of equal rights for children and noncitizen workers were common. Lack of governmental transparency and access made it difficult to assess the magnitude of many reported human rights problems.

The government identified, prosecuted, and punished a limited number of officials who committed abuses, particularly those engaged or complicit in corruption. Some members of the security forces and other senior officials reportedly committed abuses with relative impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:**a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life**

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings within the country.

Under the country's interpretation and practice of sharia, capital punishment can be imposed for a range of nonviolent offenses, including apostasy, sorcery, and adultery. The law requires a unanimous endorsement by the Supreme Judicial Council for all death sentences, and defendants sentenced to death are generally allowed to appeal their sentences. Closed court proceedings in some capital cases, however, made it impossible to determine positively whether authorities allowed the accused to present a defense or granted basic due process. Since the country lacks a written penal code listing criminal offenses and the associated penalties for them (see section 1.e.), punishment--including the imposition of capital punishment--is subject to considerable judicial discretion in the courts.

The government also imposes death sentences for crimes committed by minors. On September 14, the Supreme Court upheld the October 2014 sentence of death for Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, who was prosecuted for crimes committed when he was 17. Human rights organizations reported concerns relating to due process, including that authorities allegedly arrested al-Nimr without a warrant, obtained a confession using torture, and repeatedly denied him access to his lawyer during the sentencing and appeals process. In September and October, the Supreme Court upheld death sentences for Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher, who were convicted for crimes committed when they were 17 and 15, respectively. As of the year's end, these executions were not carried out.

Executions were sometimes conducted in public. Amnesty International reported an increase in executions, stating that the number of executions was higher during the year than it was in any year since 1995. Amnesty International noted that authorities executed dozens of individuals for nonviolent crimes related to drug smuggling.

On February 23, media reported that the general court in Hafr al-Batin sentenced a Saudi national to death on charges of apostasy. On November 17, the Abha General Court sentenced Ashraf Fayadh, a Saudi resident of Palestinian origin, to death on charges of apostasy. In August a Sri Lankan domestic worker was

convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning; her sentence was subsequently overturned on review in December.

Affiliates of Da'esh, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), claimed responsibility for several attacks during the year that killed civilians. On May 22 and 29, suicide bombers carried out attacks against Shia worshippers at mosques in Dammam and Qatif. The attacks killed 25 persons and wounded several others. On August 6, a suicide bomber killed 15 persons at a security services' mosque in Abha. On October 16, a gunman opened fire outside a Shia hussainia, or congregation hall, in the suburb of Qatif, killing five and injuring several more. Security forces killed the gunman and arrested two alleged accomplices. On October 26, a suicide bomber killed two persons at a Shia mosque in Najran.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances (for information on detentions without prompt notification of charges or release, see section 1.d.).

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture and holds criminal investigation officers accountable for any abuse of authority. Sharia, as interpreted in the country, prohibits judges from accepting confessions obtained under duress; statutory law provides that public investigators shall not subject accused persons to coercive measures to influence their testimony.

There were no confirmed reports of torture by government officials during the year, but international human rights organizations reported that allegations of torture of prisoners were not uncommon. Numerous prisoners were serving sentences based on convictions they claimed were obtained through torture or physical abuse. Former detainees in facilities run by the General Investigations Directorate (internal security forces, also called Mabahith) alleged that abuse included sleep deprivation or long periods of solitary confinement for nonviolent detainees. Former detainees in Mabahith-run al-Ha'ir Prison claimed that, while physical torture was uncommon in detention, Mabahith officials sometimes resorted to mental or psychological abuse of detainees, particularly during the interrogation phase. Ministry of Interior officials claimed that rules prohibiting torture prevent such practices from occurring in the penal system. The ministry

installed surveillance cameras to record interrogations of suspected persons in criminal investigation offices, some police stations, and in prisons where such interrogations regularly occurred, such as the ministry's General Investigations Directorate/Mabahith prison facilities.

Government officials also claimed that representatives from the governmental Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the quasi-nongovernmental National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), supported by a trust funded by the estate of the late king Fahd, conducted prison visits to ascertain whether torture did or did not occur in prisons or detention centers and maintained permanent branches in some facilities. No former detainees, however, verified independently that such office branches existed in detention facilities.

In September and October, the Supreme Court upheld death sentences for Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher (see section 1.a.), as well as other Shia activists who claimed that authorities tortured them and obtained confessions under duress. Amnesty International reported authorities beat Ali al-Nimr and subjected him to sleep deprivation during interrogation in 2012 but had not treated him harshly since that time.

The courts continued to use corporal punishment as a judicial penalty, usually in the form of floggings, a practice government officials defended as dictated by sharia. According to local human rights activists, police conducted the floggings according to a set of guidelines determined by local interpretation of sharia. The police official administering the punishment must place a copy of the Quran under his arm that prevents raising the hand above the head, limiting the ability to inflict pain on the person subjected to the punishment, and instructions forbid police from breaking the skin or causing scarring when administering the lashes.

On January 9, authorities administered 50 lashes to Raif Badawi, a nonviolent activist and blogger sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes in 2014 on charges related to insulting Islam (see section 2.a.). As of year's end, Badawi remained in Burayman Prison in Jeddah; authorities had not yet carried out the remainder of the lashing sentence.

There were no reported cases of judicially administered amputation during the year. In January authorities in Mecca sentenced a Moroccan national to amputation on theft charges; however, he was pardoned in February and deported.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions varied, and some did not meet international standards.

Physical Conditions: Juveniles constituted less than 1 percent of detainees and were held in separate facilities from adults. Although information on the maximum capacity of the facilities was not available, overcrowding in some detention centers was a problem. Violations listed in NSHR reports following prison visits documented shortages of and improperly trained wardens; lack of prompt access to medical treatment when requested; holding prisoners beyond the end of their sentences; and failure to inform prisoners of their legal rights. Some detained individuals complained about lack of access to adequate health-care services, including medication. Some prisoners alleged that prison authorities maintained cold temperatures in prison facilities and deliberately kept lights on 24 hours a day to make prisoners uncomfortable.

Human rights activists reported that deaths in prisons, jails, or pretrial detention centers were infrequent.

Authorities held pretrial detainees together with convicted prisoners. They separated persons suspected or convicted of terrorism offenses from the general population but held them in similar facilities. Activists alleged that authorities sometimes detained individuals in the same cells as individuals with mental disabilities as a form of punishment and indicated that authorities mistreated persons with disabilities.

Administration: There were multiple legal authorities for prisons and detention centers. Local provincial authorities administered approximately 90 local jails, and the Ministry of Interior administered about 20 regional prisons and detention centers. Recordkeeping on prisoners was inadequate; there were reports authorities held prisoners after they had completed their sentences. An “electronic portal” provided detainees and their relatives access to a database containing information about the legal status of the detainee, including any scheduled trial dates.

Penal and judicial authorities used alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders, including probation, house arrest, travel bans, and religious counseling. Authorities differentiated between violent and nonviolent prisoners, pardoning nonviolent prisoners to reduce the prison population. Certain prisoners held on terrorism-related charges had the option of participating in government-sponsored rehabilitation programs.

No ombudsmen were available to register or investigate complaints made by prisoners, although prisoners could and did submit complaints to the HRC and the NSHR for investigation. There was no information available on whether prisoners were able to submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship or whether authorities investigated credible allegations of inhuman conditions and treatment and made them public.

Authorities generally permitted relatives and friends to visit prisoners twice a week, although certain prisons limited visitation to once every 15 days, and there were reports that prison officials denied this privilege in some instances. The families of detainees could access a website for the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Prisons that contained forms to apply for prison visits, temporary leave from prison (generally approved around the post-Ramadan Eid holidays), and release on bail (for pretrial detainees). Family members of detained persons continued to complain that authorities canceled scheduled visits with their relatives without reason.

Authorities permitted Muslim detainees and prisoners to perform religious observances such as prayers, but prison authorities in Mabathith prison facilities reportedly did not arrange for detainees to conduct Friday Islamic congregational prayer services.

Independent Monitoring: No independent human rights observers visited prisons or detention centers during the year. The government permitted foreign diplomats to visit prison facilities to view general conditions in nonconsular cases. In a limited number of cases, foreign diplomats visited individuals in detention, but the visits took place in a separate visitors' center where conditions may have differed from those in the detention facilities holding the prisoners. The most recent prison visit conducted by an independent human rights organization was a 2006 visit by Human Rights Watch. In February the government allowed an international journalist to visit and report on conditions in al-Hair Prison. The government permitted the governmental HRC and domestic quasi-governmental organizations, such as the NSHR, to monitor prison conditions. The organizations stated they visited prisons throughout the country and reported on prison conditions. The NSHR monitored health care in prisons and brought deficiencies to the attention of the Ministry of Interior. The NSHR's 2014 report documented 573 prison-related complaints, including lack of access to medical care; poor hygiene and sanitation; overcrowding; poor ventilation; and understaffing.

Improvements: Authorities expanded the prison system through the construction of new facilities during the year. In July authorities opened the Riyadh Reformatory Prison with a capacity of 9,500 inmates. Human rights activists reported that health services in certain Mabahith-run detention facilities improved, and prison authorities established commissaries in some facilities that allowed prisoners to purchase additional food in exchange for wages earned at the prison.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law provides that no entity may restrict a person's actions or imprison a person, except under provisions of the law. Legally, authorities may not detain a person under arrest for more than 24 hours, except pursuant to a written order from a public investigator. Authorities must inform the detained person of the reasons for detention. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Interior, to which the majority of forces with arrest power reported, maintained broad authority to arrest and detain persons indefinitely without judicial oversight, notification of charges against them, or effective access to legal counsel or family. Authorities held persons for months and sometimes years without charge or trial, and reportedly failed to advise them promptly of their rights, including their legal right to be represented by an attorney. Under the law detentions can be extended administratively for up to six months at the discretion of the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution. Some human rights activists, women in particular, were detained and then released under the conditions that they refrain from social media use for activism and refrain from communicating with outside human rights organizations. A 2013 royal decree revised key elements of the Law of Criminal Procedure, nominally strengthening some protections of the original law but weakening some due process protections.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The king and the Ministries of Defense and Interior, in addition to the Ministry of National Guard, are responsible for law enforcement and maintenance of order. The Ministry of Interior exercises primary control over internal security and police forces. The civil police and the internal security police have authority to arrest and detain individuals. Military and security courts investigated abuses of authority and security force killings. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over security forces, and the government has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the security forces during the year.

The semiautonomous Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), which monitors public behavior to enforce strict adherence to the official interpretation of Islamic norms, reports to the king via the Royal Diwan (royal court) and to the Ministry of Interior. As of June 2014, the CPVPV had 12 branch offices, 129 subcommission offices, and 345 information centers throughout the kingdom. Regulations require the members of the CPVPV to carry official identification and have a police officer accompany them at the time of an arrest. A 2013 royal decree curtailed some CPVPV powers and transferred responsibilities to other competent authorities. While the CPVPV may detain suspects for brief periods, it must transfer suspects directly to police authorities to complete legal proceedings against them. CPVPV agents have authority to investigate only certain categories of offenses, including harassment of women, alcohol- and drug-related offenses, witchcraft, and sorcery. In February, CPVPV officials harassed a woman in Hail for failing to wear the face veil and tried but failed to convince security officials to arrest her.

Ministry of Interior police and security forces were generally effective at maintaining law and order. The Board of Grievances (Diwan al-Mazalim), a high-level administrative judicial body that specializes in cases against government entities and reports directly to the king, is the only formal mechanism available to seek redress for claims of abuse. Citizens may report abuses by security forces at any police station, to the HRC, or to the NSHR. The HRC and the NSHR maintained records of complaints and outcomes, but privacy laws protected information about individual cases, and information was not publicly available. During the year the Board of Grievances held hearings and adjudicated claims of wrongdoing but there were no reported prosecutions of security force members for human rights violations. The HRC, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, provided materials and training to police, security forces, and the CPVPV on protecting human rights.

Officers of the Mabahith also have broad authorities to investigate, detain, and forward to judicial authorities “national security” cases--which ranged from terrorism cases to dissident and human rights activist cases--separate from the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP). A June 2014 Ministry of Justice decree formalized and reaffirmed the role of the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), founded in 2008 to try terrorism offenses, following the promulgation of a new counterterrorism law in February.

The BIP and the Control and Investigation Board are the two units of the government with authority to investigate reports of criminal activity, corruption,

and “disciplinary cases” involving government employees. These bodies are responsible for investigating potential cases and referring them to the administrative courts. Legal authorities for investigation and public prosecution of criminal offenses are consolidated within the BIP; the Control and Investigation Board continued to be responsible for investigation and prosecution of noncriminal cases. All financial audit and control functions were limited to the General Auditing Board.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

According to the Law of Criminal Procedure, as amended in 2013, “no person shall be arrested, searched, detained, or imprisoned except in cases provided by law, and any accused person shall have the right to seek the assistance of a lawyer or a representative to defend him during the investigation and trial stages.” Under the law, authorities may summon any person for investigation, and authorities may issue an arrest warrant based on evidence. In practice, however, authorities frequently did not use warrants, and warrants were not required in cases where probable cause existed.

The law requires that authorities file charges within 72 hours of arrest and hold a trial within six months, subject to exceptions specified by amendments to the Law of Criminal Procedure and the new Counterterrorism Law (see section 2.a.). Authorities may not legally detain a person under arrest for more than 24 hours, except pursuant to a written order from a public investigator. Authorities reportedly often failed to observe these legal protections, and there was no requirement to advise suspects of their rights. Judicial proceedings began after authorities completed a full investigation, which in some cases took years.

A 2013 royal decree revised key elements of the Law of Criminal Procedure. While some of the amendments offered nominal improvements, other changes weakened due process protections contained in the earlier law. For example, an amendment to the law removed the ability of the presiding judge in a case to transfer it to another court before a sentence is issued. Another amendment altered language in a manner that might deny defendants the automatic ability to appeal. The law specifies procedures required for extending the detention period of an accused person beyond the initial five days. The amended law expands the number of individuals empowered to renew pretrial detentions for periods of up to six months to include the president of the BIP and designated subordinates. The amended text allows authorities to approve official detentions in excess of six months in “exceptional circumstances,” effectively allowing individuals to be held

in pretrial detention indefinitely. Another amendment extends from three months to six months the deadline for the BIP to gather evidence against the accused and issue a warrant for the defendant's arrest, summons, or detention. This provision is also contained in the new Counterterrorism Law, subject to the approval of the extension by the SCC. Another amendment explicitly allows an individual to represent himself in court.

There is a functioning bail system for less serious criminal charges. Detainees generally did not have the right to obtain a lawyer of their choice. In normal cases the government typically provided lawyers to defendants, although the defendant must make a formal application to the Ministry of Justice in order to receive a court-appointed lawyer. Human rights activists often did not trust the courts to appoint lawyers for them out of concern the lawyer would be biased. The law contains no provision for the right to be informed of the protections guaranteed under the law. The law stipulates that defendants have the right to request a lawyer at the expense of the government, provided they prove their inability to pay for their own legal representation.

Incommunicado detention was sometimes a problem. Authorities reportedly did not always respect detainees' right to contact family members following arrest, and the amended Counterterrorism Law allows the Ministry of Interior to hold a defendant for up to 90 days in detention without access to family members or legal counsel. Security and some other types of prisoners sometimes remained in detention for long periods before family members or associates received information of their whereabouts, particularly for detainees in Mabath-run facilities.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports of arbitrary arrest and detention. During the year authorities detained without charge security suspects, persons who publicly criticized the government, Shia religious leaders, and persons who violated religious standards.

In October 2014 authorities detained Souad al-Shammary, a Saudi women's rights and human rights activist, after she published remarks on Twitter criticizing Saudi religious clerics. She was detained without charge until her release on January 30.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem. In the past, local unlicensed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA) and the Adala Center for Human Rights, challenged the Ministry of Interior publicly and in court on cases considered to

involve arbitrary arrest or detention. The two NGOs ceased operating in 2013 and 2014, respectively, after authorities disestablished them. ACPRA claimed the ministry sometimes ignored judges' rulings; judges appeared powerless to take action against the ministry.

There was no information available on the percentage of the prison population in pretrial detention or the average length of time held. Local human rights activists knew of dozens of cases and reportedly received up to three calls per week from families claiming authorities held their relatives arbitrarily or without notification of charges.

During the year the Ministry of Interior stated it had detained hundreds of individuals for terrorist acts following a government campaign against alleged material supporters of and ideological sympathizers with Da'esh. On October 5, the Ministry of Interior announced that it had arrested 906 Saudi citizens on terror-related charges between June and October. It also reported that it had detained 4,777 individuals in General Investigation Directorate prisons on suspicion of terrorism since 2009.

Amnesty: The king continued the tradition of commuting some judicial punishments. Royal pardons sometimes set aside the conviction and sometimes reduced or eliminated corporal punishment. The remaining sentence could be added to a new sentence if the pardoned prisoner committed a crime subsequent to release. There were general pardons or grants of amnesty on special occasions throughout the year. On January 29, the king issued a royal decree pardoning certain nonviolent prisoners. The total number of prisoners pardoned or released under the decree was unclear.

Authorities did not detain some individuals who had received prison sentences. The February 2014 Law on Countering Terrorist Crimes and their Financing contains a provision that allows the interior minister to stop proceedings against an individual who cooperates with investigations or helps thwart a planned terrorist attack. The minister may also release individuals already convicted on such charges.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides that judges are independent and not subject to any authority other than the provisions of sharia and the laws in force. Nevertheless, the judiciary was not independent, as it was required to coordinate its decisions with executive

authorities, with the king as final arbiter. Although public allegations of interference with judicial independence were rare, the judiciary reportedly was subject to influence, particularly in the case of legal decisions rendered by specialized judicial bodies, such as the SCC, which rarely if ever acquitted suspects. Human rights activists reported that SCC judges received implicit instructions to issue harsh sentences against human rights activists, reformers, journalists, and dissidents, although they were not engaging in terrorist activities.

There were no reports during the year of courts exercising jurisdiction over senior members of the royal family, and it was not clear whether the judiciary would have jurisdiction in such instances.

Trial Procedures

The law states that defendants should be treated equally in accordance with sharia. In the absence of a written penal code listing all criminal offenses and punishments, judges in the courts determine many of these penalties by legal interpretations of sharia, which can vary according to the judge and the circumstances of the case. The Council of Senior Religious Scholars, an autonomous advisory body, issues religious opinions (fatwas) that guide how judges interpret sharia. In February 2014 a royal decree for the first time set in the criminal code prison sentences for broadly defined terrorist crimes.

Sharia is not solely based on precedent. As a result, rulings and sentences diverged widely from case to case. According to judicial procedures, appeals courts cannot independently reverse lower court judgments; they are limited to affirming judgments or returning them to a lower court for modification. Even when judges did not affirm judgments, appeals judges in some cases returned the judgment to the judge who originally authored the opinion. This procedure sometimes made it difficult for parties to receive a ruling that differed from the original judgment in cases where judges hesitated to admit error. While judges may base their decisions on any of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, the Hanbali school predominates and forms the basis for the country's law and legal interpretations of sharia. Shia citizens use their legal traditions to adjudicate family law cases between Shia parties, although either party can decide to adjudicate a case in state courts, which use Sunni legal tradition.

According to the law, there is neither presumption of innocence nor trial by jury. While the law states that court hearings shall be public, courts may be closed at the judge's discretion. As a result many trials during the year were closed. Since 2013

foreign diplomatic missions have been able to obtain permission to attend nonconsular court proceedings (that is, cases to which neither the host country nor any of its nationals were a party), and they did so throughout the year. To attend, authorities required diplomats to obtain advance written approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the court administration, and the presiding judge. Authorities sometimes did not permit entry to such trials to individuals other than diplomats who were not the legal agents or family members of the accused. Court officials at the SCC sometimes prevented individuals from attending trial sessions for seemingly trivial reasons, such as banning female relatives or diplomats from attending due to the absence of women officers to inspect the women upon entry to the courtroom. According to the Ministry of Justice, authorities may close a trial depending on the sensitivity of the case to national security, the reputation of the defendant, or the safety of witnesses.

Representatives of the HRC, the Ministry of Justice, and sometimes representatives of the state-controlled media regularly attended trials at the SCC in Riyadh.

According to the HRC, the government may provide, at its discretion, an attorney to indigents at public expense. Amendments to the Law of Criminal Procedure in 2013 strengthened provisions stating that authorities will offer defendants a lawyer at government expense. Nevertheless, the new Counterterrorism Law limits the right of defendants in cases defined by the government as terrorism to access to legal representation to an unspecified period “before the matter goes to court within a timeframe determined by the investigative entity.”

The law provides defendants the right to be present at trial and to consult with an attorney during the investigation and trial. There is no right to access government-held evidence, nor can defendants view their own file, the minutes from their interrogation, or all of the evidence against them as a charge sheet. Defendants may request to review evidence, and the court decides whether to grant the request. Defendants also have the right to confront or question witnesses against them and call witnesses on their behalf, but the court presents the witnesses. The law provides that a BIP-appointed investigator questions the witnesses called by the litigants before the initiation of a trial and may hear testimony of additional witnesses he deems necessary to determine the facts. Authorities may not subject a defendant to any coercive measures or compel the taking of an oath. The court must inform convicted persons of their right to appeal rulings.

While sharia as interpreted by the government extends these provisions to all citizens and noncitizens, the law and practice discriminate against women,

noncitizens, nonpracticing Sunni, Shia, and persons of other religions. For example, judges may discount the testimony of nonpracticing Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, or persons of other religions; sources reported that judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia.

Among many reports of irregularities in trial procedures was the case of Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, a political dissident and founding member of ACPRA. Authorities originally arrested al-Bajady in 2011 for his leadership role in ACPRA and for publicly demanding political and legal reforms, including calls for a constitutional monarchy in the kingdom and protection for freedom of expression and association. During al-Bajady's trial, the court denied observers access to hearings and refused to allow his lawyer access to the courtroom. In 2012 authorities sentenced him to four years' imprisonment and a subsequent five-year international travel ban. He was released in 2013, but a week later, authorities re-incarcerated him. In October 2014 authorities announced they would retry al-Bajady before the SCC in relation to his human rights activities. In March the SCC sentenced al-Bajady to 10 years in prison; a court of appeals reportedly reduced the sentence to eight years, with four years suspended and including time served. In November authorities released al-Bajady upon completion of his sentence; however, activists report that he remains in a "rest house" run by the interior ministry until he agrees to sign a pledge renouncing his activism.

In January 2014 authorities retried human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair before the SCC, and in July 2014 the court gave him to a 15-year sentence. Previously, a Jeddah criminal court sentenced him to a three-month prison term on a virtually identical set of charges (see section 2.a.).

Political Prisoners and Detainees

The number of political prisoners, including detainees who reportedly remained in prolonged detention without charge, could not be reliably ascertained.

In many cases, it was impossible to determine the legal basis for incarceration and whether the detention complied with international norms and standards. Those who remained imprisoned after trial, including persons who were political activists openly critical of the government, were often convicted of terrorism-related crimes, and there was not sufficient public information about such alleged crimes to judge whether they had a credible claim to being political prisoners. The SCC tried political and human rights activists each year for actions unrelated to terrorism or violence against the state.

International NGOs criticized the government for abusing its antiterrorism prerogatives to arrest some members of the political opposition. Authorities generally gave security detainees the same protections as other prisoners or detainees. High-profile prisoners were generally well treated. Authorities sometimes restricted legal access to detainees; no international humanitarian organizations had access to them.

On October 19, the SCC sentenced human rights activist Abdulkareem al-Khedr to 10 years' imprisonment and a 10-year travel ban on charges related to his membership in a human rights organization.

In October 2014 the SCC sentenced prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr to death, based on charges of inciting terrorism and sedition, interfering in the affairs of another country, disobeying the nation's guardians, attacking security personnel during his arrest, and meeting with wanted criminals. International human rights organizations claimed al-Nimr was charged for peaceful criticism of Saudi authorities in speeches and noted that his trial before the SCC lacked transparency and was politically motivated and that he was not given consistent access to legal counsel, nor was he allowed access to the evidence against him. Appeals were pending during much of the year, and the sentence was not carried out as of end-year. Authorities temporarily detained al-Nimr's brother, Mohammad al-Nimr, following the conclusion of Nimr al-Nimr's hearing that same day, presumably for releasing a statement on behalf of the al-Nimr family condemning the sentence and for revealing the details of the sentence to the international press in contravention of a court order. In 2013 the public prosecutor in the BIP asked for Nimr al-Nimr to be sentenced, executed, and his dead body publicly displayed. On October 25, the Supreme Court upheld a death sentence for Nimr al-Nimr; at year's end the sentence was not yet carried out, and he remained at Ha'ir Prison. Authorities allowed family members to visit Nimr al-Nimr at Ha'ir Prison during the year. On September 14, the Supreme Court reportedly upheld a death sentence for Nimr al-Nimr's nephew, Ali al-Nimr, based on crimes he allegedly committed when he was a legal minor (see sections 1.a. and 1.c.). At year's end Ali al-Nimr's death sentence was awaiting confirmation by the king.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Complainants claiming human rights violations generally sought assistance from the HRC or NSHR, which either advocated on their behalf or provided courts with opinions on their cases. The HRC generally responded to complaints and could

refer cases to the BIP; domestic violence cases were the most common. Individuals or organizations also may petition directly for damages or government action to end human rights violations before the Board of Grievances, except in compensation cases related to state security where the SCC handles remediation. The new Counterterrorism Law contains a provision allowing detainees in Mabahith-run prisons to request financial compensation from the Ministry of Interior for wrongful detention beyond their prison terms.

In some cases the government did not carry out judicially ordered compensation for unlawful detentions in a timely manner.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits unlawful intrusions into the privacy of persons, their homes, places of work, and vehicles. Criminal investigation officers are required to maintain records of all searches conducted; these records should contain the name of the officer conducting the search, the text of the search warrant (or an explanation of the urgency that necessitated the search without a warrant), and the names and signatures of the persons who were present at the time of search. While the law also provides for the privacy of all mail, telegrams, telephone conversations, and other means of communication, the government did not respect the privacy of correspondence or communications, and the government used the considerable latitude provided by law to monitor activities legally and intervene where it deemed necessary.

There were reports from human rights activists of governmental monitoring or blocking mobile telephone or internet usage before planned demonstrations. The government strictly monitored politically related activities and took punitive actions, including arrest and detention, against persons engaged in certain political activities, such as direct public criticism of senior members of the royal family by name, forming a political party, or organizing a demonstration. Customs officials reportedly routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband. In some areas, Ministry of Interior informants allegedly reported “seditious ideas,” “antigovernment activity,” or “behavior contrary to Islam” in their neighborhoods.

The CPVPV monitored and regulated public interaction between members of the opposite sex. In November, CPVPV officials raided a meeting of the Taif literary club on suspicion that the meeting was not gender segregated.

g. Use of Excessive Force and Other Abuses in Internal Conflicts

In March in response to a request from Yemeni president Hadi for Arab League/Gulf Cooperation Council military intervention, invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, Saudi officials announced the formation of a coalition to counter the Houthi rebellion, with membership including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, and Senegal. The Saudi-led coalition conducted air and ground operations throughout the remainder of the year.

Houthi rebels fired numerous rockets and three SCUD missiles across the border from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, killing at least 47 Saudi civilian and military personnel from April to December, according to media reports.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that the Saudi-led coalition launched rocket attacks into populated civilian areas near the Saudi-Yemen border in northern Yemeni towns of Sa'ada and the province of Hajja. Human Rights Watch reported that 13 people total were killed, including three children, in seven rocket attacks from April to mid-July in Hajja Province.

For additional details, see the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights* for Yemen.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

Civil law does not protect human rights, including freedoms of speech and of the press; only local interpretation and the practice of sharia protect these rights. There were frequent reports of restrictions on free speech. The Basic Law specifies, "mass media and all other vehicles of expression shall employ civil and polite language, contribute towards the education of the nation, and strengthen unity. The media is prohibited from committing acts that lead to disorder and division, affect the security of the state or its public relations, or undermine human dignity and rights." Authorities are responsible for regulating and determining which speech or expression undermines internal security.

In February 2014 the Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Terrorist-Financing (the CT law) went into effect following its approval by the Council of Ministers in 2013. For the first time, the law officially defines and criminalizes terrorism and terrorist financing in the criminal code. The legal definition of terrorism, however,

is extremely broad, defining a terrorist crime (in part) as “any act...intended to disturb the public order of the state...or insult the reputation of the state or its position.” Saudi human rights activists and international human rights organizations criticized the law for its vague definition of terrorism and complained that the government could use it to prosecute peaceful dissidents for “insulting the state.” The new CT law allows the Ministry of Interior to access a terrorism suspect’s private communications as well as banking information in a manner inconsistent with the legal protections provided by criminal procedure law.

The Press and Publications Law states that violators can face fines up to 500,000 riyals (\$133,000) for each violation of the law, which is doubled if the violation is repeated. Other penalties include banning individuals from writing. While the Violations Considerations Committee in the Ministry of Culture and Information has formal responsibility for the law, sharia court judges considered these issues regularly and exercised wide discretion in interpreting the law. It was unclear which process accords with the law.

Government-friendly ownership of print or broadcast media led to self-censorship, and there was relatively little need for overt government action to restrict freedom of expression. The government, however, did not rely on self-censoring in social media and the internet; it monitored and blocked certain internet sites. On a number of occasions, government officials and senior clerics publicly warned against inaccurate reports on the internet and reminded the public that criticism of the government and its officials should be done through available private channels. The government charged those using the internet to express dissent with subversion, blasphemy, and apostasy.

Freedom of Speech: The government monitored public expressions of opinion and took advantage of legal controls to impede the free expression of opinion and restrict those verging on the political sphere. The government prohibits public employees from directly or indirectly engaging in dialogue with local or foreign media or participating in any meetings intended to oppose state policies. The law forbids apostasy and blasphemy, which legally can carry the death penalty, although there have not been any recent instances of death sentences for these crimes. Statements that authorities construed as constituting defamation of the king, the monarchy, the governing system, or the Al Saud family resulted in criminal charges for citizens advocating government reform.

The government charged a number of individuals with crimes related to their exercise of free speech during the year. On January 12, an appeals court upheld

the sentencing of lawyer and human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair to a 15-year prison term, a subsequent 15-year international travel ban, and a 200,000 riyal (\$53,300) fine for activities related to his human rights work. These activities included public calls for reform, criticisms of government policies and officials, and his role in founding an unlicensed NGO, the Monitor for Human Rights in Saudi Arabia. In 2013 the Jeddah Criminal Court sentenced Abu al-Khair to a three-month prison term on a nearly identical list of charges, but the Ministry of Interior remanded the case to the SCC to be retried. The government has prosecuted and intermittently detained Abu al-Khair since 2011 for criticizing the government. The government also banned him from travel starting in 2011.

On November 5, the SCC sentenced Omar al-Sa'id, a member of ACPRA, to two-and-half years in prison and a two-and-a-half-year travel ban. Al-Sa'id was previously sentenced in 2013 by the Buraydah Criminal Court to 300 lashes and four years in prison for calling for a constitutional monarchy and criticizing the country's human rights record; authorities subsequently reversed his sentence and ordered that he be retried before the SCC.

In October 2014 authorities referred the case of lawyer and human rights activist Abdulaziz al-Shobaily to the SCC for prosecution. Al-Shobaily, a member of ACPRA, was active on Twitter and published comments critical of the government. As of year's end, his prosecution at the SCC continued.

In September 2014 the Jeddah Court of Appeals affirmed an earlier judgment by the court in May 2014 sentencing human rights activist Ra'if Badawi to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes following Badawi's decision to appeal his 2013 sentence of a seven-year prison term and 600 lashes. The judgment also banned Badawi from international travel for 10 years after completing his prison term and banned him from corresponding with international media. The appeals court ruled that Badawi violated Islamic values, violated sharia, committed blasphemy, and mocked religious symbols on the internet. The presiding judge in the original case ordered the internet forum he had founded, Saudi Liberals Network, closed, although it had been inactive since 2012 (see section 1.c.).

Press and Media Freedoms: The Press and Publications Law, which extends explicitly to internet communications, governs printed materials; printing presses; bookstores; the import, rental, and sale of films; television and radio; and foreign media offices and their correspondents. In 2011 a royal decree amended the law to strengthen penalties and create a special commission to judge violations. The decree bans publishing anything "contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving

foreign interests that contradict national interests, and damaging the reputation of the Grand Mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials.” The Ministry of Culture and Information may permanently close “whenever necessary” any means of communication--defined as any means of expressing a viewpoint that is meant for circulation--that it deems is engaged in a prohibited activity, as set forth in the decree.

Because of self-censorship, print and media authorities did not frequently have reason to prosecute print and broadcast media. The government owned most print and broadcast media and book publication facilities in the country, and members of the royal family owned or influenced privately owned and nominally independent operations, including various media outlets and widely circulated pan-Arab newspapers such as *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat*. The government owned, operated, and censored most domestic television and radio outlets.

Satellite dish usage was widespread. Although satellite dishes were technically illegal, the government did not enforce restrictions on them. Access to foreign sources of information, including the internet, was common, but the government blocked access to some internet sites it considered objectionable. Privately owned satellite television networks headquartered outside the country maintained local offices and operated under a system of self-censorship. Many foreign satellite stations broadcast a wide range of programs into the country in English and Arabic, including foreign news channels. Foreign media were subject to licensing requirements from the Ministry of Culture and Information and could not operate freely.

The Ministry of Culture and Information must approve the appointment of all senior editors and has authority to remove them. The government provided guidelines to newspapers regarding controversial issues. A 1982 media policy statement urged journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage. The Saudi Press Agency reported official government news.

All newspapers in the country must be government-licensed. The government can ban or suspend media outlets if it concludes they violated the Press and Publications Law.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities subjected journalists to arrests, imprisonment, and harassment during the year.

On July 16, authorities arrested writer Zuhair al-Kutbi after he criticized the king and Saudi leadership on a talk show on Rotana Khalijia TV, a private television channel. On December 21, al-Kutbi was convicted of “inciting public opinion, fomenting sedition, defaming state institutions, and harming the government’s prestige.” He was sentenced to four years in prison, banned from international travel for five years, banned from writing and appearing in the media for 15 years, and fined 100,000 riyals (\$27,000). Authorities also banned talk show host Abdullah al-Mudaifar, who interviewed al-Kutbi, and his other guest, religious scholar Mohsen al-Awaji, and ordered an investigation into comments made on the show critical of King Abdullah’s policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government owned, operated, and censored most domestic television and radio outlets. The government reportedly penalized those who published items counter to government guidelines and directly or indirectly censored the media by licensing domestic media and by controlling importation of foreign printed material. Authorities prevented or delayed the distribution of foreign print media, effectively censoring these publications. In some cases, however, individuals criticized specific government bodies or actions publicly without repercussions. The Consultative Council (Majlis as-Shura), an advisory body, frequently allowed print and broadcast media to observe its proceedings and meetings, but the council closed some high profile or controversial sessions to the media.

The government censored published material it considered blasphemous, for example, by removing works by Palestinian novelist and poet Mamoud Darwish at the Riyadh International Book Fair in March 2014.

Libel/Slander Laws: There were no reports during the year of the government using libel laws to suppress publication of material that criticized policies or public officials.

National Security: In most cases, authorities used the 2007 Anticybercrimes Law and the 2014 Counterterrorism Law to restrict freedom of expression, including by prosecuting several individuals under these laws on charges related to statements made on social media.

Internet Freedom

The Ministry of Culture and Information or its agencies must authorize all websites registered and hosted in the country. The General Commission for Audiovisual

Media has responsibility for regulating all audio and video content in the country, including satellite channels, film, music, internet, and mobile applications, independent from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Internet access was widely available to and used by citizens of the country; more than 63 percent of the population used the internet in 2014, according to the International Telecommunication Union.

The Press and Publications Law implicitly covers electronic media, since it extends to any means of expression of a viewpoint meant for circulation, ranging from words to cartoons, photographs, and sounds. In 2011 the government issued implementing regulations for electronic publishing that set rules for internet-based and other electronic media, including chat rooms, personal blogs, and text messages.

Security authorities actively monitored internet activity, both to enforce societal norms and to monitor recruitment efforts by organizations such as Da'esh. Activists complained of monitoring or attempted monitoring of their communications on web-based communications applications. According to a 2015 Freedom House report, social media users were increasingly careful about what they posted, shared, or "liked" online, particularly after the passage of the 2014 Counterterrorism Law. According to the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, the government coordinated with the Italian antithreat software company Hacking Team to target Saudi citizens in Qatif with surveillance malware. Access to the internet is legally available only through government-authorized internet service providers. The government required internet access providers to monitor customers and since 2009 has made it mandatory for internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of customers. Although authorities blocked websites offering proxies, persistent internet users accessed the unfiltered internet via other means.

The Press and Publications Law criminalizes the publication or downloading of offensive sites, and authorities routinely blocked sites containing material perceived as harmful, illegal, offensive, or anti-Islamic. The governmental Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) filtered and blocked access to websites it deemed offensive, including pages calling for domestic political, social, or economic reforms or supporting human rights. In addition to blocking the websites of local and international human rights NGOs in the country, during the year authorities also blocked access to the websites of expatriate Saudi dissidents, such as Ali al-Demainy and the website for the October 26 Women's Driving Campaign.

In February the CITC blocked access in the country to 41 local news websites for failing to obtain the requisite licensing and permissions from the Ministry of Culture and Information. In August the government introduced new regulations requiring all online media websites operating in the country to have a commercial registration, physical office space, and municipal office space; editors in chief must have a college degree and possess Saudi citizenship.

The CITC dealt with requests to block adult content and coordinated decisions with the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency on blocking phishing sites seeking to obtain confidential personal or financial information. Under the Telecommunication Act, failure by service providers to block banned sites can result in a fine of five million riyals (\$1.33 million). Authorities submitted all other requests to block sites to an interagency committee, chaired by the Ministry of Interior, for decision. In addition to designating unacceptable sites, the CITC accepted requests from citizens to block or unblock sites. According to the CITC, authorities received an average of 200 requests daily to block and unblock sites.

According to the NGO Reporters without Borders, authorities claimed to have cumulatively blocked approximately 400,000 websites. The CITC claimed that Facebook removed materials the CITC deemed offensive but that Twitter ignored all CITC requests.

A 2013 announcement had warned that the CITC would “take appropriate action” against other applications or services, including Skype and WhatsApp, if the proprietary services did not allow the government “lawful access” for monitoring purposes. Nonetheless, these applications remained accessible.

In November 2014 the Khobar Criminal Court sentenced human rights activist Mekhlef al-Shammary to two years in prison and 200 lashes after he commented on Twitter in support of Shia-Sunni reconciliation and attended a Shia religious gathering. On November 23, the court of appeals upheld the sentence. As of year’s end, however, authorities had not detained al-Shammary.

Laws, including the 2009 Cybercrimes Law, criminalize defamation on the internet, hacking, unauthorized access to government websites, and stealing information related to national security as well as the creation or dissemination of a website for a terrorist organization. The government reportedly collected information concerning the identity of persons peacefully expressing political, religious, or ideological opinions or beliefs online. In November the Ministry of

Interior stated it would sue anyone comparing Saudi Arabia to Da'esh on social media.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government censored public artistic expression, prohibited cinemas, and restricted public musical or theatrical performances other than those considered folkloric or that were special events approved by the government. Academics reportedly practiced self-censorship, and authorities prohibited professors and administrators at public universities from hosting meetings at their universities with foreign academics or diplomats without prior government permission. In November authorities ordered 80 books written by Islamist scholars, including Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna and Islamist theorist Sayyid Qutb, removed from schools and libraries. In December, Mecca governor Khaled al-Faisal banned poet Hind al-Mutairy from speaking at or attending cultural events in Mecca Province for two years, after she read a poem perceived to be insulting to tribes at the Jeddah Book Fair.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law does not provide for freedom of assembly and association, which the government strictly limited.

Freedom of Assembly

The law requires a government permit for an organized public assembly of any type. The government categorically forbids participation in political protests or unauthorized public assemblies, and security forces reportedly arrested demonstrators and detained them for brief periods. Security forces, nonetheless, allowed a small number of unauthorized demonstrations throughout the country, despite a 2011 Ministry of Interior statement that demonstrations were banned and that it would take “all necessary measures” against those seeking to “disrupt order.” The Council of Senior Religious Scholars reinforced the ministry’s position, stating “demonstrations are prohibited in this country” and explaining that “the correct way in sharia of realizing common interests is by advising.”

Most protests during the year occurred in the Eastern Province, in particular in the city of Qatif, although the size and number of protests decreased significantly since 2013. Activists reported security forces used intimidation to discourage persons from joining demonstrations as a general practice. There were also reports of

security forces firing bullets in the air to disperse crowds. YouTube videos showing antigovernment slogans on walls portrayed residents, largely Shia, protesting alleged systematic discrimination and neglect in government investment in physical and social infrastructure, including education, healthcare, and public facilities.

In contrast to previous years, there were no significant protests by family members of long-term detainees in Mabahith-run prisons.

The CPVPV and other security officers also restricted mixed gender gatherings of unrelated men and women in public and private spaces.

Freedom of Association

The law does not provide for freedom of association, and the government strictly limited this right. The government prohibited the establishment of political parties or any group it considered as opposing or challenging the regime. All associations must be licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and comply with its regulations. Some groups that advocated changing elements of the social or political order reported their licensing requests went unanswered for years, despite repeated inquiries. The ministry reportedly used arbitrary means, such as requiring unreasonable types and quantities of information, to delay and effectively deny licenses to associations. On November 30, the Council of Ministers passed a law authorizing the Ministry of Social Affairs to license NGOs. The government previously only provided licenses to philanthropic and charitable societies; organizations that have social or research mandates required royal backing to avoid government interference or prosecution.

In 2014 ACPRA effectively ceased operations because of the continued harassment, investigation, prosecution, or detention of most of its members. While ACPRA maintained a presence on social media networks such as Twitter, the government severely curtailed its operations and closed down its website.

Government-chartered associations observed citizen-only limitations. For example, the Saudi Journalists Association, operating under a government charter, prohibited noncitizen members from voting and from attending the association's general assembly.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law does not contain provisions for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

In-country Movement: The government generally did not restrict the free movement of male citizens within the country, but it severely restricted the movement of female citizens. The guardianship system requires a woman to have the permission of her male guardian (normally a father, husband, son, brother, grandfather, uncle, or other male relative) to move freely in the country.

Authorities respected the right of citizens to change residence or workplace, provided they held a national identification card (NIC). The law requires all male citizens who are 15 or older to possess a NIC. In 2012 the Ministry of Interior announced it would start issuing NICs to all female citizens at the age of 15, phasing in the requirement over a seven-year period. In 2013 the ministry stated it had issued only 1.5 million NICs since 2002 to women; the country's female population was approximately 9.8 million.

The government prohibited women from driving motor vehicles by refusing to issue them licenses. On September 13, authorities reportedly detained a woman for driving and released her after seizing her car.

In December 2014 authorities detained Loujain al-Hathloul, a Saudi citizen, at a Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates (UAE) border crossing. Al-Hathloul, who possessed a Gulf Cooperation Council driver license issued in the UAE, drove herself to the crossing and attempted to enter Saudi Arabia, while tweeting her encounters with the border guards. Authorities also arrested Maysaa al-Amoudi, a UAE-based Saudi journalist and supporter of al-Hathloul, when al-Amoudi drove herself into Saudi territory to bring food to al-Hathloul. In late December 2014, reports indicated that al-Hathloul and al-Amoudi's cases were referred to the SCC,

a court designed to address national security cases. On February 12, authorities released al-Hathloul and al-Amoudi after 73 days in detention.

Foreign Travel: There are severe restrictions on foreign travel, including for women and members of minority groups. No one may leave the country without an exit visa and a passport. Women under the age of 45, minors (men younger than 21), and other dependents or foreign citizen workers under sponsorship require a male guardian's consent to travel abroad. A noncitizen wife needs permission from her husband to travel unless both partners sign a prenuptial agreement permitting the noncitizen wife to travel without the husband's permission. Government entities and male family members can "blacklist" women and minor children, prohibiting their travel. The male guardian is legally able in custody disputes to prevent even adult children from leaving the country.

Employers or sponsors controlled the departure of foreign workers and residents from the country; employers or sponsors were responsible for processing residence permits and exit visas on their behalf. Sponsors frequently held their employees' passports against the desires of the employees, despite a law specifically prohibiting this practice. Foreign workers typically provided sponsors with their residence permit before traveling in exchange for their passport to ensure the worker's return to their employer after their travel.

The government continued to impose international travel bans as part of criminal sentences. The government reportedly confiscated passports on occasion for political reasons and revoked the rights of some citizens to travel, often without providing them notification or opportunity to contest the restriction. Most travel bans reportedly involved individuals in court cases relating to financial and real estate disputes.

During the year the government banned several individuals engaged in human rights activism or political activities from foreign travel, in addition to hundreds of other travel bans promulgated by the courts. These included ACPRA members Mohammed al-Bajady and Abdulkareem al-Khedr as well as human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair and activists Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysaa al-Amoudi.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides that the "state will grant political asylum if public interest so dictates." There are no regulations implementing this provision or UNHCR-managed refugee and asylum matters. The government permitted

UNHCR-recognized refugees to stay in the country temporarily pending identification of a durable outcome, including third-country resettlement or voluntary repatriation. The government generally did not grant asylum or accept refugees for resettlement from third countries. Government policy is not to grant refugee status to persons in the country illegally, including those who have overstayed a pilgrimage visa. The government strongly encouraged persons without residency to leave, and it threatened or imposed deportation. Access to naturalization was difficult for refugees. As of October, 58 refugees were registered with UNHCR and 37 individuals applied for asylum during the year. The majority of asylum seekers were Iraqi and Syrian nationals, with smaller numbers of Eritreans.

Between January and early April, the government was deporting an estimated 1,000-2,000 Yemenis per day, often under abusive conditions, including reports of beatings, confiscation of personal property, and detention in poor conditions, according to a May 9 Human Rights Watch report. In April UNHCR issued new policy guidance regarding returns to Yemen, as it became apparent that the conflict there would go on for several months, and advised countries not to deport undocumented Yemeni migrants back to Yemen, as that could be considered refoulement. As a result, Saudi Arabia ceased sending undocumented Yemeni migrants back to Yemen, and it announced that all undocumented Yemenis who had been in Saudi Arabia before April 9 would be eligible for a six-month renewable visa enabling them to seek employment, education, and healthcare legally in the country. In August the media reported that nearly 450,000 Yemenis had regularized their status in Saudi Arabia. In December the crown prince ordered the extension of these visas for another six months.

The government continued its policy of not deporting Syrian nationals.

Employment: Refugees and asylum seekers were generally unable to work legally.

Access to Basic Services: The government reserves access to education, health care, public housing, courts and judicial procedures, legal services, and other social services to citizens only. The UNHCR office in Riyadh provided a subsistence allowance covering basic services to a limited number of vulnerable families based on a needs assessment. Authorities allowed Syrian school-age children access to government-run schools and worked with UNHCR to provide medical treatment following a needs assessment.

Stateless Persons

The country had a significant number of habitual residents who were legally stateless, but data on the stateless population were incomplete and scarce.

Citizenship is legally derived only from the father. Children may be born stateless if they were: the child of a citizen mother and a stateless father; a child born to an unmarried citizen mother who is not legally affiliated with the citizen father, even if the father has recognized the child; or the child of a citizen father and a noncitizen mother if the government did not authorize their marriage prior to birth. A child may lose legal identification and accompanying rights if authorities withdraw identification documents from a parent (possible when a naturalized parent denaturalizes voluntarily or loses citizenship through other acts). The sons of citizen mothers and noncitizen fathers can apply for citizenship once they turn 18, but daughters can only obtain citizenship through marriage to a Saudi man. Since there is no codified personal-status law, judges make decisions regarding family matters based on their own interpretations of Islamic law.

In 2013 the government clarified regulations governing the status of non-Saudi men married to Saudi women. Foreign male spouses of female citizens are entitled to permanent residency in the country without needing a sponsor, and they receive free government education and medical benefits. These spouses also are entitled to count towards the Nitaqaat, or percentage a company's or enterprise's employees who are Saudis, which improves their employment prospects. Non-Saudi wives of Saudi men receive more rights if they have children resulting from their marriage with a Saudi man than if they do not.

UNHCR unofficially estimated there were 70,000 stateless persons in the country, almost all of whom were native-born Arab residents known locally as bidoon (an Arabic word that means "without" [citizenship]). Bidoon are persons whose ancestors failed to obtain nationality, such as descendants of nomadic tribes not counted among the native tribes during the reign of the country's founder, King Abdulaziz; descendants of foreign-born fathers who arrived before there were laws regulating citizenship; and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. As noncitizens, bidoon are unable to obtain passports or travel abroad. The government sometimes denied them employment and educational opportunities, and their marginalized status made them among the poorest residents of the country. In recent years, the Ministry of Education encouraged them to attend school. The government issues bidoon five-year residency permits to facilitate their social integration in government-provided health care and other services, putting them on similar footing with sponsored foreign workers. In addition, in

2014 the General Directorate of Passports began to issue special identity cards to bidoon similar to residency permits issued to foreigners in the country, but with features entitling their holders to additional government services similar to those available to citizens.

There were also some Baloch, West Africans, and Rohingya Muslims from Burma, but only a portion of these communities was stateless. For example, many Rohingya had expired passports that their home government refused to renew. UNHCR estimated there were between 250,000 and 500,000 Rohingya in the country. During the year some of these individuals benefited from a program to correct their residency status; the government issued approximately 200,000 four-year residency permits by year's end. Only an estimated 2,000 individuals of Rohingya origin had Saudi citizenship. There also were between 300,000 and 400,000 Palestinian residents not registered as refugees as well as between 750,000 and one million Syrian nationals in the kingdom, although most of these arrived prior to the 2011 outbreak of the conflict in Syria.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law does not provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage; it establishes an absolute monarchy led by the Al Saud family as the political system. The law provides citizens the right to communicate with public authorities on any matter and establishes the government on the principle of consultation (shura). The king and senior officials, including ministers and regional governors, are required to be available by holding meetings (majlis), open-door events where in theory any male citizen or noncitizen may express an opinion or a grievance without the need for an appointment. Most government ministries and agencies had women's sections to interact with female citizens and noncitizens, and at least two regional governorates hired female employees to receive women's petitions and arrange meetings for women with complaints for, or requests of, the governor. Only select members of the ruling family have a voice in the choice of leaders, the composition of the government, or changes to the political system. The Allegiance Commission, composed of up to 35 senior princes appointed by the king, is formally responsible for selecting a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In June the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs announced that municipal elections would take place on December 12 for two-thirds of the 3,159 seats on 284 municipal councils around the country (the government appoints remaining third). For the first time, women were allowed to vote and run as candidates, and the voting age was lowered universally to 18 years. The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs actively encouraged women's participation in the December municipal elections. According to the ministry, 131,188 women registered to vote (compared with 1,373,971 men registered in 2015 and previous election cycles), and 979 ran as candidates (compared with 5,938 men). Election regulations prohibited candidates from contesting under party affiliation. Twenty-one women won seats, and 17 were appointed to seats. The NSHR observed the elections, and select international journalists were also permitted to observe. Independent polling station observers identified no irregularities with the election. Prior to the election, several candidates reported that they were disqualified for "violating the rules and regulations," without further explanation. They had the right to appeal, and some were reinstated. Uniformed members of the security forces, including the military and police, were ineligible to vote.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were no political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically. The Counterterrorism Law, issued in February 2014, explicitly banned a number of organizations that had political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups. The government continued to regard human rights organizations, such as ACPRA, as illegal political movements and treated them accordingly.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Gender discrimination excluded women from many aspects of public life. Women slowly but increasingly participated in political life, albeit with significantly less status than men, in part due to guardianship laws requiring a male escort, restrictions on women candidates' contact with male voters in this year's elections, and the ban on women driving.

In 2013 the former king issued a royal decree changing the governance of the Consultative Council, the 150-person royally appointed body that advises the king and can propose but not pass laws. The changes mandate that women constitute no less than 20 percent of the membership of the Consultative Council. In accordance with the law, the council inducted 30 women as full members in 2013.

Women were routinely excluded from formal decision-making positions in both government and the private sector, although some women attained leadership positions in business. Women's ability to practice law was severely limited; there were no women on the High Court or Supreme Judicial Council and no women judges or public prosecutors. The government continued to issue licenses to Saudi female lawyers. In October, Ministry of Justice officials estimated that, while there were no women employed in their agency, the government had granted law licenses to 66 women. The ministry allowed an additional 450 female law graduates to work in internships.

At the beginning of the year, there were two women in senior-level government positions, as deputy minister for women's education and general supervisor for women's higher education, in addition to senior advisors in multiple ministries. In April, however, a royal decree removed the female deputy minister of education from her post, along with several other officials. In June the general supervisor for women's higher education resigned after the government merged the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. As of year's end, the most senior position held by a woman in government was undersecretary of education.

The country had an increasing number of female diplomats. Bureaucratic procedures largely restricted women working in the security services to employment in women's prisons, at women's universities, and in clerical positions in police stations where they were responsible for visually identifying other women for law enforcement purposes.

No laws prevent males from minority groups from participating in political life on the same basis as other male citizens. Societal discrimination marginalized the Shia population. Tribal factors and longstanding traditions continued to dictate many individual appointments to positions. Unofficially, government authorities will not appoint a Bedouin tribesman to a high-ranking cabinet-level position, and Bedouins can only reach the rank of major general in the armed forces. All cabinet members who were tribal were members of urbanized "Hamael" tribes rather than Bedouin tribes. While the religious affiliation of Consultative Council members was not known publicly, the council included an estimated seven or eight Shia members. In contrast to previous years, the cabinet contained one religious minority member. In June 2014 the king appointed Mohammad bin Faisal Abu Saq, a Shia, as minister of state and member of the cabinet for consultative council affairs. Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia were concentrated, had large proportions of Shia as members to reflect the local population, including a majority in Qatif and 50 percent in al-Hasa. Eastern

Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption. The government did not implement the law effectively; some officials engaged in corrupt practices with impunity, and perceptions of corruption persisted in some sectors.

Government employees who accept bribes face 10 years in prison or fines up to one million riyals (\$267,000). The National Anticorruption Commission (Nazaha), established by King Abdullah in 2011, was responsible for promoting transparency and combating all forms of financial and administrative corruption. The commission's ministerial-level director reported directly to the king. In February the Shura Council censured Nazaha for its failure to prosecute a sufficient number of corruption cases. The council also stated that the public did not believe Nazaha could handle its responsibility to investigate and punish corruption. The Control and Investigation Board remains responsible for investigating financial malfeasance, and the BIP has the lead on all criminal investigations. The HRC also responded to and researched complaints of corruption. Provincial governors and other members of the royal family paid compensation to victims of corruption during weekly majlis meetings where citizens raised complaints.

Corruption: In April Nazaha opened an investigation into corruption allegations associated with 672 delayed government projects (44 percent of all government projects). In October, Nazaha requested the creation of a judicial program dedicated to corruption cases in order to speed up rulings, which were subject to lengthy delays. Nazaha also complained that 16 ministries and government agencies refused to cooperate with its probes. In July, Nazaha announced it had prosecuted six Ministry of Health officials on charges of forgery, bribery, and extortion; their prison terms varied from three to 10 years, and they faced fines of up to one million riyals (\$267,000).

Financial Disclosure: Public officials were not subject to financial disclosure laws.

Public Access to Information: The law does not provide for, and there is no right to, public access to government information, such as ministerial budgets or allocations to members of the royal family.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The law provides that “the State shall protect human rights in accordance with the Islamic sharia.” The government restricted the activities of domestic and international human rights organizations. The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to be based in the country but allowed representatives to visit on a limited basis. There were no transparent standards governing visits by international NGO representatives. The HRC stated that the government welcomed visits by legitimate, unbiased human rights groups but added the government could not act on the “hundreds of requests” it received, in part because it was cumbersome to decide which domestic agencies would be their interlocutor.

The government often cooperated with and sometimes accepted the recommendations of the NSHR, the sole government-licensed domestic human rights organization. The NSHR accepted requests for assistance and complaints about government actions affecting human rights.

The government viewed unlicensed human rights groups with suspicion, frequently blocking their websites and charging their founders with founding and operating an unlicensed organization. ACPRA applied for a license in 2008, which authorities did not grant. The government initially allowed its unlicensed operation, but it remained unclear which activities the group could undertake without risking punishment. For example, the group was unable to raise operating funds legally, which limited its activities. In 2013 a court ordered the dissolution of ACPRA and confiscation of its assets.

During the year nine of the original 11 founders of ACPRA remained imprisoned because of their participation in the founding of the organization. The remaining two founders were facing charges before the SCC. Several other ACPRA members remained under investigation during the year or had charges brought against them, and authorities forced others to sign statements repudiating the organization to avoid investigation and detention.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The HRC is part of the government and requires the permission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before meeting with diplomats, academics, or researchers with international human rights organizations. The HRC president has ministerial status and reports to the king. The well-resourced HRC was effective in highlighting problems and registering and

responding to the complaints it received, but its capacity to effect change was more limited. The HRC worked directly with the Royal Diwan and the Council of Ministers, with a committee composed of representatives of the Consultative Council and the Ministries of Labor, Social Affairs, and Interior, and with Consultative Council committees for the judiciary, Islamic affairs, and human rights.

During the year the HRC and NSHR were more outspoken in areas deemed less politically sensitive, including child abuse, child marriage, prison conditions, and cases of individuals detained beyond their prescribed prison sentences. They avoided topics, such as protests or cases of political activists or reformists, that would require directly confronting government authorities. The HRC board's 19 full-time members included at least three Shia; they received and responded to complaints submitted by their constituencies, including to problems related to religious freedom and women's rights. The Consultative Council's Human Rights Committee also actively followed cases and included women and Shia among its members; a woman served as chairperson of the committee.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race but not gender, sex, disability, language, sexual orientation and gender identity, or social status. The law and tradition discriminate based on gender. The law and the guardianship system restrict women to the status of legal dependents vis-a-vis their male guardians. This status is unchanged, even after women reach adulthood. Women and some men faced widespread and state-enforced segregation based on societal, cultural, and religious traditions.

The government generally reinforced sharia-based traditional prohibitions on discrimination based on disability, language, social status, or race. Nevertheless, discrimination based on race, lineage, or social status were common.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is a criminal offense under sharia with a wide range of penalties from flogging to execution. The law does not recognize spousal rape as a crime. The government enforced the law based on its interpretation of sharia, and courts often punished victims as well as perpetrators for illegal "mixing of genders," even when there was no conviction for rape. Victims also had to prove that the rape was committed, and women's testimony in court is worth half

the weight of that of a man. Consequently, due to these legal and social penalties, authorities brought few cases to trial. The government did not maintain public records on prosecutions, convictions, or punishments.

Statistics on incidents of rape were not available, but press reports and observers indicated rape was a serious problem. Moreover, most rape cases were likely unreported because victims faced societal and familial reprisal, including diminished marriage opportunities, criminal sanction up to imprisonment, or accusations of adultery or sexual relations outside of marriage, which are punishable under sharia. The National Family Safety Program, a private charity organization founded in 2005 to spread awareness and combat domestic violence, including child abuse, continued to report abuse cases.

In 2013 the Council of Ministers announced the adoption of a law against domestic violence that defines domestic abuse broadly and provides a framework for the government to prevent and protect victims of violence in the home. The law criminalizes domestic abuse with penalties of one month to one year of imprisonment or a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 riyals (\$1,330 to \$13,300) unless a court provides a harsher sentence.

Researchers stated domestic violence might be seriously underreported, making it difficult to gauge the magnitude of the problem, which they believed to be widespread. Independent estimates supported by officials working at the Ministry of Social Affairs indicated the incidence of spousal abuse ranged widely, affecting 16 to 50 percent of all married women. Officials stated that the government did not clearly define domestic violence and procedures concerning cases, including thresholds for investigation or prosecution, and thus enforcement varied from one government body to another. Some women's rights advocates were critical of investigations of domestic violence, claiming investigators were hesitant to enter the home without permission from the head of household, who may also be the male perpetrator. Some activists also claimed that authorities often did not investigate or prosecute cases involving domestic violence, instead encouraging victims and perpetrators to reconcile in order to keep families intact regardless of reported abuse. The NSHR's 2014 annual report noted that the organization investigated 312 cases of domestic violence and violations of women's rights, compared with 360 such cases in 2013. Violence included a broad spectrum of abuse. There were reports of police or judges returning women directly to their abusers, most of whom were the women's legal guardians. The government made efforts to combat domestic violence, and during the year the King Abdulaziz

Center for National Dialogue held workshops and distributed educational materials on peaceful conflict resolution between spouses and in families.

The government supported family-protection shelters. The HRC received complaints of domestic abuse and referred them to other government offices. The HRC advised complainants and offered legal assistance to some female litigants. The organization provided services for children of female complainants and litigants and distributed publications supporting women's rights in education, health care, development, and the workplace.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): FGM/C was not a common practice in the country, particularly among the Saudi population, as the official government interpretation of sharia prohibits the practice.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: There were no known deaths involving dowry, honor killings, or other harmful practices targeting women during the year.

Sexual Harassment: The extent of sexual harassment was difficult to measure, with little media reporting and no government data. The government's interpretation of sharia guides courts on cases of sexual harassment. Nonetheless, female workers reported widespread sexual harassment and discrimination. Employers in many sectors maintained separate male and female workspaces where feasible, in accordance with law.

In July a video of a group of men harassing two women on the Jeddah Corniche coastal resort area drew significant attention on social media. The case was referred to the Jeddah Criminal Court in August, where the two women were cleared of charges, while three men were found guilty on charges of harassment, disturbing the public order, and gender mixing and sentenced to two-and-a-half months' imprisonment and 50 lashes.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of government interference in a couple's right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of children; to manage their reproductive health; and to have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Prenatal care, essential obstetric care, and postpartum care were available, but patients were not always aware of its availability, and medical staff did not always emphasize its importance. Intrauterine devices were the most popular form of birth control, and women, regardless of marital status, were legally able to obtain them. Birth control pills also were available to women in local pharmacies without

prescriptions. Although no legal barriers prevented access to contraception, constraints on mobility and economic resources as well as social pressure for large families limited many women. Information was not available regarding equal diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections.

Discrimination: Women continued to face significant discrimination under law and custom, and many remained uninformed about their rights. The law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men, and since there is no codified personal-status law, judges made decisions regarding family matters based on their interpretations of Islamic law. Although they may legally own property and are entitled to financial support from their guardian, women have fewer political or social rights than men, and society treated them as unequal members in the political and social spheres. The guardianship system requires that every woman have a close male relative as her “guardian” with the legal authority to approve her travel outside of the country. A guardian also has authority to approve some types of business licenses and study at a university or college. Women can make their own determinations concerning hospital care. Women can work without their guardian’s permission, but most employers required women to have such permission. A husband who verbally (rather than through a court process) divorces his wife or refuses to sign final divorce papers continues to be her legal guardian.

The overall percentage of female workforce participation was 21 percent, according to the World Economic Forum’s *Gender Gap Report 2015*. The law does not require equal pay for equal work (see section 7.d.).

Nationality law discriminates against women, who cannot directly transmit citizenship to their children (see section 2.d.). The country’s interpretation of sharia prohibits women from marrying non-Muslims, but men may marry Christians and Jews. Women require government permission to marry noncitizens; men must be more than 25 years old to marry a foreigner and must obtain government permission if they intend to marry citizens from countries other than Gulf Cooperation Council member states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE). Regulations prohibit men from marrying women from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Chad, and Burma. The government additionally required Saudi men wishing to marry a second wife who is a foreigner to submit documentation attesting to the fact that his first wife is either disabled, suffering from a chronic disease, or sterile.

Widespread societal exclusion enforced by, but not limited to, state institutions restricted women from using many public facilities. The law requires women usually to sit in separate, specially designated family sections. They frequently cannot consume food in restaurants that do not have such sections. Women risk arrest for riding in a private vehicle driven by a male who is not an employee (such as a hired chauffeur or taxi driver) or a close male relative. Cultural norms enforced by state institutions require women to wear an abaya (a loose-fitting, full-length black cloak) in public. The CPVPV also generally expected Muslim women to cover their hair and non-Muslim women from Asian and African countries to comply more fully with local customs of dress than non-Muslim Western women.

Women also faced discrimination in courts, where the testimony of one man equals that of two women. All judges are male, and women faced restrictions on their practice of law. In divorce proceedings, women must demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men can divorce without giving cause. In doing so, men must pay immediately an amount of money agreed at the time of the marriage that serves as a one-time alimony payment. Men can be forced, however, to make subsequent alimony payments by court order. The government began implementing an identification system based on fingerprints that was designed to provide women more reliable access to courts. The previous system required women to present themselves at court in the presence of a male relative to prove their identity if they declined to unveil their faces.

Women faced discrimination under family law. For example, a woman needs a guardian's permission to marry or must seek a court order in the case of *adhl* (male guardians refusing to approve the marriage of women under their charge). In such *adhl* cases, the judge assumes the role of the guardian and can approve the marriage. On October 18, the Ministry of Justice reported that courts received 755 cases of *adhl* during the previous year.

Courts award custody of children when they attain a specified age (seven years for boys and nine years for girls) to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family. In numerous cases, former husbands prevented divorced noncitizen women from visiting their children. Inheritance laws also discriminate against women, since daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers.

According to recent surveys, women constituted more than half of university students, although segregated education through university level was the norm. The only exceptions to segregation in higher education were medical schools at the undergraduate level and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology,

a graduate-level research university, where women worked jointly with men, were not required to wear a veil, and drove cars on campus. Other universities, such as al-Faisal University in Riyadh, offered partially segregated classes with students receiving instruction from the same teacher and able to participate together in class discussion, but with the women and men physically separated by dividers.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from the father, and only the father can register a birth. There were cases of authorities denying children of citizen parents public services, including education and health care, because the government failed to register the birth entirely or had not registered it immediately, sometimes because the father failed to report the birth (see section 2.d., Stateless Persons).

Child Abuse: Abuse of children occurred. In 2014 the NSHR registered 173 cases of violence against children, according to its annual report, compared with 112 in 2012. In September 2014 a study released by the Ministry of Social Affairs estimated that 45 percent of children in the country were victims of domestic abuse.

In August the court of appeals reduced the sentence of Fayhan al-Ghamdi, who was sentenced to eight years in prison and 800 lashes in 2013 on charges that he raped and murdered his five-year-old daughter. The court released al-Ghamdi on bail and reduced his charges to “excessive disciplining that resulted in death.”

Early and Forced Marriage: There were reports during the year of child marriage; it was almost entirely limited to rural areas. Senior government officials, including officials from the governmental HRC and the quasi-governmental NSHR, spoke out against the practice and advocated the adoption of a minimum marriage age. The law does not specify a minimum age for marriage, but sharia suggests girls may marry after reaching puberty. According to some senior religious leaders, girls as young as 10 may marry. Families sometimes arranged such marriages to settle family debts, without the consent of the child. The HRC and NSHR monitored cases of child marriages, which they reported were rare or at least rarely reported, and took steps to prevent them from being consummated. Media reports quoted judges as saying the majority of child marriage cases in the country involved Syrian girls, followed by smaller numbers of Egyptians and Yemenis. There were media reports that some men traveled abroad to find brides, some of whom were legally minors. The application for a marriage license must record the bride’s age, and registration of the marriage is a legal prerequisite for

consummation. The government reportedly instructed marriage registrars not to register marriages involving children.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): FGM/C was not a common practice for children in the country, particularly among the Saudi population, as the official government interpretation of sharia law prohibits the practice.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The Anticybercrimes Law stipulates that punishment for such crimes, including the preparation, publication, and promotion of material for pornographic sites, may be no less than two-and-a-half years' imprisonment or 1.5 million riyals (\$400,000) if the crime includes the exploitation of minors. The law does not define a minimum age for consensual sex.

International Child Abductions: The kingdom is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State's report on compliance at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html and country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/saudi-arabia.html.

Anti-Semitism

There were no known Jewish citizens and no statistics available concerning the religious denominations of foreigners.

Cases of government-employed imams using anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, or anti-Shia language in their sermons were rare and occurred without authorization by government authorities. The law requires government-employed imams to give all sermons delivered in mosques in the country. They must deliver sermons vetted and cleared by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. During the year the ministry issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their sermons. According to the ministry, no imams publicly espoused intolerant views warranting dismissal during the year. Unauthorized imams continued to employ intolerant views in their sermons.

There were reports of anti-Semitic materials available at government-sponsored book fairs.

The government's multi-year Tatweer project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam began in 2007. As of the end of 2013, the program had received more than 11 billion riyals (\$2.9 billion) to revise the curriculum. As of the end of 2013, the government had also developed new curricula and textbooks for at least grades four through 10. Despite these efforts, some intolerant material remained in textbooks used in schools.

Editorial cartoons exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, particularly at times of heightened political tension with Israel. Anti-Semitic comments by journalists, academics, and clerics appeared in the media.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, or the provision of other state services or other areas. The law does not require public accessibility to buildings, information, and communications. Newer commercial buildings often included such access, as did some newer government buildings. Children with disabilities could attend government-supported schools. Persons with disabilities had equal access to information and communications.

Information about patterns of abuse of persons with disabilities in prisons and educational and mental health institutions was not widely available. Persons with disabilities could generally participate in civic affairs, and there were no legal restrictions that prevented persons with disabilities from voting in municipal council elections, although lack of accessibility of buildings, information, and communications likely limited some persons with disabilities from participating fully. In 2013 the HRC appointed four subject matter experts to work as advocates for persons with disabilities in the kingdom and to respond to complaints of discrimination; their work expanded during the year to include participation in international conferences on discrimination against persons with disabilities. The King Salman Center for Disability Research, a nonprofit research foundation,

continued to conduct laboratory and field research on a range of disability and quality of life issues. The Ministry of Social Affairs was responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation projects and social care programs increasingly brought persons with disabilities into the mainstream.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although racial discrimination is illegal, societal discrimination against members of national, racial, and ethnic minorities was a problem. There was also discrimination based on tribal or nontribal lineage. Descendants of former slaves in the country, who have African lineage, faced discrimination in both employment and society. There was formal and informal discrimination, especially racial discrimination against foreign workers from Africa and Asia. The tolerance campaign of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue sought to address some of these problems, and it provided training during the year to combat discrimination against national, racial, or ethnic groups.

The Shia minority continued to suffer social, legal, economic, and political discrimination. To address the problem, in recent years the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard included antidiscrimination training in courses run by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue for police and other law enforcement officers (for additional information, see Other Societal Violence and Discrimination).

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Under sharia as interpreted in the country, consensual same-sex sexual conduct is punishable by death or flogging, depending on the perceived seriousness of the case. It is illegal for men “to behave like women” or to wear women’s clothes and vice versa. Due to social conventions and potential persecution, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) organizations did not operate openly, nor were there gay rights advocacy events of any kind. There were reports of official societal discrimination, physical violence, and harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, statelessness, access to education, or health care. Stigma or intimidation acted to limit reports of incidents of abuse. Sexual orientation and gender identity could constitute the basis for harassment, blackmail, or other actions.

There were no government efforts to address potential discrimination. On June 23, the Ministry of Interior tweeted statements regarding a resolution on LGBTI rights at the UN Human Rights Council, noting that the government did not support the resolution and rejecting international interference in its internal affairs.

In June authorities arrested several persons in Jeddah following raids on two parties involving LGBTI individuals. In July a Twitter account associated with the CPVPV announced a \$25,000 fine for an international school that had painted rainbows on its building, calling them “emblems of homosexuality.”

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no reports of societal violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS. By law the government deported foreign workers who tested positive for HIV/AIDS upon arrival or who tested positive when hospitalized for other reasons. There was no indication that HIV-positive foreigners failed to receive antiretroviral treatment or that authorities isolated them during the year. The Ministry of Health’s HIV/AIDS program worked to fight stigma and discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Societal violence and discrimination against the country’s Shia minority continued. Da’esh claimed responsibility for four separate attacks on Shia mosques or community halls (see section 1.a.). As a result of the attacks, there was increased cooperation between government security forces and local Shia volunteer security committees. Government officials and the public widely condemned all attacks.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law does not provide for the right of workers to form and join independent unions. The law does not provide for the right to collective bargaining or the right to conduct legal strikes. The law does not prohibit antiunion discrimination or require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The government did not respect freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. There were no labor unions in the country, and workers faced potential dismissal, imprisonment, or, in the case of migrant workers, deportation for union

activities. The Commission for the Settlement of Labor Disputes under the Ministry of Labor investigates labor-related complaints by private individuals against officials responsible for enforcement of the laws.

The government allowed citizen-only labor committees in workplaces with more than 100 employees, but it placed undue limitations on freedom of association and was heavily involved in the formation and activities of these committees. For example, the Ministry of Labor approves the committee members and authorizes ministry and employer representatives to attend committee meetings. Committee members must submit the minutes of the meetings to management and then transmit them to the minister; the ministry can dissolve committees if they violate regulations or are deemed to threaten public security. Regulations limit committees to making recommendations to company management regarding only improvements to working conditions, health and safety, productivity, and training programs. In its 2014 annual report, the NSHR registered 193 labor-related complaints.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce legal protections for migrant workers. Forced labor occurred, especially among migrant workers--notably domestic servants--and children. Conditions indicative of forced labor experienced by foreign workers included withholding of passports, nonpayment of wages, restrictions on movement, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Amendments to the labor law, including prohibitions on the confiscation of passports and nonpayment of wages, went into effect October 18. Violations of labor laws resulted in fines and restrictions on the ability to recruit foreign workers. Many noncitizen workers, particularly domestic employees who were not covered under the labor law, were not able to exercise their right to end their contractual work. Restrictive sponsorship laws increased workers' vulnerability to forced labor conditions and made many foreign workers reluctant to report abuse.

The government continued implementation of the Wage Protection System (WPS), which required employers to pay foreign workers through bank transfers, thereby allowing the Ministry of Labor to ensure workers were paid appropriately. Through October the ministry shut down 1,441 companies for failing to comply with the WPS. The ministry reported 9,500 cases in which foreign migrants were working for employers without legal sponsorship.

Throughout the year the government strictly implemented measures to limit the number of noncitizen workers in the kingdom. Between August 2014 and September 2015, the ministry reported it had 508,000 foreigners deported. The government also penalized Hajj tourist agencies that engaged in human trafficking and Saudi companies that abused the country's visa laws to bring individuals into the country for reasons other than to employ them directly. The government campaign in 2013 to correct the legal status of noncitizen laborers by transferring their sponsorship or deporting them resulted in many noncitizen workers leaving the country by the end of 2013. Many individuals either left their legal sponsors' employment or stayed on after expiration of their work visas and residence permits. A smaller number came as religious pilgrims and overstayed their visas. Because of their undocumented status, many persons in the country were susceptible to forced labor, substandard wages, and deportation by authorities.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides that no person younger than 15 may legally work unless that person is the sole source of support for the family. Children between the ages of 13 and 15 may work if the job is not harmful to health or growth and does not interfere with schooling. The law provides that hazardous operations or harmful industries may not employ legal minors; children under the age of 18 may not be employed for shifts exceeding six hours a day. There is no minimum age for workers employed in family-owned businesses or other areas considered extensions of the household, such as farming, herding, and domestic service.

The HRC and the NSHR are responsible for monitoring enforcement of the child labor laws. There was little information on government efforts to enforce relevant laws or actions to prevent or eliminate child labor during the year. Authorities most commonly enforced the law in response to complaints of children begging on the streets.

Child labor occurred, most commonly in the form of children, usually from other countries including Yemen and Ethiopia, forced into begging rings, street vending, and work in family businesses.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations do not prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national origin or citizenship, social origin, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, age, language, or HIV-positive status. Discrimination with respect to employment and occupation occurred with respect to all these categories.

The Ministry of Labor explicitly approved and encouraged the employment of women in specific sectors, particularly in government, but women faced many discriminatory regulations. A 2015 report by the Central Department of Statistics and Information estimated that Saudi women constituted 21.6 percent of the country's workforce. The same report estimated that women, both Saudi and foreign, occupied 28.6 percent of all jobs in the country. Rules limited the work women were allowed to perform, required them to wear a veil in most workplaces, and enforced gender segregation in the workplace on penalty of fines. Amendments to the labor law that went into effect in October included discriminatory provisions, such as requiring strict gender-segregation and dress code policies, but also allowed women to work in hazardous or dangerous jobs. There is no regulation requiring equal pay for equal work (see section 6, Women).

In 2012 the Ministry of Labor announced implementation of regulations requiring stores selling women's undergarments and cosmetics to be staffed solely by women. As of year's end, however, the government had not universally applied the regulations, either in urban neighborhoods frequented by foreign noncitizen workers or outside major cities.

Regulations ban women from 24 professions, mostly in heavy industry, but create guidelines for women to telework. Nevertheless, some factories and manufacturing facilities, particularly in the Eastern Province, employed men and women, who worked separate shifts during different hours of the day. Despite gender segregation, the law grants women the right to obtain business licenses with the approval of their guardians, and women frequently obtained licenses in fields that might require them to supervise foreign workers, interact with male clients, or deal with government officials. In medical settings and in the energy industry, women and men worked together and, in some instances, women supervised male employees. Women who work in establishments with 50 or more female employees have the right to maternity leave and childcare.

Discrimination with respect to religious beliefs occurred. Members of the Shia community complained of discrimination based on their religion and had difficulty securing or being promoted in government positions. Shia were significantly

underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. In predominantly Shia areas, Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies (see section 3, Participation of Women and Minorities). Shia were also underrepresented in hiring in primary, secondary, and higher education.

Discrimination against Asian and African migrant workers occurred (see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities). The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue continued programs that sought to address some of these problems and provided training during the year to combat discrimination against national, racial, or ethnic groups. There were numerous cases of assault on foreign workers and reports of worker abuse. Government policies designed to increase the number of citizens in the workforce intentionally raised the costs of hiring migrant workers and made it more difficult for them to find work.

Informal discrimination in employment and occupation occurred on the basis of sex, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation or gender identity.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly minimum wage for public-sector employees was 3,000 riyals (\$800). There was no private-sector minimum wage for foreign workers; the government's Nitaqaat (Saudization) program set a general minimum private-sector wage for citizens at 3,000 riyals (\$800) per month.

The Commission for the Settlement of Labor Disputes actively prosecuted cases against employers of citizens, with most outcomes favoring the employee. Prosecution of employers of noncitizens occurred with less frequency, and most verdicts reportedly favored the employer. The Ministry of Social Affairs also has the ability to arbitrate reconciliation between an employer and employee in a dispute. Labor regulations ostensibly apply to all workers in the public and private sector, other than domestic servants (covered by a separate law). The regulations provide for a 48-hour standard workweek at regular pay, a weekly 24-hour rest period (normally on Fridays, although the employer may grant it on another day), and time-and-a-half pay for overtime, with a maximum of 12 additional hours per week for private-sector employees. The regulations do not distinguish between different types of employment. To protect laborers working outside, the government also imposed a midday work ban during the hottest parts of the day

during the summer. The Ministry of Labor imposed penalties in 2,200 cases where companies violated the government's midday work ban during the summer months. The public-sector workweek is 35 hours with two rest days per week. The law's provisions were not enforced.

In 2013 the Council of Ministers approved regulations to govern the work relationship between employers and domestic workers, including the creation of a dispute mechanism to settle financial claims. Under these regulations, the employer and the employee must have a written agreement outlining the worker's duties and rights that would then be subjected to legal action should either party fail to uphold the contract. If an employer commits a violation, the punishment could include a one-year recruitment ban, a 2,000 riyal (\$530) fine, or both, with increasing penalties for repeat offenses. Domestic workers violating their contract could be assessed a similar fine and prohibited from working in the country.

In 2012 the Ministry of Labor announced a new law that penalizes individuals between 500 riyals (\$133) and 1,000 riyals (\$266) for bringing foreigners into the country to work in any service, including domestic service, without following the required procedures and obtaining a permit. Local press reports indicated the Ministry of Labor conducted 124,892 site visits and inspectors found more than 34,000 violations of labor law in the period between November 2014 and September. The most commonly cited violation was failing to adhere to the seasonal prohibition against working in direct sun.

The labor law provides for regular safety inspections and enables Ministry of Labor-appointed inspectors to examine materials used or handled in industrial and other operations and to submit samples of suspected hazardous materials or substances to government laboratories. The Ministry of Health's Occupational Health Service Directorate works with the Ministry of Labor on health and safety matters. Regulations require employers to protect some workers from job-related hazards and disease, although some violations occurred. These regulations did not cover farmers, herdsmen, domestic servants, or workers in family-operated businesses. Foreign nationals privately reported frequent failures to enforce health and safety standards. The Ministry of Labor employed nearly 1,000 labor inspectors.

The law requires that a citizen or business sponsor most foreign workers for them to obtain legal work and residency status, although the requirement exempts Syrian nationals who overstayed their visas. The Ministry of Labor implemented measures to lift restrictions to allow noncitizen workers to switch from their

current employers to employers or companies that employed a sufficient quota of Saudi nationals. Despite these revised restrictions, some workers were unaware of the new regulations and had to remain with their sponsor until completion of their contract or seek the assistance of their embassy to return home. There were also instances in which sponsors bringing noncitizen workers into the country failed to provide them with a residency permit, which undermined the workers' ability to access government services or navigate the court system in the event of grievances. Sponsors with commercial or labor disputes with foreign employees also could ask authorities to prohibit the employees from departing the country until the dispute was resolved. In November 2014, however, the government announced that workers who fled their employers would not be jailed or forced to return to their employers to obtain an exit visa, provided they cooperated with their respective embassies within a 72-hour period and had no criminal charges or outstanding fines against them.

The Migrant Workers' Welfare Department of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for addressing cases of abuse and exploitation of migrant workers. Noncitizen workers were able to submit complaints and seek help in 37 offices throughout the country. The Ministry of Labor reportedly maintained a database of abusive employers and banned individuals and companies who mistreated noncitizen workers from sponsoring such workers for up to five years. There was no data on enforcement of these policies.

Bilateral labor agreements set conditions on foreign workers' minimum wage, housing, benefits including leave and medical care, and other topics. These provisions were not necessarily drafted in line with international standards, and they varied depending on the sending country's relative bargaining leverage. The labor law and the 2009 law against trafficking provide penalties for abuse of such workers.

In July the Ministry of Labor signed a bilateral work agreement with Uganda. The agreement established safeguards for workers and requires Saudi Arabia to establish a 24-hour help center for domestic workers, facilitate exit visas to repatriate workers as needed, ensure employment contracts are implemented, and protect workers' rights and welfare. The minimum wage set in the agreement is approximately \$200 per month.

The government engaged in a news campaign highlighting the plight of abused workers, trained law enforcement and other officials to combat trafficking in persons, and worked with the embassies of labor-sending countries to disseminate

information about labor rights to foreign workers. As in previous years, during Ramadan, the HRC broadcast a public awareness program on television emphasizing the Islamic injunction to treat employees well.

An estimated 10 million noncitizen workers, including approximately 3.2 million female domestic workers, made up the majority of the country's labor force. Legal workers generally negotiated and agreed to work conditions prior to their arrival in the country, in accordance with the contract requirements contained in the labor law. Nevertheless, many such workers were employed on terms to which they had not agreed and experienced problems, such as delays in the payment of wages, changes in employer, or changed working hours and conditions. Migrant workers, especially domestic workers, were vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and conditions contravening labor laws, including nonpayment of wages, working for periods in excess of the 48-hour workweek, working for periods longer than the prescribed eight-hour workday, and restrictions on movement due to passport confiscation. There were also reports of physical and verbal abuse. The labor regulations announced in October seek to reduce instances of such abuse. The new labor law protects workers' rights in the private sector and seeks to improve the work environment with new safety and welfare standards. The new provisions also provide assistance for workers seeking new employment after their contract terminates and provide for women to receive maternity leave.

Many noncitizen workers, particularly domestic employees, were not able to exercise their right to remove themselves from dangerous situations. Some employers physically prevented workers from leaving or threatened them with nonpayment of wages if they left. Sponsoring employers, who controlled foreign workers' ability to remain employed and in the country, usually held foreign workers' passports, a practice prohibited by law. In some contract disputes, a sponsor held the employee in the country until resolution of the dispute to force the employee to accept a disadvantageous settlement or risk deportation without any settlement.

Foreign workers could contact the labor offices of their embassies for assistance. During the year hundreds of domestic workers, the majority of whom were female, sought shelter at their embassies, some fleeing sexual abuse or other violence by their employers. Some embassies maintained safe houses for citizens fleeing situations that amounted to bondage. The workers usually sought legal help from embassies and government agencies to obtain end of service benefits and exit visas.

In addition to their embassies, domestic servants could contact the NSHR, the HRC, the governmental Interministerial General Secretariat to Combat Human Trafficking, and the Migrant Workers' Welfare Department of the Ministry of Labor, which provided services to safeguard migrant workers' rights and to protect them from abuse. Workers could also apply to the offices of regional governors and lodge an appeal with the Board of Grievances against decisions from those authorities.