

CASE STUDIES

Saudi Arabia



Pakistani soldiers patrol the streets as posters welcome Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman five months after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Image credit: Aamir Qureshi/AFP via Getty Images.

The Saudi Arabian government is perhaps the best known in the world for targeting its nationals abroad. The brutal 2018 murder and dismemberment of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the country's Istanbul consulate brought transnational repression into popular awareness. Khashoggi's killing was not an isolated event, but rather the outcome of an increasingly physical, targeted campaign against critics and former insiders, including members of the royal family, that has rapidly escalated since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began his rise to power in 2015. This campaign has included extensive use of spyware, coercion by proxy, detentions, assaults, and renditions in nine countries spanning the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Asia.²⁰⁸ Facilitating Riyadh's extraterritorial efforts closer afield is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security agreement that sets broad parameters for cooperation against dissidents. The

Saudi Arabian government's transnational repression campaign also includes a uniquely gendered aspect; women fleeing gender-based repression in the country face characteristic transnational repression efforts from the state.

An escalating, personalized campaign

The Saudi transnational repression campaign is highly personalized, as befits an absolute monarchy where the royal house is identical to the state. Human rights defenders, journalists, former insiders, and online critics are vulnerable to charges of subverting that state, even if they do not explicitly speak out against the royal family. Prince Mohammed bin Salman became Minister of Defense in 2015 and Crown Prince in June 2017, and his rise to power tracks closely with the regime's recent transnational repression

efforts. This escalation also coincides with a purge against members of the royal family, government ministers, and businessmen that bin Salman launched soon after assuming the role of Crown Prince.²⁰⁹

Five of the 10 physical cases of Saudi transnational repression documented by Freedom House were carried out against **former insiders**. In addition to the Khashoggi assassination, two princes were rendered from France and the aide to a rival prince was rendered from Jordan. One of the princes disappeared after voicing support for a coup in a social media post; the other, Prince Sultan bin Turki II, was seeking reconciliation with bin Salman after suing the royal family for kidnapping him in the early 2000s. Bin Turki boarded a plane provided by the royal family in France, thinking he was heading to Cairo for a meeting; he was instead drugged and flown to Riyadh, and has not been heard from since.²¹⁰

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As in other cases Freedom House has studied, the physical campaign against former insiders is built on indirect and nonphysical means of repression. In August 2020, former Saudi intelligence officer Saad al-Jabri, who lives in Canada, brought a lawsuit against bin Salman and others, alleging the Saudi government deployed spyware against him, plotted to kill him, and detained his family members in an effort to coerce him into returning to Saudi Arabia. In his lawsuit, al-Jabri alleges that a group of Saudi nationals stopped at the Canadian border were carrying the equipment needed to dismember a corpse.²¹¹ Al-Jabri's allegations represent a familiar pattern of escalatory targeting, involving multiple means of repression against a single person.

There is ample evidence that Jamal Khashoggi's murder was the culmination of a longer process of escalating attacks against multiple targets. The mobile phone of Omar Abdulaziz, an activist and confidante of Khashoggi, was infected with Pegasus **spyware**, and one of his brothers was apparently coerced into asking Abdulaziz to cease his activism

and return to Saudi Arabia. Abdulaziz did not comply, and two of his brothers were subsequently imprisoned along with several friends.²¹² Khashoggi himself was subjected to serious **harassment** on Twitter. His son, who lived in Saudi Arabia, was issued a travel ban that would have been lifted upon Khashoggi's return to the country.²¹³ Khashoggi asked his fiancée to await him outside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul when he visited to procure marriage documents, to ensure that someone could alert the Turkish government if he did not return. He was murdered while she waited outside.²¹⁴

Further intertwining the escalatory targeting of Abdulaziz and Khashoggi, details extracted from the former's mobile phone may have played a role in the plot against the latter.²¹⁵ At the time, the two critics were collaborating to combat the notorious mass of government-directed inauthentic accounts on Twitter.²¹⁶ The Saudi regime closely controls expression within the country, and pays special attention to dissident activity on Twitter. Saud al-Qahtani, a royal court adviser, oversaw Saudi Arabia's "electronic army" or "electronic flies."²¹⁷ In an unprecedented tactic that displays the country's wealth, and willingness to go to extreme ends, Saudi Arabian authorities even bribed two Saudi Twitter employees to assist in the surveillance of critics using the platform.²¹⁸

Despite clear evidence of high-level government involvement in the targeting of Saudi nationals abroad, the international response has been muted, effectively sending a message of impunity to Saudi officials and others around the world. Within weeks of Khashoggi's murder, the CIA confirmed that bin Salman ordered the assassination himself.²¹⁹ Saudi Arabia's democratic partners failed to hold the Saudi government or bin Salman to account, however. US president Donald Trump famously strayed from the conclusions of the American intelligence community, defending bin Salman.²²⁰ "I saved his ass," Trump told a reporter. "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop."²²¹

The United States implemented Global Magnitsky sanctions against 17 Saudi nationals for their role in killing Khashoggi, but bin Salman was not on the list.²²² In July 2020, the UK implemented similar targeted sanctions against 20 Saudi officials involved in the assassination, including al-Qahtani, who intelligence agencies agree was central to orchestrating the operation,²²³ but not bin Salman.

Saudi Arabian courts sentenced five people to death for their role. The government dismissed—but did not try or convict—al-Qahtani from his media advisory role.²²⁴ Meanwhile, Saudi

rights activists believe al-Qahtani is still managing the regime’s “electronic army.”²²⁵ Far from offering real justice, this partial show of accountability was a nod to international pressure that largely targeted lower-level operatives while avoiding repercussions at the top. Though the Khashoggi assassination certainly created a public-relations crisis for the Saudi regime, the lack of repercussions for the regime or for bin Salman means this personalized campaign of transnational repression will likely continue undeterred.

Gulf cooperation

Freedom House found renditions of Saudi nationals from three Gulf states: Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There was clear cooperation on the part of the host states in all three cases which, when combined with known security agreements among GCC member states, illuminates the region’s institutionalized channels of transnational repression.

In addition to a 2004 antiterrorism agreement,²²⁶ a 2012 GCC joint security agreement specifies that signatories will “extradite persons in their territory who have been charged or convicted by competent authorities in any state party.” Such a broad provision, applied within a group of countries that routinely violate human rights through dubious legal proceedings, is ripe for abuse. In 2014, as the Kuwaiti parliament was considering the agreement’s ratification, Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that Gulf states already engaged in problematic cooperation, prosecuting their own citizens for criticizing other GCC states and their leaders.²²⁷

The full extent of cooperation between Gulf states is unknown. As true monarchies, these governments are notable for their opaque operation,²²⁸ and possess poor human rights records. Evidence suggests informal and personal cooperation occurs beyond what is specified in formal security agreements. In 2017, previously secret handwritten agreements dating back to 2013 and 2014 between several Gulf states were made public. The 2013 agreement, signed by the Saudi king and the emirs of Qatar and Kuwait, prevents conferring asylum, refugee status, or nationality to individuals who oppose their homelands’ regimes, and bars support for “deviant” groups or “antagonistic” media.²²⁹

GCC cooperation has resulted in clear violations of human rights and international law. In May 2018, Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent women’s rights activist, was arrested by Abu Dhabi police while attending university in the UAE. In what was

effectively a kidnapping, al-Hathloul was immediately placed on a Saudi private jet bound for Saudi Arabia; she was then issued a travel ban, and was arrested that July.²³⁰ Her family says she was tortured in detention. In December 2020, she was convicted of spying and conspiring against the kingdom.

The Qatari government’s cooperation in the 2017 **detention and rendition** of Mohammad Abdullah al-Otaibi showed a willingness to openly violate asylum protections. Al-Otaibi, a human rights defender, fled Saudi Arabia less than five months after he was charged with illegally forming an organization in relation to his human rights work. He received refugee status in Qatar, and was preparing to resettle safely in Europe as part of a United Nations protection program within two months of receiving that status. In May 2017, he arrived at Doha’s airport to board his resettlement flight to Norway, when he was apprehended by Qatari security forces. He was transferred to Saudi Arabia four days later, and is now serving a 14-year prison sentence.²³¹

In another case of targeting in transit, a Saudi poet and member of a tribe with historical claims to the throne was arrested at a Kuwaiti airport and rendered to Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti government was clear about the official nature of their cooperation: a tweet from their interior ministry confirmed the deportation, stating that it was undertaken at the Saudi government’s request, “under bilateral mutual security arrangements.”²³²

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Gender-based transnational repression

Consistent with the personalized nature of Saudi repression and the central importance of the monarchy, transnational repression by the state reflects, and sometimes supports, control sought at the family level. The Saudi Arabian guardianship system requires that women receive permission from a male guardian to engage in many basic activities. Recent legal reforms have reduced the guardianship system’s scope, allowing women to obtain passports and travel

abroad without their guardian's permission, but guardianship practices remain deeply entrenched at a societal level.²³³

Guardianship has historically afforded a significant amount of control over freedom of movement. An official e-government app, Absher, included guardianship controls, notably allowing guardians to grant entry and exit visas from their mobile phones. Even when visa controls were loosened in August 2019 following criticism, the app was not immediately updated to reflect the changes.²³⁴ In parallel, the bin Salman-led government has used travel restrictions, likely numbering in the thousands, to control and coerce those they perceive as threats.²³⁵ Access to state documents while abroad, like those Khashoggi needed for his marriage, is another tool the Saudi government uses to control its citizens.

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The severe gender-based repression in Saudi Arabia results in women featuring more prominently in the country's transnational repression campaign than in other cases. Globally, women are less frequently the targets of transnational repression, and are more often collateral damage, used as leverage points in family targeting. However, 2 of the 10 physical cases of Saudi transnational repression documented by Freedom House involved women as targets, and there are many more instances where women are targeted in nonphysical ways. The gender component of the Saudi campaign may partially be due to familial patterns of control, but can also be attributed to the uniquely high profile of Saudi women's rights activists, which makes them targets of the state in their own right.

In one case of transnational repression identified by Freedom House, state and family repression overlapped. Dina Ali Lasloom fled Saudi Arabia in 2017 in an attempt to escape a forced marriage. While waiting for a connecting flight in the Philippines, Lasloom claimed that airport officials confiscated her passport and boarding pass, and detained her for 13 hours. Eventually her uncles arrived and she was forced—restrained by duct tape and screaming, according to an HRW report—onto a return flight bound for Saudi Arabia.²³⁶

The Saudi embassy in the Philippines said Lasloom's rendition was a "family matter." But while the details of Lasloom's forced return and the role of Philippine authorities are murky, her rendition could not have occurred without the involvement of the Saudi state. The allegation that the Philippine authorities detained Lasloom and confiscated her passport points to the implementation of mobility controls by the Saudi authorities. By flagging or cancelling her passport, they could trigger Philippine intervention in her transit. Even if the event was instigated by a guardianship claim, the Saudi state is nevertheless extending its laws and authority beyond its own territory.

Moreover, the bin Salman-led government may have additional concrete and personal reasons to act in cases like Lasloom's. The number of Saudi asylum seekers has more than doubled in the two years after bin Salman's ascension to the role of Crown Prince.²³⁷ As described in the *New Yorker*, "The implicit critique of this exodus was enough to stoke the ire of the Crown Prince."²³⁸ The *New Yorker* report paints a chilling picture of how women who fled repressive family environments became targets of state repression. The women profiled reported that their bank accounts were frozen and their national ID cards were revoked; they also faced harassment by progovernment social media accounts, interrogation and harassment of family and friends residing in Saudi Arabia, run-ins with apparent Saudi operatives, and harassment by the Saudi embassy. In other words, women who flee Saudi Arabia's gender-based repression face many of the state's characteristic transnational repression tools.