

Saudi Arabia

	2016	2017		
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free	Population:	32.3 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	14	Internet Penetration 2016 (ITU):	73.8 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	24	24	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	34	34	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	72	72	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2017 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2016 – May 2017

- The government outlined plans to significantly increase broadband penetration by 2020 (see **Availability and Ease of Access**).
- An online campaign to end male guardianship caught the attention of the royal court and resulted in gradual reforms (see **Digital Activism**).
- A court increased an activist's prison sentence for advocating for human rights online from 9 to 11 years on appeal; others were newly detained (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Public institutions lost critical data in major cyberattacks, including the civil aviation authority, a chemical company, and the labor ministry (see **Technical Attacks**).

Introduction

Saudi internet freedom remained restricted in 2017, despite effective digital activism for women's rights. Several human rights defenders were jailed for social media posts.

Saudi Arabia unveiled its monumental "Vision 2030" reform and development targets in April 2016. The plan included measures to increase competitiveness, foreign direct investment, and non-oil government revenue by 2030.¹ The government also announced a National Transformation Program in June 2016 which included several ICT specific targets to be achieved by 2020, including increasing fixed-line broadband penetration in densely populated areas from 44 to 80 percent, and increasing wireless broadband penetration in rural areas from 12 to 70 percent. The government also plans to double the ICT industry's share of the non-oil economy to 2.24 percent.²

The economic and social reforms sparked criticism from religious conservatives. A handful of digitally savvy preachers—some of them with hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers—were arrested or prosecuted criticizing social liberalizations online over the coverage period. But Saudi Arabia's restrictive laws have been rigorously applied to silence reform-minded Saudis as well. Human rights activists Issa al-Hamid and Abdulaziz al-Shubaily have been sentenced to 11 and 8 years in prison respectively, as well as multi-year bans on using social media following their release. Liberal blogger Raif Badawi remains in prison; he was sentenced to 10 years and 1,000 lashes in 2012. Since traditional political organizing is banned, many human rights activists conduct activities on social media.

Ordinary Saudis have also used smartphones to document corruption and improper behavior by government officials. In 2016, the head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) in Riyadh was dismissed after CPVPV members were filmed chasing a girl outside a mall. This year, women's rights activists made huge strides in an online campaign to end male guardianship of women, who are treated as legal minors under Saudi law. Tens of thousands of Saudis petitioned the royal court until King Salman issued a royal directive to end all informal restrictions on women's access to public services, although those that are established by law remain in place. Another victory came in September 2017, when the king announced women would be given the right to drive starting in June 2018.

Despite the country's highly centralized internet infrastructure and restrictions on Voice-over-IP (VoIP), the internet remains to be the least repressive space for expression. Large numbers of Saudis use circumvention tools to access banned content and services, even if they are reluctant to express themselves due to strict legal penalties for speech on certain political, social, or religious topics. The internet has fundamentally changed the way that young Saudis interact with each other. However, repression has been institutionalized under antiterrorism and cybercrime laws that have instilled fear into activists and ordinary social media users alike. So long as the authoritarian tendencies of the country's political and religious establishments remain fully present in the minds of internet users, their democratic aspirations remain blocked.

1 "Full text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," *Al-Arabiya*, April 26, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2016/04/26/Full-text-of-Saudi-Arabia-s-Vision-2030.html>.

2 *The National Transformation Program 2020*, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, June 2016, http://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/NTP_En.pdf.

Obstacles to Access

Overall, infrastructure is not considered a major barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas, where the governmental has allocated funds to introduce high-speed connections. Internet penetration is highest in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Young Saudis make up the majority of the user population throughout the country.

Availability and Ease of Access

Key Access Indicators		
Internet penetration (ITU) ^a	2016	53.2%
	2015	44.1%
	2011	19.0%
Mobile penetration (ITU) ^b	2016	100%
	2015	93%
	2011	74%
Average connection speeds (Akamai) ^c	2017(Q1)	4.7 Mbps
	2016(Q1)	3.5 Mbps

^a International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^b International Telecommunication Union, "Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^c Akamai, "State of the Internet - Connectivity Report, Q1 2017," <https://goo.gl/TQH7L7>.

Saudis have enjoyed a rapid growth of internet and communications technologies (ICTs). Internet penetration increased to 74.9 percent in 2016, up from 47 percent in 2011.³ Saudi Arabia is home to around 24 million internet users. The number of those with household fixed broadband ADSL subscriptions decreased from 49.7 percent in 2015 to 42 percent in 2016, which corresponds to the general decline in the fixed telephony market due to competition with mobile services

In March 2017, the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) awarded a project to expand high-speed, fiber-optic connections to less competitive, underserved areas in the country to the company Zain. The project aims to increase national broadband coverage to 70 percent by 2020.⁴

Mobile broadband penetration fell from 102 percent in 2015 to 78.8 percent in 2016, with 25 million mobile broadband subscriptions. Overall, the number of mobile subscriptions fell from 54 million in 2011 to 51.8 million in 2016. The fall was due to the deportation of thousands of undocumented workers and the deactivation of their prepaid mobile accounts,⁵ in addition to new requirements for all mobile subscribers to register using their fingerprints in order to obtain service (see "Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity").

³ International Telecommunications Union, "Percentage of Individuals using the Internet," 2011-16, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

⁴ "CITC awards broadband expansion project to Zain Saudi," *TeleGeography*, March 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nKxMdZ>.

⁵ Matt Smith, "Saudi mobile subscriptions shrink on labor crackdown, hajj limits," *Al Arabiya News*, January 26, 2014 <https://bit.ly/1HaGC9l>.

Restrictions on Connectivity

Regulators and telecommunication companies have taken an aggressive stance against free or low-cost VoIP call services that threaten the use of standard mobile calls, circumvent the regulatory environment and in some cases bypass the surveillance apparatus. All internet providers have blocked VoIP over Viber (since June 2013),⁶ WhatsApp (since March 2015),⁷ and Facebook Messenger (since May 2016).⁸ As of May 2017, call functions were still operational on Signal and Telegram.^{9,10} The CITC denied responsibility for the ongoing restrictions, stating in September 2016 that it is evaluating the situation with telecommunication companies.¹¹ The CITC had previously acknowledged responsibility.¹²

Saudi Arabia is connected to the internet through two country-level data services providers, the Integrated Telecom Company and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services, up from a single gateway in the past. Their servers, which block a long list of sites, are between the state-owned internet backbone and global servers. All user requests that arrive via Saudi internet service providers (ISPs) travel through these servers, making them subject to censorship at a centralized point. International internet bandwidth increased from 318 Gbps in 2010 to 1484 Gbps in 2015.¹³

ICT Market

The two country-level service providers offer services to licensed ISPs, which in turn sell connections to dial-up and leased-line clients. Broadband and mobile phone services are provided by the three largest telecommunications companies in the Middle East: Saudi Telecom Company (STC), Mobily (owned by Etisalat of the United Arab Emirates), and Zain (from Kuwait). In addition to these companies, two relatively new companies have been operating since 2014: Virgin Mobile in October 2014 (operating with STC) and Lebara in December 2014 (operating with Mobily). As of August 2016, Virgin Mobile has reached two million subscribers across its different services.¹⁴ Several ISPs provide zero-rating services, offering some content or services for free. For example, Zain provides unlimited access to YouTube as part of a prepaid mobile packages.¹⁵

Internet cafes, once prevalent, have become less popular in recent years due to the broad availability and affordability of home broadband access. Internet cafes are mainly used by youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds to congregate and socialize. Conversely, coffee shops have grown in popularity among business people, young adults, and single males, who enjoy free Wi-Fi access with their paid beverages. In addition, more female-only coffee shops have been opened to serve women and girls who previously had to go to family sections.

6 "Saudi Arabia clamps down on messaging apps with ban of Viber" *The Verge*, June 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2t6zHPY>.

7 "WhatsApp's new call service to be blocked in KSA" *ITP.net*, March 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bPpYm0>.

8 "Facebook Messenger blocked in Saudi Arabia: Chat apps have voice and video call functions banned over 'regulations'", *The Independent*, May 13, 2016, <http://ind.pn/2t6juKX>.

9 "CITC blocks Viber", *Saudi Gazette*, June 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1VLVW28>.

10 "WhatsApp's new call service to be blocked in KSA" *ITP.net*, March 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bPpYm0>.

11 Twitter, CITC account, <http://bit.ly/2nscgsL>.

12 "Saudi Arabia bans Viber web communication tool", Reuters, June 5, 2013, <http://reut.rs/2vg9fjJ>.

13 CITC, "Annual Report, 2015," 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ov9tk>.

14 Arab News, "Virgin Mobile Saudi Arabia achieves major milestone in less than two years," August 22, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2bXROQz>.

15 Zain, "Shabab Package," <http://bit.ly/1NpWIWH>.

Regulatory Bodies

In 2003, the governmental Saudi Communication Commission was renamed to become the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) and became responsible for providing internet access to the private sector, in addition to resolving conflicts among the private telecommunication companies.¹⁶ The CITC is also responsible for controlling the price that telecommunications companies are allowed to charge for cross-network calls. For example, in February 2015, the maximum charge of local voice calls between different networks was lowered.¹⁷ Furthermore, the CITC sends content removal requests to social networks in political cases (see “Content Removal”). The board of directors of the CITC is headed by the minister of communications and information technology.¹⁸ In September 2016, the CITC suspended all unlimited internet packages in coordination with telecommunication companies, starting with pre-paid packages. The CITC cited unsustainable pressure on national bandwidth.¹⁹

Previously, all internet governance fell under the purview of the Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST). Established in 1998 and reporting directly to the Vice President for Scientific Research Support of KACST, the ISU now only provides internet access to government departments, as well as Saudi research and academic institutions.²⁰

Limits on Content

The Saudi government continued to employ strict filtering of internet content throughout 2016 and early 2017. Self-censorship remained prevalent when discussing politics, religion, and the royal family. Nonetheless, social media has driven an immense diversification of online content, offering Saudis a multitude of perspectives beyond state-controlled media. These tools have been used by ordinary citizens and human rights activists to raise awareness of issues surrounding political reform, poverty, gender inequality, and corruption.

Blocking and Filtering

Popular social media and communication apps are not blocked, although authorities have imposed restrictions on their use. For example, messaging app Telegram has faced throttling since January 9, 2016, when users reported severe bandwidth limitations preventing file- and image-sharing.²¹ Telegram’s CEO confirmed the issue, but said that the “reasons [behind the restrictions] are unknown.”²² VoIP services offered by popular apps have also been restricted (see “Restrictions on Connectivity”).

16 CITC, “Background,” accessed on March 2, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nsg8dh>.

17 “The Communication Commission Reduces the Charge Between Telecommunication Companies,” [in Arabic] *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, February 22, 2015, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1024133>.

18 CITC, “Board of Directors,” accessed on March 2, 2017, <http://www.citc.gov.sa/en/aboutus/Pages/Boardofdirectors.aspx>.

19 Arab News, “CITC to stop the sale of unlimited Internet cards,” September 27, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2nrWu19>.

20 CITC, “CITC Roles and Responsibilities,” accessed March 2, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2o0oHLh>.

21 Amir-Esmaeil Bozorgzadeh, “UPDATED: Telegram’s Troubled Times In The Middle East” *TechCrunch*, January 12, 2016, <http://tcrn.ch/1PpVhhB>.

22 Pavel Durov on *Twitter* <https://bit.ly/1Qy2fHM>, and The Telegram Team, “Voice Messages 2.0, Secret Chats 3.0 and...” *Telegram Blog*, February 12, 2016, <https://bit.ly/1QWdTqr>.

Officially, sites that are judged to contain “harmful,” “illegal,” “anti-Islamic,” or “offensive” materi are routinely blocked, including pages related to pornography, gambling, and drugs. Websites that may be used to distribute copyrighted materials, such as the Pirate Bay,²³ are blocked.²⁴ Authorities also seek to disrupt the dissemination of violent extremism,²⁵ sometimes resulting in the blocking of licensed news sites for publishing photos of militants of the so-called Islamic State (IS).²⁶ Authorities do not tolerate criticism of the Saudi royal family or its allies among the Gulf Arab states. The website of the London-based *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* and its English equivalent *The New Arab* was blocked in January 2016.²⁷ The English language websites of most international news agencies are available.

Websites and social media pages belonging to human rights or political organizations, such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organization (ACPRA) and the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), are blocked.²⁸ Sites belonging to several Saudi religious scholars and dissidents are blocked,²⁹ as well as those related to the Shi’a religious minority, such as *Yahosein*, *Awamia*,³⁰ and *Rasid*,³¹ which was discontinued as a result.³² Authorities have also blocked the website of the Islamic Umma Party, the country’s only political party, which operates underground because political parties are illegal. It has called for the royal family to step down.

The government receives blocking requests from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding “undesirable” material.³³ Once an individual submits the form, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. In 2015, the CI C received 732,504 blocking requests.³⁴

The government is somewhat transparent about what content it blocks. While the list of banned sites is not publicly available, users who attempt to access a banned site are redirected to a page displaying the message, “Access to the requested URL is not allowed!” In addition, a green background is displayed on sites blocked by the CITC, whereas sites blocked by the Ministry of Culture and Information for licensing violations or copyright infringement have a blue background.

The country’s providers of data services must block all sites banned by the CITC,³⁵ and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (US\$1.33 million), according to

23 Ernesto, “Saudi Arabia Government Blocks The Pirate Bay (and More),” *TorrentFreak*, April 2, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KZwhQz>.

24 “Ministry of Culture and Information blocks 52 websites for infringing the rights of authors,” [in Arabic] *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, October 2012, <https://bit.ly/1PrEspC>.

25 “The censorship policy of websites that spread extremist ideologies has proven its success” [in Arabic] *Al Arabiya News*, December 22, 2012, <https://bit.ly/1Fr25fm>.

26 “Anha Newspaper Blocked,” *Al Hayat*, May 24, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2mZUGBf>.

27 Jasper Jackson, “Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt block access to Qatari-owned news website,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/1mzqvww2>.

28 According to the Alkasir.com, which provides information on blocked websites, the URLs acpra6.org and anhri.net are blocked in Saudi Arabia: “Cyber-Censorship Map,” Alkasir, accessed on March 2, 2013, <https://alkasir.com/map>.

29 Blocked websites of Saudi religious scholars include: www.almoslim.net, www.albrrak.net, and islamqa.info/ar; “Blocking some sites because they violate rules and spread bold ideas and theses” [in Arabic] *Al Arabiya*, April 6, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1EUWChv>.

30 “Cyber-Censorship Map,” Alkasir, accessed on March 2, 2013, <https://alkasir.com/map>.

31 Adala Center, “A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia” [in Arabic] accessed on December 22, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1NpMiAZ>.

32 “Time for Rasid to go,” (Archived) *Rasid*, June 5, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2udr6La>.

33 CITC, “Block Request Form,” Internet.gov.sa, <http://web1.internet.sa/en/block>.

34 CITC, “Annual Report, 2015,” 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ov9tk>.

35 CITC, “General Information on Filtering Service”, Internet.gov.sa, accessed on September 30, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1MbH05y>.

Article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.³⁶ Many Saudi internet users have become savvy at using circumvention tools such as Hotspot Shield, which allows users to access a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass censorship,³⁷ but the websites of many similar tools, such as Tor and the major VPN providers, are blocked by the government.³⁸

Content Removal

Blocking and filtering are compounded by the prior censorship that online news moderators and site owners must exercise. Gatekeepers frequently delete user-generated content that could be deemed inappropriate or inconsistent with the norms of society, as they can be held legally liable for content posted on their platforms.³⁹ As a result, it is unusual to find any antigovernment comments on the websites of major Saudi newspapers, which do not reflect the diversity of political views seen on social networks.

The CITC also sends requests to social networks to remove content. As of the end of 2016, Facebook had not reported any removal requests from the Saudi government since 2014, when seven were sent by the CITC “under local laws prohibiting criticism of the royal family.”⁴⁰ Google received 13 requests from the CITC to remove 43 items in the second half of 2016, complying in 54 percent of cases. The majority of cases were categorized by the company as related to “copyright” or “obscenity/nudity.”⁴¹ Twitter reported only five removal requests from the Saudi government from July 2016 to June 2017, and took no action.⁴² In November 2016, the governor of the CITC told an anti-child abuse conference that a delegation from the Gulf Arab countries would be sent to the United States to discuss the filtering of pornographic content with Twitter’s management.⁴³

Copyright notices have been used by popular figures to attempt to remove criticism deemed as defamatory. In September 2014, an episode of a satirical show on YouTube called *Fitnah* was censored when the Saudi TV channel Rotana sent a notice to have it taken down under U.S. copyright law. The show used footage from the channel to criticize its owner, Prince Waleed Bin Talal.⁴⁴ The video was later restored.⁴⁵

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Social media users are increasingly careful about what they post, share, or “like” online, particularly after the passage of a new antiterrorism law in 2014. Users who express support for liberal ideals,

36 Telecommunication Act of Saudi Arabia, <http://bit.ly/2oomclR>.

37 Saudis refer to this circumvention tool as a “proxy breaker.”

38 Examples include Hotspot Shield, Hide My Ass! and AirVPN.

39 “Raif Badawi’s wife provides “Anhaa” with the list of charges against her husband and calls for his release [in Arabic] *Anhaa*, April 25, 2013, <http://www.an7a.com/102662>.

40 Facebook, “Saudi Arabia,” *Government Requests Report*, June–December 2016, <https://govtrequests.facebook.com/country/Saudi%20Arabia/2016-H2/>.

41 Google, “Saudi Arabia,” *Transparency Report 2016*, <https://govtrequests.facebook.com/country/Saudi%20Arabia/2016-H2/>.

42 Twitter, “Removal Requests,” *Transparency Report*, 2017, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html>.

43 “‘Child Abuse’ condemned by the CITC, who describes Twitter as a pornography market,” *Al Hayat*, November 19, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2oMQi4Q>.

44 “YouTube Blocks Fitna Show In Response to a Request from Rotana,” [in Arabic] *al-Tagreer*, September 7, 2014, <https://bit.ly/1Tb7KKZ> [offline]

45 Maira Sutton, “Copyright Law as a Tool for State Censorship of the Internet,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, December 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1rVSJmg>.

minority rights, or political reform, in addition to those who expose human rights violations, are closely monitored and often targeted by the government. Questioning religious doctrine is strictly taboo, particularly content related to the prophet Mohammed. Saudi women receive pressure to refrain from posting photos of their faces online. This social pressure has led to many users turning to privacy-conscious social networks, such as Snapchat and Path. Influential Twitter users are growingly fearful of expressing support for outspoken activists who have been recently sentenced to jail time. Government consultants have stopped contributing to foreign newspaper articles due to pressure from other government agency representatives.

With so much activity occurring on social networks, the Saudi government maintains an active presence online as a means of creating the illusion of popular support for its policies. It is believed the government employs an “electronic army” to continuously post progovernment views, particularly on social media. Progovernment trolls have taken to “hashtag poisoning,” a method of spamming a popular hashtag in order to disrupt criticism or other unwanted conversations through a flood of unrelated or opposing tweets.⁴⁶ Bots, or automated accounts created by combining random photos of faces with names culled from the internet, frequently share identical messages. The government also influences online news reporting by offering financial support to news sites such as *Sabq* and *Elaph* in return for coordination between site editors and the authorities.⁴⁷

The owners of opposition websites, by contrast, come under strong financial pressure as a result of censorship. Revenue from third-party advertisers can be heavily impacted by a government decision to block a website. The government can also request advertisers cancel their ads on a particular website in order to pressure the website to close. Restrictions on foreign funding further inhibit the sustainability of websites that are critical of the ruling system.

Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of commonly used social media sites and mobile applications. While opposition blogs and online forums were once the main venue for discussing political and social matters, most Saudis now use social media. Saudis are the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world.⁴⁸

Opposition figures abroad use YouTube as a platform for distributing audio and video content, since their websites are blocked within the country.⁴⁹ Omar Abdulaziz, the Canada-based founder of the “Yakathah” channel on YouTube, produces political commentary shows that are very critical of progovernment propaganda.

Digital Activism

The most significant digital activism during the coverage period was the campaign to end male guardianship of women. Under Saudi law, women are treated as legal minors and cannot make critical decisions in relation to their education, health, and career without the supervision of a male relative. In July 2016, Human Rights Watch produced a report and a video clip in Arabic and English which gave birth to the hashtags #IamMyOwnGuardian, and #CampaignToEndGuardianship.⁵⁰ For

46 “Fake accounts and drowning the hashtag in Twitter [in Arabic] *Osama Al Muhaya*, March 16, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Q13N8g>.

47 “Othman Al-Omair in Turning Point 8-5” [in Arabic] YouTube video, 8:11, published by Alnahry2009, May 31, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1LXn9um>.

48 Arab Social Media Report 2017, p45 <http://bit.ly/2kG5vGh>.

49 Examples include Sa’ad Al-Faqih, Mohammad al-Massari and Mohammad al-Mofarreh.

50 “Boxed In,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 16, 2016 <http://bit.ly/29HrKTg>.

more than eight months, these hashtags trended locally with many female activists documenting their experiences and calling for an end to the restrictions. In September 2016, more than 14,000 men and women signed a petition to the Royal Court calling for an end to the guardianship system.⁵¹ Some 2,500 women sent letters to the Royal Court in one weekend alone.⁵² Saudi's Grand Mufti described the campaign as "a crime targeting the Saudi and Muslim society," and said the guardianship system should stay.⁵³ In December 2016, a music video with Saudi women singing feminist lyrics went viral with three million views in less than two weeks.⁵⁴ In May 2017, King Salman issued a royal directive to government agencies to limit any restrictions on women's access to public services to cases where the limits are established by law.⁵⁵ On September 26, King Salman announced women would be given the right to drive starting in June 2018.⁵⁶

Saudis have also used smartphones to document corruption and improper behavior by government official ⁵⁷ In September 2016, three managers of a hospital in the eastern city of Abqaiq were suspended after a video showed workers painting hospital rooms while patients were in them.⁵⁸ Similarly, in January 2017, the manager of a primary care center in the Eastern Province was suspended after a video showed housekeepers dispensing medications to patients.⁵⁹

In September 2016, an online campaign was launched to boycott telecommunication companies in response to their "overpriced and limited" internet packages. The campaign called for people to unfollow the Twitter accounts of the companies and refrain from making calls at specific times of day.⁶⁰ In response, the companies privately asked popular figures to step in and defend them. One Twitter user publicized a message he received in which he was asked to write that "fair usage internet policies" were for the public good and that similar policies apply in the United States.⁶¹

Violations of User Rights

Saudi courts have delivered some of the harshest prison sentences against internet users in the world, with numerous human rights defenders jailed for up to 11 years for their online activities. This past year witnessed the arrest and prosecution of both conservative and liberal social media users for criticizing the government.

51 "Saudi women file petition to end male guardianship system," BBC, September 26, 2017, <http://bbc.in/2deatqr>.

52 Gretel Kauffman, "Saudi women petition to end male guardianship laws," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 27, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2czPNVg>.

53 Donie O'Sullivan, "The women tweeting for their freedom in Saudi Arabia," CNN, September 16, 2016, <http://cnn.it/2cjs77i>.

54 "Women Defy Saudi Restrictions in Video, Striking a Nerve," *New York Times*, January 5, 2017 <http://nyti.ms/2umVyTO>.

55 "Saudi King issues new law on women's guardianship," *Khaleej Times*, May 5, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2pMyWXC>.

56 Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia agrees to let women drive," September 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-drive.html>.

57 "Saudi Arabia: The head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Riyadh Abdullah al-Fawaz was dismissed" *Arabian Business*, February 14, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2boxEvh>.

58 "The Painting Incident Suspends Mangers of a Abqaiq Hospital", [Arabic] *Alriyadh Newspaper*, September 7, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2oohUkF>.

59 *Alriyadh News Paper*, "A video clip get a primary care center manager suspended", [Arabic] January 5, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2oov4hF>

60 "We will render you bankrupt': a campaign to boycott Saudi telecommunication companies," [Arabic] *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, October 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2op5lFw>.

61 Twitter, @MidoAlhajji's tweet, [Arabic] October 1, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2nKolBZ>.

Legal Environment

Saudi Arabia has no constitution. The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia contains language that calls for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only within certain boundaries. The 2000 Law of Print and Press also addresses freedom of expression issues, though it largely consists of restrictions on speech rather than protections. Online journalists employed at newspapers and other formal news outlets maintain the same rights and protections as print and broadcast journalists, and like their counterparts, are also subject to close government supervision. Similarly, laws designed to protect users from cybercrimes also contain clauses that limit freedom of expression. The 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law criminalizes “producing something that harms public order, religious values, public morals, the sanctity of private life, or authoring, sending, or storing it via an information network,” and imposes penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to SAR three million (US\$800,000).⁶²

The antiterrorism law, passed in January 2014, defines terrorism in such vague terms as “insulting the reputation of the state,” “harming public order,” or “shaking the security of the state,” effectively criminalizing a range of nonviolent speech.⁶³ Article 1 of the law defines “calling for atheist thought in any form” as terrorism.⁶⁴ Article 4 prohibits support for banned groups by “circulating their contents in any form, or using slogans of these groups and currents [of thought], or any symbols which point to support or sympathy with them” through audio, visual, or written format, including websites and social media.⁶⁵

In January 2017, a threatening message was widely circulated through local WhatsApp groups stating that those who incite public opinion through the platform could be imprisoned for one year and fined 500,000 Saudi riyals fine (US\$133,000). The message was also promoted by state-owned newspapers, who cited lawyers to confirm its legal basis⁶⁶

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Saudi Arabia’s restrictive laws have been rigorously applied to silence critical voices and human rights defenders. Since traditional political organizing is banned, many human rights activists conduct activities online. As a result, the authorities often prosecute activists for setting up websites, posting on Twitter, or appearing in YouTube videos documenting human rights abuses or calling for government action.

For example, in December 2016, an appeals court increased the sentence against human rights activist Issa al-Hamid from 9 to 11 years in prison followed by a travel ban of equal duration, as well as a fine of 100,000 Saudi riyals (US\$27,000)⁶⁷ The original sentence was issued in April 2016 by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh which found al-Hami guilty of “defaming the Council of Senior Religious Scholars,” “insulting the judiciary,” “communicating false information to

62 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Royal Decree No. M/17, Anti-Cyber Crime Law, March 2007, <http://bit.ly/2ovxLuB>.

63 Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights,” March 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1d3mLN9>.

64 Elliot Hannon, “New law in Saudi Arabia Labels All Atheists as Terrorists,” *Slate*, April 1, 2014, <http://slate.me/1ifyNk9>.

65 Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights,” March 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1d3mLN9>.

66 “WhatsApp leads citizens and residents to prison, fine and flo ing,” *Al Hayat Newspaper*, February 19, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2op4aGg>, and “A year in prison and a 500,000 fine for WhatsApp inciters” *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, January 9, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oMUNfR>.

67 “Saudi Arabia increases ruthless sentence in unfair trial of human rights defender to 11 years,” *Amnesty International*, December 1, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2glwZX5>.

international organizations in order to harm the image of the state,” and “violating Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law.”⁶⁸ Al-Hamid is a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). Abdulaziz al-Shubaily, another ACPRA co-founder, had his sentence confirmed by an appeals court in January 2017.⁶⁹ He was sentenced to eight years in prison, followed by an eight-year ban on travel and social media use.⁷⁰

A court in Riyadh disbanded the ACPRA in March 2013 and sentenced two of its other members, Abdulah al-Hamid and Mohammed al-Qahtani, to 11 years and 10 years in prison, respectively, in addition to a travel ban the same length.⁷¹ Their sentences were partly based on Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, relating to the creation of a website that could disturb social order.⁷² Six additional founding members of ACPRA are currently in detention.⁷³ Two founding members of the Islamic Umma Party, al-Wahiby and al-Gamidi,⁷⁴ have been in prison since February 2011.⁷⁵ Both the ACPRA and the Islamic Umma Party base many of their operations online.

A number of religious figures and conservative citizens were arrested for criticizing government-led social reforms during the reporting period.

- In February 2017, conservative preacher Asem al-Owyaed was arrested for his tweets criticizing the newly-established General Entertainment Authority (GEA). Public entertainment was previously rare, but the GEA began to organize concerts in 2016.⁷⁶
- Saad al-Barrak, a conservative preacher with 1.5 million Twitter followers,⁷⁷ was detained one month later for defending al-Owyaed on Twitter.⁷⁸
- In November 2016, a conservative Twitter user was sentenced to two years in prison for “inciting public opinion.” The user had criticized a reform that limited the role of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.⁷⁹
- In December 2016, four conservative Twitter users were tried for claiming the government executed 47 men accused of terrorism in a bid to “please the U.S.” One reportedly had 500,000 followers.⁸⁰ State-owned media accused one of the suspects of inappropriate behavior with a woman on WhatsApp to sully his reputation.⁸¹

68 “URGENT ACTION: Issa al-Hamid Sentenced to 9 Years in Prison,” *Amnesty International*, June 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2n0Tr4J>.

69 “Saudi Arabia steps up ruthless crackdown against human rights activists,” *Amnesty International*, January 10, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2j1s8SA>.

70 “Saudi Arabia: Counter-terror court sentences activist for exposing systematic human rights violations,” *Amnesty International*, May 29, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2nthtk3>.

71 “10 years jail for Al-Qahtani and 11 for Al-Hamid in the ACPRA case” [in Arabic], *Sabq*, March 9, 2013, <http://sabq.org/onyfde>.

72 CITC, “Anti-Cyber Crime Law,” March 2007, <http://bit.ly/VWXEmI>.

73 Those members are Sulieman Al-Rushoody, Mansour Al-Awth, Mousa Al-Garni, Mohamed Al-Bijadi, Saleh Al-Ashwan and Fawzan Al-Harbi.

74 Islamic Umma Party, Twitter Page, accessed on December 22, 2012, <http://twitter.com/islamicommapart>.

75 Islamic Umma Party, Twitter Page, accessed on March 10, 2012, <http://twitter.com/islamicommapart>.

76 “A Saudi preacher arrested with a charge of funding terrorism” *The New Gulf*, February 25, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2ntmokZ>.

77 Saad al-Breik, Twitter Page, <https://twitter.com/saadalbrik>.

78 “Angry Tweets after the arrest of Saad Albreik,” *The New Gulf*, March 5, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nNCUQh>.

79 “Riyadh: Two years in prison for a Twitter user for offending the rulers” [Arabic] *Okaz Newspaper*, November 15, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2owHf8M>.

80 “Four preachers are being tried, one of which accused the government of executing 47 to please the US,” [Arabic] *Al Watan Newspaper*, December 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2nsSKfR>.

81 “WhatsApp exposes the romance of Twitter preacher,” [Arabic] *Al Watan Newspaper*, December 30, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2nKo6QN>.

Both conservative and liberal critics have been accused of sharing pornographic content in a bid to discredit them in the conservative society. In December 2016, a Twitter user who had called for an end to male guardianship was sentenced to one year in prison and a fine of SAR 30,000 (US\$8,000) for allegedly operating a pornographic account on Twitter.⁸²

Prominent human rights activists have been questioned about their online activities. Samar Badawi, a human rights advocate and the sister of imprisoned blogger Raif Badawi, was summoned to the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP) in February 2017. She was asked about her role in the online campaign to end male guardianship.⁸³ In another case, Essam Koshak was detained by the BIP and questioned about his tweets in January 2017.⁸⁴ As of July, he was still detained without charge.⁸⁵

On a positive note, a Twitter user was cleared of defamation charges in July 2016. The charges related to his participation in an online campaign criticizing a healthcare center (see "Digital Activism").⁸⁶

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia, which justifies the pervasive monitoring of nonviolent political, social, and religious activists under the umbrella excuse of protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, emails and mobile phone text messages. Evidencing the government's determination to monitor its citizens, the American security expert Moxie Marlinspike published email correspondence with an employee at Mobily who sought to recruit him to help the telecommunications firm intercept encrypted data from mobile applications such as Twitter, Viber, and WhatsApp.⁸⁷

The Ministry of Culture and Information requires that all blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other sites obtain a license from the ministry to operate, thus putting more pressure on online writers to self-regulate their content.⁸⁸ However, this rule is enforced only on popular online publications. Even anonymous users and writers who employ pseudonyms when making controversial remarks face special scrutiny from the authorities, who attempt to identify and detain them.

In January 2016, the CITC required mobile network operators to register the fingerprints of new SIM card subscribers, and in August 2016, unregistered subscriptions were suspended. Subscribers had a period of 90 days to document their fingerprint to reactivate their lines before the suspension became permanent.⁸⁹ The CITC said that the new requirement is meant to "limit the negative effects

82 "Criminal Court of Dammam sentences 'guardianship abolitionist' to prison and a fine," [Arabic] *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, December 27, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2owqYAG>.

83 "Sister of Raif Badwi Summoned in Saudi Arabia," [Arabic] *France 24*, February 15, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nKPoXe>.

84 "Saudi Arabia 'arrests two human rights activists'," *BBC*, January 11, 2017 <http://bbc.in/2jGwL7F>.

85 Adam Coogler, "Essam Koshak Case Will Test Saudi Arabia's 'Reformed' Prosecution Service," Human Rights Watch, July 18, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/18/essam-koshak-case-will-test-saudi-arabias-reformed-prosecution-service>.

86 "Court rules in favor of a Twitter user," *Al Waaam Newspaper*, July 14, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2nw6yqB>.

87 Moxie Marlinspike, "A Saudi Arabia Telecom's Surveillance Pitch", *Thought Crime* (blog), May 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/101Ynw>.

88 Reporters Without Borders, "Saudi Arabia," *Internet Enemies*, 2012, <http://bit.ly/JrLevl>.

89 *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, "Unauthenticated mobile subscriptions to be suspended, tomorrow", August 3, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2nMziOl>.

and violations in the use of communication services.”⁹⁰ This added to the previous legal requirement to register subscribers’ real names and identity numbers, even to recharge a prepaid mobile card,⁹¹ which was often circumvented in practice.⁹²

Intimidation and Violence

Numerous individuals report that they were tortured by police while held in custody, often to force confessions. Munir al-Adam, who was sentenced to death for his role in antigovernment protests in the Shiite-majority town of al-Qatif, said he was severely beaten by police and coerced into signing a confession. Among other accusations against him, police claimed he was “sending texts,” although he denied owning a mobile phone.⁹³

Progovernment Twitter accounts often defame and harass activists by using hashtags to call for their arrest. Anonymous accounts often show photos of the king or the interior minister as their avatars. For example, after the *Economist* released a YouTube interview with political activist Loujain al-Hathloul and social activist Fahad Albutairi,⁹⁴ Twitter and WhatsApp users accused them of treason.

Technical Attacks

Hackers hijacked Twitter accounts to oppose the government in the past year. On January 6, 2017, the Twitter account of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Education was hacked by an unknown actor who called on the government to provide schools with medical equipment, offer job opportunities for unemployed postgraduate teachers, and reduce the number of foreign teachers, among other demands.⁹⁵ In February, the Twitter account of the Eastern Province office of the Ministry of Health was separately hacked; the perpetrator called for better measures to fight medical malpractice, and reduce the number of foreign health practitioners.⁹⁶

On June 3, 2016, hackers infiltrated the website of *Al-Watan* newspaper and posted a fabricated statement by the crown prince condemning Saudi foreign policy in Yemen and Syria.⁹⁷ The editor-in-chief of the site accused Iran or the so-called Islamic State of responsibility.⁹⁸

Several public and private institutions faced major security breaches during the reporting period. Attacks by the “Greenbug” group began on November 17, 2016, triggering the loss of critical data at the General Authority of Civil Aviation, though air travel, airport operations, and navigation

90 “Communication Commission mandates companies to register fingerprints before issuing cards” [in Arabic], *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, January 22, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1WEBQ9H>.

91 “User’s ID number now required to recharge prepaid mobile phones”, *Arab News*, July 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1azmvzS>.

92 Faleh Al-Buyani, “Black market for SIM cards with ID thriving”, *Saudi Gazette*, December 31, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Q1amYu>.

93 Charlotte England, “Saudi Arabia to behead disabled man for taking part in protests,” *The Independent*, November 4, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-behead-disabled-protester-executions-reprieve-amnesty-a7396906.html>.

94 “Arrested and jailed for driving in Saudi Arabia” *The Economist*, January 22, 2016, <https://youtu.be/XsQaldTph5Q>.

95 “Hacker sends 6 messages after hacking the spokesperson of the Ministry of Education,” *Al Watan Newspaper*, January 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nZ2OkH>.

96 “Hackers hijack the ‘Eastern Health’ Twitter account and send messages to the minister,” *Okaz Newspaper*, February 13, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2oMZEaA>.

97 “Saudi Al Watan confirms: it was hacked and ‘dishonest statements’ of Prince Mohammad bin Nayef were distributed,” CNN Arabia, June 5, 2016, <http://cnn.it/2bGwMTB>.

98 “Saudi Al Watan Editor-in-Chief: Iran hacked the website,” *Al Arabiya*, June 5, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2bQnST2>.

systems were not affected.⁹⁹ The virus was configured to wipe the disks of infected computers and display a photo of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee whose body was found on a beach in Turkey.¹⁰⁰ Another attack occurred on January 23, 2017, affecting the Ministry of Labor, the Human Resources Development Fund,¹⁰¹ and Sadara, a chemical company jointly owned by Saudi Aramco and Dow Chemical.¹⁰² Three days after the attack, Sadara announced that they had resolved the issue. Symantec analyzed two variants of the virus,¹⁰³ and in March 2017, Kaspersky Lab reported the discovery of another malware that played a role in the recent attacks, named “StoneDrill.” The new malware was also found to be infecting computers in Europe.¹⁰⁴ A group of hackers known as “Shamoon” had carried out similar attacks in Saudi Arabia in 2012, infecting over 35,000 computers belonging to Saudi Aramco.

99 “Cyberattacks Strike Saudi Arabia, Harming Aviation Agency,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/2opluv1>.

100 “Shamoon wiper malware returns with a vengeance,” *Ars Technica*, December 1, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2opps6l>.

101 “Saudi Arabia warns of new crippling cyberattack,” *CNN Tech*, January 26, 2017, <http://cnnmon.ie/2nNJuX9>.

102 “Saudi’s Sadara gets cause of network disruption resolved (SYMC),” *Business Insider*, January 26, 2017, <http://read.bi/2nZ1xKr>.

103 “Greenbug cyberespionage group targeting Middle East, possible links to Shamoon,” Symantec Official Blog, January 23 2017, <http://symc.ly/2n0OZmw>.

104 “From Shamoon to StoneDrill,” *Securelist*, March 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2mAb2iB>.