

Saudi Arabia

	2013	2014		
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free	Population:	30.1 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	15	Internet Penetration 2013:	60 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	24	24	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	32	33	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	70	72	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2014 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: May 2013 – May 2014

- At least 35 news websites were blocked in December for failing to register with authorities, in the first signs that the government is enforcing e-publishing legislation passed in 2011 (see **Limits on Content**).
- Similarly, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media announced in April that it will begin monitoring YouTube videos produced in the country for compliance with local laws (see **Limits on Content**).
- A new anti-terrorism law criminalizes online expression that promotes atheism, insults the state's reputation, harms public order, or threatens state security, among other things. Limits on arbitrary detention were also repealed, allowing security forces to detain individuals indefinitely and without charge (see **Violations of User Rights**).
- Prison sentences related to online activism and free expression have grown over the past year, with prominent human rights activists Mukhlif al-Shammari, Waleed Abu al-Khair, and Fadhel al-Manafes jailed for 5 to 15 years. Seven men from the Eastern province were sentenced to 5 to 10 years under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for allegedly inciting protest and damaging public order through Facebook. They had been detained since 2011 (see **Violations of User Rights**).

Introduction

Tensions between technological advancement and religious dogma continue to characterize the online sphere in Saudi Arabia. Social media has opened a new space for public interaction between Saudis, even aiding in matchmaking between men and women in the conservative country.¹ As use of Twitter and YouTube in particular reached some of the highest levels in the world, Saudis have employed online tools to highlight government corruption, discuss economic and social issues, and, in more limited cases, call attention to human rights violations. The government has responded positively to some low-level issues, but has shown a zero tolerance policy when red lines are crossed on political or religious issues.

Having first gained access to the internet in 1998, Saudis now go online from their home, place of employment, data-enabled mobile phones, and internet cafes. All forms of internet and mobile phone access are available in the country, including fiber-optic networks (FTTx), third-generation (3G) and fourth-generation (4G) mobile networks, internet via satellite, and High-Speed Packet Access (HSPA) technologies. In a sign that the government itself realizes the crucial role of Twitter, King Abdullah's chief of royal court and gatekeeper, Khalid al-Tuwaijir, in March 2014 reactivated his defunct Twitter account. He indicated he would follow a list of 50 people at a time, asking them to send him requests or issues that needed to be resolved. However, while Saudi Arabia is a regional leader in providing e-government services, authorities have looked to exploit technology to more disturbing ends as well.² A system whereby male guardians are alerted by text message when a woman leaves the country was introduced in November 2012.³ Following complaints from high-profile Saudi women, it was suspended in January 2014.⁴

Public figures and religious authorities continue to warn citizens against the "evils" of social media and other online tools. On May 15, 2013, the country's top cleric declared that a Saudi who uses Twitter "has lost this world and his afterlife."⁵ In September 2013, it was reported that several government ministries warned that tweets are monitored and employees may face termination from their jobs for expressing critical opinions.⁶ Authorities have also stepped up the monitoring of social media, with the government announcing in April 2014 that it would begin to monitor YouTube videos produced in the country to ensure compliance with local laws. Dozens of news websites were blocked in February for failing to obtain a government license as the government took the first steps towards enforcing a law on online publishing passed in 2011.

While the country is grappling with regional threats related to the recruitment and return of armed extremists fighting in Syria, broad anti-terrorism regulations are being applied to human rights

1 Khadija al-Mazrouhi, "Social media plays matchmaking role in Saudi Arabia," Joelle el-Khoury, trans., Al Monitor, March 9, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2014/03/social-media-saudi-breaking-barriers.html>.

2 , United Nations, "United Nations E-Government Survey 2012," December 26, 2012, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan048065.pdf>.

3 "'Where's my wife?' Electronic SMS tracker notifies Saudi husbands", AlArabiya, December 27, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/22/251255.html>.

4 "Suspension of text messages when women leaves Saudi Arabia," American Bedu, January 19, 2014, <http://americanbedu.com/2014/01/19/suspension-of-text-messages-when-women-leave-saudi-arabia/>.

5 Betsy Isaacson, "Twitter, Saudi Arabia's Top Cleric Says, Will Damn Your Soul," The Huffington Post, May 18, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/18/twitter-saudi-arabia-damn_n_3294209.html.

6 "The Ministry of Justice Monitors Lawyers' Tweets," Al-Watan September 9 2013, <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=18191>.

defenders and critics of the state. In the Eastern Province (*Ash-Sharqiyah*), where disparate protests have continued for years, seven men were sentenced for 5 to 10 years under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for allegedly inciting protests and damaging public order through Facebook. A photographer known as the “Revolution’s Journalist” for documenting local protests was shot dead during a police raid on his neighbor’s home in February. Prominent human rights activists Mukhlif al-Shammari, Waleed Abu al-Khair, and Fadhel al-Manafes were jailed for 5, 10, and 15 years, respectively, in addition to extended travel bans and suspended sentences. Rai Badawi, the co-founder of the Saudi Liberals website that has been detained since 2012, had his jail sentence increased from 7 to 10 years in March 2014. The increased prosecutions come as the government passed new legislation that, among other things, equates the promotion of atheist thought with violent terrorism, and abolishes time limits on arbitrary detentions.

Obstacles to Access

Saudis have enjoyed a rapid growth of internet and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years. Access had increased to 60.1 percent of the population by mid-2014, up from 36 percent in 2008.⁷ Fixed broadband subscriptions stood at 48.4 percent of all households, with a majority using ADSL connections. Monthly expenditure on 4G broadband ranges from between SAR 55 (\$11) for a 2GB allowance to SAR 146 (\$89) for a family plan of 60 GB.⁸ Household internet plus television packages with fiber-optic connections range from SAR 300 for speeds of 25 Mbps to SAR 800 for 200 Mbps.⁹

Mobile broadband use is even higher, with a penetration rate of 78.3 percent. Standard mobile phone subscriptions have risen to 51 million, resulting in a penetration rate of 169.3 percent.¹⁰ Finally, 87.8 percent of mobile subscriptions are prepaid. The number of mobile users has dropped from a height of 54 million in 2011 as the government deported thousands of illegal workers and forced mobile companies to cancel free roaming service, thus cutting the number of SIM cards that were exported as well as deactivating prepaid cards whose owners are not registered.¹¹

Overall, infrastructure is not considered a major barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas. Internet penetration is highest in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Residents of provinces such as Jizan in the south and Ha’il in the north are the least likely to use the internet, while young Saudis make up the majority of the user population throughout the country.¹² Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of applications such as chat rooms, discussion forums, and social media sites.

7 CITC, “ICT Indicators Report – End of Q2 2014,” http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/Indicators%20of%20Communications%20and%20Information%20Techn/ICT%20Indicators%202014%20-%20Q2%20-%20Analysis%20Report_Final.pdf.

8 See for example “Connect 4G,” Mobily, <http://bit.ly/1tJ6Rch>.

9 See for example “Package Prices,” Mobily, <http://bit.ly/1sFCIRf>.

10 CITC, “ICT Indicators Report – End of Q2 2014,” http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/Indicators%20of%20Communications%20and%20Information%20Techn/ICT%20Indicators%202014%20-%20Q2%20-%20Analysis%20Report_Final.pdf.

11 Matt Smith, “Saudi mobile subscriptions shrink on labor crackdown, hajj limits,” Al Arabiya, January 26, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/telecoms/2014/01/26/Saudi-mobile-subscriptions-shrink-on-labor-crackdown-Haj-limits.html>.

12 CITC, “The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia.”

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 years past. These servers, which contain long lists of blocked sites, are placed between the state-owned internet backbone and global servers. All user requests that arrive via Saudi internet service providers (ISPs) travel through these servers, where they can be filtered and possibly blocked.

The two country-level service providers offer services to licensed ISPs, which in turn sell connections to dial-up and leased-line clients. The number of ISPs in the country rose from 23 in 2005 to 36 in 2011.¹³ Broadband and mobile phone services are provided by the three largest telecommunications companies in the Middle East: Saudi Telecom Company (Saudi Arabia), Mobily (owned by Etisalat of the United Arab Emirates), and Zain (Kuwait).

Internet cafes, once prevalent, have become less popular in recent years due to the broad availability and affordability of home broadband access. With the departure of many power users, internet cafes are now mainly used by youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds to congregate and socialize. Due to a mandate issued by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) on April 16, 2009,¹⁴ all internet cafes must close by midnight, compliance of which is ensured by the police.¹⁵ These measures were ostensibly designed to crack down on internet use by extremists, but in practice they allow the police to deter any activity that the government may find objectionable. 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.

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.¹⁶ In 2003, the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC) became responsible for providing internet access to the private sector.

The CITC establishes policies and enforces regulations on ICT services, including duties such as managing tariffs, performing content filtering, and licensing providers.¹⁷ Under the 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law, the CITC also assists the Ministry of Interior (MOI) in monitoring extremists and political activists.¹⁸ While both the CITC and KACST claim to enjoy administrative and financial independence, there is no evidence to support this. On the contrary, the CITC chairman is also the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, while the KACST President reports directly to the Prime Minister and is appointed by the King. Board members consist of government officials, appointed to these roles on the basis of their position within the government.

13 CITC, "Annual Report, 2011" [in Arabic], Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2012, http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/MediaCenter/Annualreport/Documents/PR_REP_007.pdf.

14 For more information on this mandate, please refer to [Arabic] <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20090416/Con20090416271112.htm>.

15 "New hidden camera rule for Internet cafés", Saudi Gazette, April 16, 2009, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009041635209>

16 "ISU History", KACST, March 2, 2013, <http://www.kacst.edu.sa/en/depts/isu/Pages/about.aspx>

17 "CITC Roles and Responsibilities", CITC, March 2, 2013, <http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/AboutUs/AreasOfwork/Pages/default.aspx>

18 Anti-Cyber Crime Law, MOI [in Arabic], March 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/19JUq7S>.

Limits on Content

The Saudi government continued to employ strict filtering over internet content throughout 2013 and early 2014. Authorities blocked dozens of news sites for failing to obtain a government license, the first time that regulations on online publishing, enacted in 2011, have been enforced. The General Commission for Audiovisual Media announced in April that it would begin to monitor Saudi videos uploaded to YouTube to ensure compliance with local laws. These moves reflect a growing regulation of online content, in line with authorities' strict control over traditional media. Although high levels of social media use has translated into a growing diversity of content online, self-censorship remains prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family. Overall, these tools have also been used by ordinary citizens and human rights activists in order to raise awareness on issues surrounding poverty, gender inequality, and corruption. However, numerous arrests and lengthy prison sentences have had an overall chilling effect on online activism (See "Violations of User Rights").

Past reports indicated that at least 400,000 websites that are considered immoral or politically sensitive are inaccessible within the country. Officially, sites that are judged to contain "harmful," "illegal," "anti-Islamic," or "offensive" material are routinely blocked, including pages related to pornography, gambling, and drugs. While part of the government's blocking policy is designed to disrupt terrorist networks and the dissemination of extremist ideology, the government also blocks any content that it deems harmful to society or challenging to the royal family. Criticism of Saudi Arabia or other Gulf Arab States is not tolerated, and neither are sites that organize political opposition or question the ruling family's strict conception of Islam.¹⁹ The extensive list of sites blocked under these policies is supplemented by an additional list formulated from recommendations by members of the public.²⁰

On March 13, 2014, the Ministry of Information announced it had blocked 35 unlicensed online publications. The websites were blocked for failing to obtain a government license under an online publishing law that was passed in January 2011, but not implemented until now.²¹ Abdelaziz al-Oqail, assistant undersecretary at the Ministry of Information and Culture, told *al-Hayat* on March 21 that another list of publications would be blocked, without providing more details.²² A spokesman from the Ministry of Culture and Information stated that any electronic newspapers that contained false information or offensive content, such as material that offended Islam, Saudi Arabia, or national traditions, would be shut down. Online publications must obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Information, which lasts for three years and can only be granted to citizens that have passed high school and are at least 20-years-old. Editors-in-chief must also be approved by the ministry.²³

19 "The censorship policy of websites that spread extremist ideologies has proven its success"[in Arabic], AlArabiya.Net, December 22, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/29/217356.html>.

20 "General Information on Filtering Service", Internet.gov.sa, June 22, 2013 <http://www.internet.gov.sa/learn-the-web/guides/content-filtering-in-saudi-arabia>

21 Rory Jones and Ahmed al-Omran, "Saudi Arabia Plans to Regulate Local YouTube Content," Wall Street Journal, April 24, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304518704579521463293165726?cb=logged0.6177338273264468>.

22 "35 online newspapers blocked for not getting a license," March 13, 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/1070630/-الاعمال-35-تحت-ادلاج-دفنت-سرخ-6-اروذج-م-ةينورتكلل-ةيفيحص-35-تحت>

23 "'Offensive' e-papers face closure in Saudi Arabia," Al Arabiya, February 17, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/02/17/Offensive-e-papers-face-closure-in-Saudi-Arabia.html>.

In another bid to regulate online content, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media announced that it will begin to monitor YouTube videos made in Saudi Arabia for compliance with local laws. The president of the commission, Riyadh Najm, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "We will make them aware of what's acceptable in Saudi Arabia... Criticism is acceptable as long as it's professional and constructive." Prohibitions would include nudity, alcohol, tobacco, and acts of a sexual nature, although it is still too early to how the government will censor in practice.²⁴

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.²⁵ Sites belonging to several Saudi religious scholars and dissidents are blocked,²⁶ as well as those related to the Shi'a religious minority, such as Rasid,²⁷ Yahosein, and Awamia.²⁸ Authorities also block the website of the Islamic Umma Party, the country's only underground (and illegal) political party, which has called for the royal family to step down.

The CITC also censors individual social media pages that demand political reforms or basic civil rights. These include the Facebook pages of Abdullah al-Hamid and Mohamed Saleh al-Bejadi, well-known Saudi human rights activists and co-founders of the ACPRA,²⁹ as well as the Twitter accounts of Saudi human rights activist and blogger Nouf Abdulaziz,³⁰ Saudi journalist and political activist Muhana al-Hubail, and the head of the organization "Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia" Waleed Abo al-Khair.³¹ Authorities also blocked the official website for the "October 26th Women Driving campaign" on September 29th, 2013. One week later, a mirror site was also blocked.³² In early 2013, the government also temporarily blocked millions of Twitter pages in an experiment to test its capabilities.³³

Authorities have occasionally moved to block entire online products and services for breaching the country's strict laws. In September 2012, the government threatened to block all of YouTube if Google did not restrict access to the controversial "Innocence of Muslims" video containing an offensive depiction of the Prophet Mohamed. Google later blocked the video in Saudi Arabia.³⁴ The CITC also has an aggressive stance toward Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services that

24 Rory Jones and Ahmed al-Omran, "Saudi Arabia Plans to Regulate Local YouTube Content," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304518704579521463293165726?cb=logged0.6177338273264468>.

25 According to the Alkasir.com, which provides information on blocked websites, the URLs acpra6.org and anhri.net are blocked in Saudi Arabia. See <https://alkasir.com/map>, accessed March 2, 2013.

26 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], AlArabiya.net, April 6, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/06/205754.html>.

27 "A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic/English], Adala Center], December 22, 2012, <http://www.adalacenter.net/?act=sec&pg=39>.

28 See <https://alkasir.com/map> viewed March 2, 2013.

29 "A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic/English], Adala Center,], December 22, 2012, <http://www.adalacenter.net/?act=sec&pg=39>.

30 See <http://nofah.com/wordpress/>.

31 See <https://twitter.com/abualkhair>.

32 Osama Khalid, "Saudi Authorities Block Women Driving Websites," *Global Voices*, October 8, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/10/08/saudi-authorities-block-women-driving-websites/>.

33 "Saudi Authorities performs an experiment to block millions of Twitter links" [in Arabic], Anhri.net, March 6, 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/?p=72079>.

34 "YouTube blocks 'Innocence of Muslims' in Saudi Arabia", AlArabiya.net, September 19, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/19/238987.html>.

circumvent the country's regulatory environment and, by some indication, the surveillance apparatus. So far only Viber has been blocked, though authorities have threatened to institute further restrictions on services such as Whatsapp or Skype.³⁵ BlackBerry services were temporarily stopped on June 30, 2012 following glitches experienced by the BlackBerry maker Research in Motion, according to Saudi Telecom Company (STC). There was no evidence to suggest that the government was behind the short suspension.³⁶

There were several incidents in which pressure from social media users and online newspapers led to users deleting "controversial" tweets, disassociating themselves from their accounts, or even deleting their accounts. For instance, Twitter user Hesaah al-Sheikh disassociated herself from her account after public anger erupted over her tweet in which she equated listening to the singer Mohamed Abdo as listening to Allah.³⁷ Disassociating oneself from a Twitter account is common in Saudi Arabia, particularly when simply deleting a controversial tweet is not enough to calm public anger. Users who are deemed to have acted inappropriately often publicly declare that the account does not belong to them and that another user is using their name to impersonate them, a common occurrence in Saudi Arabia.³⁸

These limitations are compounded by the self-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

The government responds to takedown notices from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding undesirable material.⁴⁰ Sites can also be unblocked through a similar process.⁴¹ Once an individual completes such a request, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. The manager of public relations at the CITC said the commission receives about 200 requests each day, though he would not comment on how often the CITC unblocks a site based on such an appeal.⁴² In one example, the CITC unblocked the website Mustamel after the owners obeyed a request from the CITC to remove illegal advertisements.⁴³

The government is somewhat transparent about what content it blocks. 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

35 "CITC blocks Viber", Saudi Gazette, June 5, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130605168659>

36 "STC: BlackBerry service stoppage problem solved and service to return progressively" [in Arabic], Al-Madina Newspaper, June 30, 2012, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/387238?liv>.

37 "Writer Hessa Al-Sheikh explains to 'Sabq': Twitter account impersonated my personality" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 26, 2012, <http://sabq.org/Uuhfde>.

38 "Saudi Minister of Culture and Information criticizes impersonation of intellectuals" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, March 2, 2013, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/20/250707.html>

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 The CITC block-request form is available at <http://bit.ly/aRBpYa>.

41 The CITC unblock request form is available at <http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/unblock/>.

42 "About 300,000 requests to block sites in Saudi Arabia annually" [in Arabic], Ajl.com.sa, January 13, 2010, <http://www.burnews.com/news-action-show-id-12100.htm>.

43 "For the second time Haraj site blocked in Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic], Qbas, March 26, 2013, <http://qbas.org/home/news.php?action=show&id=3585>

blocked by the Information Ministry for licensing violations have a blue background. Still, a full list of banned sites is not publicly available. The country's two data service providers must block all sites banned by the CITC,⁴⁴ and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (\$1.33 million), according to Article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.⁴⁵ It should be noted, however, that 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.⁴⁶

After two years in which the space for moderate government criticism slowly opened, new anti-terror laws have had a chilling effect on users. Social media users are increasingly careful about what they post, share, or "Like" online. Users who express support for extremism, liberal ideals, minority rights, or political reforms, 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 Mohamed. Influential Twitter users, such as Essam al-Zamil, are growingly fearful of expressing support for outspoken activists who have been recently sentenced to jail time. Government consultants have stopped contributing to foreign newspapers 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 manufacturing consent for its policies. It is believed the government employs an "electronic army" to constantly 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. Through the use of a "bot," such as those provided by Yoono.com, one individual can send thousands of tweets to a hashtag at the same time.⁴⁷ While the tweet may contain the same message, the bot sends the tweet on behalf of numerous fabricated accounts, created by combining random photos of faces with names searched from the internet. 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.⁴⁸

Whereas the authorities provide monetary support to progovernment websites, the owners of opposition websites can come under strong financial pressures as a result of the country's environment 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 to the ruling system. Numerous sites have been closed for copyright violations,⁴⁹ or for featuring advertisements for drugs.⁵⁰ In addition,

44 CITC, "General Information on Filtering Service," September 30, 2010, <http://bit.ly/yhOPwD>.

45 Telecommunication Act found here [in Arabic]: <http://bit.ly/16Jzjj5>.

46 Saudis refer to this circumvention tool as a "proxy breaker."

47 "Fake accounts and drowning the hashtag in Twitter [in Arabic], Osama Al Muhaya, March 16, 2013, <http://osamh.me/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/twitterstudy.pdf>

48 "Othman Al-Omair in Turning Point 8-5" [in Arabic] MBC (YouTube), December 24, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=r9oqwtWiSYA.

49 "CITC closed down Haraj site after advertising half kilo Hashish", [in Arabic], AlSharq Newspaper, March 30, 2013, <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2013/03/30/783097>

50 "Saudi Arabia closes 52 sites violated intellectual property copyrights" [in Arabic], Ameinfo.com, October 16, 2012, <http://www.ameinfo.com/ar-248952.html>

several political opposition websites such as Humanf, Saudihr, Hummum, and Alwaqa have ceased operations in recent years, presumably because of pressure from the MoI.

While opposition blogs and online forums were once the main instrument for discussing political and social matters, most Saudis now use social media to share information and express opinions. According to Abdul Rahman Tarabzouni, the Head of Emerging Arabia at Google, Saudis collectively watch 190 million YouTube videos per day, the highest amount of views per capita of any country in the world.⁵¹ There are now dozens of comedic channels on YouTube, the most popular being “Eysh Elly,” “La Yekthar,” and “3al6ayer,” which respectively have around 126 million, 51 million, and 39 million total views.⁵² Omar Hussein, host of 3al6ayer, has touched on political issues and come out in support of women’s right to drive. On Eysh Elly, Badr Saleh compiles and makes fun of popular Saudi YouTube videos.⁵³ One reason for the success of these videos is their engagement in cautious rather than harsh criticism and their restraint against pushing the limits too far. Saudi companies such as C3 (Creative Culture Catalyst) and Jeddah-based UTURN have sprung up to provide funding and support for video production in the kingdom, with great success.

In the past, the government turned a blind eye towards the online broadcasters.⁵⁴ However, there are worries that government plans to monitor Saudi-made YouTube videos will result in self-censorship and pressure against users.

In limited cases, online activism has resulted in positive steps from the government. A YouTube video of a Saudi man abusing a foreign worker for speaking to his wife has reportedly prompted investigation from the government-sponsored Human Rights Commission.⁵⁵ However, in the majority of cases, those who upload or are featured in controversial YouTube videos may face criminal charges. For example, three men were arrested in March 2014 for YouTube videos in which they urged the king to improve living standards.⁵⁶ (See “Violations of User Rights”)

Similarly, Twitter continued to grow as a platform for expressing sensitive issues. Indeed, when interviewed, one Saudi described the country’s Twitter environment as a sort of virtual parliament “where people from all political sides meet and speak freely.”⁵⁷ Saudis are the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world, with the number of users reaching 4.8 million, according to a report by PeerReach.⁵⁸ Twitter is also a platform where victims of human rights abuses speak out in an effort to raise awareness and call for justice. Four Saudi princesses who say they have been locked up in

51 “The emergence of Google”, Arab News Newspaper, November 27, 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/emergence-google>.

52 Other popular channels include ‘Quarter to Nine,’ ‘Sa7i,’ ‘Masameer,’ ‘Eysh Elly,’ ‘Fe2aFala,’ ‘Hajma Mortadda’ ‘Just For Wanasah,’ and ‘Eysh Sar Fi Twitter.’ “Twitter usage in KSA grows ‘10 times’ the world average,” *Saudi Gazette*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130106148256>.

53 Omar Ramzi, “Saudi Comedians test authorities’ limits online,” *France24*, February 24, 2014, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20140224-saudi-comedians-youtube-society-taboos>.

54 Matt Smith, “Young Saudis getting creative on YouTube,” *Reuters*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/18/us-saudi-youtube-idUSBRE9AH0GY20131118>.

55 “Abuse video shocks Saudi Arabia,” November 1, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/31/world/meast/saudi-arabia-beating-video/index.html>

56 “Saudi Arabia arrests three for dissenting YouTube Videos,” March 31, 2014 <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/internet/news/saudi-arabia-arrests-three-for-dissenting-youtube-videos-activists-502511>.

57 “Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own,” Robert F. Worth, *The New York Times*, October 20, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/ORCPoc>.

58 “Saudi Arabia war on twitter,” December 12, 2013, <http://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2013/12/insight-saudi-arabias-war-on-twitter-79407/>.

isolation for 13 years have been active on the platform, resulting in international attention.⁵⁹ Saudis have also used hashtags such as “Breaking the fences,”⁶⁰ and “elected Consultative Council” to expose corruption by public officials or call for reforms.⁶¹ Prominent religious scholars, such as al-Awdah, have even contributed to these debates on Twitter.⁶²

On June 10, 2013, Saudi women took part in small “Sit-ins for Freedom” in several cities across the country in support of their detained relatives. Over 140 protestors were arrested in the two days that followed. The protests were organized the Twitter page @almonaseron, an advocacy group.⁶³ On the occasion of Saudi Arabia’s National Day (September 23), online advocacy groups arranged protests using Twitter in Buraidah and other towns, where they demonstrated together with the families of prisoners of conscience, particularly members of the ACPRA.⁶⁴

Facebook is the third most visited site in the country⁶⁵ with 7.8 million local users, according to a report by the Social Clinic in cooperation with The Loft Creative Hub.⁶⁶ Over the past few years, Facebook groups have been active in organizing low-level demonstrations in cities throughout the country.⁶⁷ However, more recently, the robustness of security forces in dismantling demonstrations and seeking out protestors for arrest has forced many Saudis to devise more creative forms of organized protest.

An online campaign, Saudi Nationality, has been started to change Article 7 of the Nationality Act, which grants only Saudi men the right to pass on nationality to their children. The children of Saudi mothers and non-Saudi fathers thus do not have access to public services.⁶⁸ Online petitions have also been created to demand the release of political detainees,⁶⁹ such as journalist and teacher Tariq al-Mubarak, who was arrested in October 2013 for supporting women’s right to drive.⁷⁰

The anonymous Twitter user @Mujtahidd continues to criticize high profile members of the royal

59 Solana Larsen, “Captive Saudi Princesses Speak Out on Twitter,” Global Voices, March 11, 2014, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/03/11/captive-saudi-princesses-speak-out-on-twitter/>.

60 #كوبشلال_ميطحت

61 #بختنم_يروش_بيلجم

62 “Salman Al-Awdah calls for an elected Consultative Council in Saudi Arabia [in Arabic], Watan.com, December 29, 2012, <http://www.watan.com/news/world-news/2012-12-29/18048>.

63 Osama Khalid, “Simultaneous ‘Sit-ins for Freedom’ Held Across Saudi Cities,” Global Voices, June 12, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/06/12/simultaneous-sit-ins-for-freedom-held-across-saudi-cities/>.

64 Hadeel Mohamed, “Blogging for Freedom on Saudi Arabia’s National Day,” Global Voices, September 25, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/09/25/saudi-arabias-national-day-a-carnival-is-not-enough/>.

65 “Twitter usage in KSA grows ‘10 times’ the world average,” *Saudi Gazette*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130106148256>.

66 “The state of social media in Saudi Arabia, 2013,” January 2014, <http://www.thesocialclinic.com/the-state-of-social-media-in-saudi-arabia-2013/>.

67 These include ‘Islamic Umma Party’, ‘Kulna Hasm’ (which is associated with ‘Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association’), ‘Rajab Revolution 1432 in Holly Mosques Land’, ‘Day of Anger in Saudi Arabia’, ‘the coalition of free youth’, ‘The national campaign for supporting detainees in Saudi Arabia’, and ‘The Coordinating Committee for the Youth movement in Saudi Arabia’.

68 Osama Khalid, “Campaign to Demand Saudi Nationality Gender Equality,” Global Voices, February 9, 2014, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/02/09/campaign-to-demand-saudi-nationality-gender-equality/>.

69 See <https://www.change.org/petitions/the-saudi-king-government-free-tariq-al-mubarak>.

70 Amira al Hussein, “Saudi Arabia Arrests Writer for Supporting Women Drivers,” Global Voices, November 1, 2013, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/11/01/saudi-arrests-writer-for-supporting-women-driving/>.

family,⁷¹ and to provide detailed descriptions of state corruption.⁷² The popularity of the account has more than doubled over a short period, increasing from around 410,000 Twitter followers in June 2012 to over 1.5 million as of May 2014.⁷³ In 2013, the user shared the tweets of dozens of users who defended the government using the exact same wording, thus evidencing the presence of a MoI Twitter army.⁷⁴ Due to apparent insider knowledge, the Mujtahidd account is believed to be operated by a disgruntled member of the Saudi royal family.

Violations of User Rights

Saudi courts have passed some of the harshest prison sentences against online users in the world over the past year, with numerous human rights defenders jailed for periods of 10 to 15 years for their online activities. The legal environment surrounding online expression remains a significant impediment to internet freedom, and it has only worsened over the past year. Authorities passed an anti-terrorism law that equates “insulting the reputation of the state” or “calling for atheist thought” with terrorism, allowing for the trial of numerous prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders in special terrorism tribunals under broad national security laws. Furthermore, a new law abolished time limits on arbitrary detention. Numerous Saudis have been detained for periods of months—and sometimes years—at a time without charge. Over the past twelve months, the cases of many of these victims were finally heard, only to result in lengthy prison sentences for expression that should be protected as a right.

Saudi Arabia has no constitution, but 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 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 assigns jail sentences and fines for defamation; the unauthorized interception of private email messages; the hacking of a website to deface, destroy, modify, or deny access to it; or simply the publishing or accessing of data that is “contrary to the state or its system.”⁷⁵

In late 2012, after an upsurge in defamation cases stemming from Twitter and the popular messaging service WhatsApp, the CITC deployed a large-scale media campaign to remind Saudis that “anyone who re-sends messages (via mobile phones and smartphone applications) that violate the sanctity of the private lives of citizens through insult, mockery, and violation of the sanctity of public morals, religious values and public order, will be sentenced to five years in jail, in addition to a fine of SAR 3 million (\$800,000).”⁷⁶ On August 8, 2012, the MOI also introduced a new web-based

71 “Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own”, York Times, December 27, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/RmDtYD>.

72 “Mujtahidd,” Twitter, accessed on February 12, 2013. <http://bit.ly/MtgI50>.

73 “‘Mujtahidd’ exposes secrets of Saudi royal family on Twitter,” LBC International, June 24, 2012, <http://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/37984/mujtahidd-exposes-secrets-of-saudi-royal-family-on>

74 <https://twitter.com/assaflovhotmail/status/307325546847694848/photo/1>.

75 <http://bit.ly/VWXEmI>.

76 “Privacy violators on Web face tough punishments”, Arab News Newspaper, December 27, 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/privacy-violators-web-face-tough-punishments>.

form on its official website allowing internet users to complain about offensive comments made online about them.⁷⁷

Several laws passed over the coverage period have had a negative effect on the rights of internet users in Saudi Arabia. On November 22, 2013, King Abdullah approved amendments that removed a six-month limit on detaining individuals without court cases. The law, implemented in December, established a legal basis for infinite arbitrary detention.

On January 31, 2014, the Interior Ministry issued new anti-terror regulations that criminalized any form of association with banned religious or terrorist groups. Among many things, the law outlaws Saudis from fighting in wars abroad, an issue that came to the forefront as a result of the Syrian civil war. However, at home, the law defines terrorism in vague terms so that non-violent acts, such as “insulting the reputation of the state,” “harming public order,” or “shaking the security of the state” are criminalized as applicable offenses.⁷⁸ Article 1 of the law defines “calling for atheist thought in any form” as terrorism.⁷⁹ Article 4 of the anti-terrorism regulations makes it clear that promoting, expressing sympathy, or demonstrating affiliation with these banned groups includes “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.⁸⁰

The MoI introduced a new method for users to report offensive comments made toward them by other users, opening the door for an upsurge in defamation lawsuits that may ultimately have repercussions for freedom of expression. Overall, the MoI continues to enjoy relative impunity over its abuses of online users. Some have reported that authorities have confiscated their cars, computers, and other personal items indefinitely.

An alarming number of Saudi human rights activists, lawyers, and ordinary users were prosecuted over the past year, with disproportionately large prison sentences passed by the country's terrorism tribunal. In general, outspoken bloggers face constant pressure by police authorities who engage in periodical interrogations and threats to initiate legal proceedings.⁸¹ On June 24, 2013, seven men from the Eastern province were sentenced to prison terms of 5 to 10 years and concomitant travel bans of the same amount of time for allegedly inciting protest and damaging public order through Facebook. They were convicted under Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, which deals with the creation, distribution, and storage of materials that “harm public order.” The men were first arrested in September 2011 and were held without charges until in April 2013, when their case came in front of a special anti-terrorism court.⁸²

77 “‘Interior’ confronts social networking sites abuse.. electronically”, [in Arabic], Aleqtisadiah Newspaper, March 9, 2013, http://www.aleqt.com/2012/08/08/article_681378.html

78 “Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights,” Human Rights Watch, March 20, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights>.

79 Elliot Hannon, “New law in Saudi Arabia labels all atheists as terrorists,” Slate, April 1, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2014/04/01/a_new_terrorism_law_in_saudi_arabia_targets_atheists_and_dissent_of_all.html.

80 For further information, see “Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights,” Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights>.

81 Interview with prominent blogger Foad al-Farhan, 2014.

82 According to Human Rights Watch, the seven individuals were Saleh al-Shaya’ (5 years), Hussein al Sulayman (7 years), Mohamed al-Khalifa (8 years), Mostafa al Mujahad (6 years), Hussein al-Bathir (5 years), Ali al-Hadlaq (7 years), and Abd al-Hamid al-Amer (10 years). See “Saudi Arabia: 7 Convicted for Facebook Postings About Protests,” Human Rights Watch, June 30, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/29/saudi-arabia-7-convicted-facebook-postings-about-protests>.

On March 9, 2014, a Saudi appeals court upheld an eight-year sentence for a Saudi man found guilty of using Twitter and YouTube to call on detainees' family members to protest. He was also convicted of "mocking" the king, religious officials, and government bodies.⁸³ One day later, another man was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a US\$ 26,600 fine for encouraging protests on Twitter and using websites "hostile to the government and that promote deviant ideologies."⁸⁴ In both cases, the names of the men were kept anonymous and it was not clear when they were first arrested.

Twitter users who expose the misdeeds of government officials or public sector employees are often targeted by authorities. Well known human rights activist Mukhlif al-Shammari was sentenced to five years in jail in June 2013 for allegedly damaging the country's domestic and international reputation, insulting religious bodies, and inciting discord. He was also banned from all media activity and cannot travel abroad for 10 years. He had written several articles and posted a video to YouTube in which two young girls described their mistreatment. In March 2014, he lost an appeal against the sentence.⁸⁵

Three lawyers—Abdel Rahman al-Subehi, Bander al-Nakithan, and Abdel-Rahman al-Remaih—were referred to the public prosecutor in November 2013 after they had criticized the slow pace of judicial reform on Twitter.⁸⁶ They were given prison sentences of five to eight years in October 2014 for charges relating to "insulting" and "interfering with the purview" of the ruler and the judiciary.⁸⁷

In March 2014, three men were arrested for uploading separate YouTube videos in which they decried the economic situation in the kingdom and called on King Abdullah to distribute wealth in a more equitable manner. Mohamed Fahd al-Doussari was the first to post, with the other two videos made in support of his call after it was widely circulated on Twitter and other social media. All three individuals stated their full names and displayed their identity cards to the camera. According to activist Waleed Abu al-Khair, the individuals do not know each other in real life and are "just regular people" from different regions across the country.⁸⁸

Well-known human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair was jailed on April 15, 2014 on numerous charges including "disobeying the ruler," "disrespecting the authorities," "offending the judiciary," "inciting international organizations against the Kingdom," "founding an unlicensed organization," and violating the cybercrime law. He is the head of the organization "Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia" and the husband of Raif Badawi's sister, human rights activist Samar Badawi.⁸⁹ He was sentenced to 15 years—of which 5 years were suspended—and an ensuing travel ban of 15 years on July 6, 2014. He was tried under the Specialized Criminal Court, a terrorism tribunal. It is believed

83 "Saudi Arabia sentences person to 8 years in jail for twitter protest call," The Express Tribune (Pakistan), March 10, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/681033/saudi-jails-person-for-8-years-for-twitter-protest-call/>.

84 Mohammed Jamjoon, "Twitter posts land 2 Saudi men in prison," CNN, March 12, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/11/world/meast/saudi-arabia-twitter-jail/>.

85 "Court upholds five-year jail sentence for well-known writer," Reporters Without Borders, March 20, 2014, <https://en.rsf.org/saudi-arabia-court-upholds-five-year-jail-20-03-2014.46022.html>.

86 Abeer Allam, "Saudi Arabia cracks down on twitter," Al Monitor, March 20, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/03/saudi-twitter-crackdown-political-dissent.html>.

87 ANHRI, "Three Saudi lawyers sentenced to jail for tweeting," IFEX, October 30, 2014, https://www.ifex.org/saudi-arabia/2014/10/30/jailed_for_a_tweet/.

88 Sarra Grira, "Saudis arrested for criticizing King Abdullah on YouTube," France24, April 1, 2014, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20140401-saudis-chastise-king-abdullah-youtube-get-arrested>.

89 Elham Manea, "Waleed Abdulkhair: Imprisoned!" Huffington Post, May 6, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elham-manea/waleed-abulkhair-imprison_b_5267086.html.

he was targeted for statements he had made on Twitter and various media outlets related to the government's handling of prisoners of conscience.⁹⁰

On April 17, 2014, blogger and activist Fadhel al-Manafes was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a fine of SAR 100,000 for "undermining national security and stability, inciting sedition and sectarian divisions, disloyalty towards the king, publishing articles and communicating with foreign journalists with the aim of harming the state's image, and creating a banned association and inciting protests." He had been held since October 2011. Al-Manafes is also a founding member of the Al-Adalah Center for Human Rights and maintains a blog that raises awareness of discrimination against the Saudi Shiite community.⁹¹

Victims have faced extended periods of arbitrary detention for their online activities. Hamza Kashgari, a young Saudi writer, was released in October 2013 after almost two years in detention without trial.⁹² He had been detained in February 2012 after publishing three tweets detailing an imaginary conversation with the Prophet Mohammed. Similarly, writer Turki al-Hamad was released on June 5, 2013 after spending five months in detention.⁹³ He had been arrested in December 2012 after tweeting "...we need someone to rectify [the Prophet] Mohamed bin Abdullah's doctrine."⁹⁴ Any discussion that questions an aspect of how Islam is practiced in society commonly leads to arrest. The incident inspired its own hashtag on Twitter and drew large amounts of both support and criticism.

Others who have been in detention for several years have been sentenced to lengthy prison sentences over the past year. Raif Badawi, co-founder of the Saudi Arabia Liberals website, had his sentence increased from 7 to 10 years in jail, as well as 1,000 lashes and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (US\$ 266,000) in early May 2014.⁹⁵ Badawi was charged with "setting up a website that undermines general security" and "ridiculing Islamic religious figures."⁹⁶ He has been held since 2012 and had been cleared of apostasy charges in 2013, which could have brought the death penalty. Also in May 2014, two bloggers that have been detained since 2012 were sentenced to long jail terms. Sheikh Jalal Mohamed al-Jamal, who had been released in May 2013, was sentenced on an appeal to five years in prison and a SAR 50,000 (US\$ 13,000) fine. His website, Awamia, was found to

90 Human Rights Watch, "Saudi lawyer sentenced to 15 years in jail for reporting human rights violations," IFEX, July 7, 2014, https://www.ifex.org/saudi_arabia/2014/07/07/sentenced_to_15_years_in_jail/.

91 "Human Rights Blogger Gets 15-Year Jail Term," Reporters Without Borders, April 30, 2014, <http://en.rsf.org/saudi-arabia-human-rights-blogger-gets-15-year-30-04-2014,46217.html>.

92 Ellen Knickmeyer, "Saudi 'blasphemy' prisoner Hamza Kashgari tweets for first time after release," Gulf News, October 29, 2013, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-blasphemy-prisoner-hamza-kashgari-tweets-for-first-time-after-release-1.1248548>.

93 "Turki Al-Hamad released after 5 months from his detention" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, June 5, 2013, <http://sabq.org/O65fde>.

94 "As ordered by the Minister of Interior. Turki Al-Hamad arrested because of his "offensive tweets" against doctrine" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 24, 2012, <http://sabq.org/Ygtfde>.

95 Ludovica Iaccino, "Saudi Arabian Online Liberal Activist Raif Badawi Sentenced to 1,000 lashes," International Business Times, May 8, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/saudi-arabian-online-activist-raif-badawi-sentenced-1000-lashes-promoting-liberal-ideas-1447664>.

96 Ludovica Iaccino, "Saudi Arabian Online Liberal Activist Raif Badawi Sentenced to 1,000 lashes," International Business Times, May 8, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/saudi-arabian-online-activist-raif-badawi-sentenced-1000-lashes-promoting-liberal-ideas-1447664>.

have “attacked the Saudi state.” Ali Jaseb Touhifah was sentenced to six years and an identical fine. Touhifah has been detained since August 2012.⁹⁷

Aside from these arrests, there are a number of other cases that reflect the Saudi authorities’ strict control over free speech online. A young woman in Jeddah was questioned by the police because her Twitter profile carried the motto used in the Arab uprisings, “The regime has to fall.” Her father was asked to prevent her from tweeting, her mobile phone and laptop were confiscated, and she has to sign a pledge not to tweet.⁹⁸ Tariq al-Mubarak, an online journalist and teacher, was detained by police on October 27, 2013, shortly after publishing an article on *Asharq al-Wasat*.⁹⁹ The article was critical of religious extremists and the lack of freedoms in Saudi society.¹⁰⁰

A number of political activists remain imprisoned from previous years. On March 9, 2013, a court in Riyadh disbanded the human rights organization ACPRA and sentenced two of its members, Abdulah al-Hamid and Mohammed al-Qahtani, to 11 years and 10 years of jail time respectively, in addition to a travel ban equal in length to their jail sentences.¹⁰¹ Five years of their sentences were based on Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, relating to the creation of a website that could disturb social order.¹⁰² Five founding members of ACPRA are also currently in detention.¹⁰³ Two founding members of the Islamic Umma Party, al-Wahiby and al-Gamidi,¹⁰⁴ have been in prison since February 2011.¹⁰⁵ Both the ACPRA and the Islamic Umma Party base many of their operations online.

Violent attacks against online users are rare, although in February a photojournalist named Hussein Ali Madan Al-Faraj was shot during a police raid. Al-Faraj was known as the “Revolution’s Journalist” for documenting protests and funerals in the Eastern Province, where Shi’ites form a majority. While the government claims they encountered violent resistance, other reports stated he had gone to document a heavy police raid targeting his neighbor. While the man was not home, both his son and al-Faraj were killed by police.¹⁰⁶

New registration requirements have also undermined the ability to use ICT tools anonymously and free from government interference. As previously mentioned, the Ministry of Culture and Information requires that all blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other sites obtain a license from the Ministry to operate online, thus putting more pressure on online writers to self-regulate their

97 “Long jail terms for three bloggers,” Reporters Without Borders, May 12, 2014, <http://en.rsf.org/saudi-arabia-long-jail-terms-for-three-bloggers-12-05-2014.46263.html>.

98 Interview with activists and human rights lawyers, 2014.

99 See petition, “Free Tariq al-Mubarak,” Change.org, <https://www.change.org/petitions/the-saudi-king-government-free-tariq-al-mubarak>.

100 For article, see http://aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=748005&issueno=12752#U3J41_JdXQK.

101 “10 years jail for Al-Qahtani and 11 for Al-Hamid in the ACPRA case” [in Arabic], Sabq.org, March 9, 2013, <http://sabq.org/onyfde>.

102 Anti-Cyber Crime Law, MOI [in Arabic], March 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/19JUq7S>.

103 Those members are Suliaman Al-Rushoody, Mansour Al-Awth, Mousa Al-Garni, Mohamed Al-Bijadi and Saleh Al-Ashwan.

104 Islamic Umma Party page on Twitter, [in Arabic], December 22, 2012, <http://twitter.com/islamicmapart>.

105 Islamic Umma Party official webpage, [in Arabic], March 10, 2012, <http://www.islamicmaparty.com/Portals/default/>

106 “Four die during Saudi police raid to arrest wanted people,” Reuters, February 20, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/20/us-saudi-raid-idUSBREA1J1CK20140220>, and “Call for independent probe into journalist’s death in police raid,” Reporters Without Borders, February 26, 2014, <http://en.rsf.org/saudi-arabia-call-for-independent-probe-into-26-02-2014.45930.html>.

content.¹⁰⁷ Users are also legally required to use their real names and register with the government when purchasing mobile phones. In 2012, the CITC introduced a new law making it mandatory to enter a user's ID number to recharge a prepaid mobile card, rendering it virtually impossible to use prepaid mobile phones anonymously.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, a black market has since emerged in which vendors sell new SIM cards and prepaid refill cards with pre-existing ID numbers.¹⁰⁹ To stop this lucrative practice, the government is now considering linking these cards to fingerprints.¹¹⁰

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. Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia; anyone who uses communication technology is subject to government monitoring, which is officially justified under the pretense of protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, emails, mobile phone text messages, and messages sent through the very popular service WhatsApp. 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, Vine, and WhatsApp.¹¹¹

In addition to direct government monitoring, access providers are required to monitor their own customers and supply the authorities with information about their online activities, often without legal process. Since 2009, the MOI has made it mandatory for internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of their customers. The security regulations also bar entrance to anyone under the age of 18.

As ICT use has grown across the country, the threat of cyberattacks has also escalated. Several government websites, including the Ministry of Interior were attacked in May 2013.¹¹² A politically motivated hacker took down the website oct26driving.org in October, posting a threatening message in its place.¹¹³ In January 2014, 16 government websites were hacked by the Syrian Electronic Army.¹¹⁴

Alarming, according to a report from the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, the government has coordinated with the Italian company Hacking Team in order to target Saudis in the region of Qatif with surveillance malware. A legitimate news app titled Qatif Today, available to Android mobile devices through the Google Play store, was manipulated in order to spy on users with an interest in the Saudi region of Qatif, which has undergone numerous protests. A link circulated on Twitter directed users to a Dropbox file that downloaded the phony app linked to Hacking Team, an Italian

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

108 "User's ID number now required to recharge prepaid mobile phones", Arab News, July 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1azmvzS>.

109 "Black market for SIM cards with ID thriving", Saudi Gazette Newspaper, December 31, 2012, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20121231147657>

110 "Study to link SIM cards with fingerprints", Arab News Newspaper, June 20, 2013, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/455594>.

111 "A Saudi Arabia Telecom's Surveillance Pitch", Moxie Marlinspike, May 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/101Ynw>.

112 "Saudi Arabia faces major cyber attack," Reuters May 18, 2013 <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-faces-major-cyber-attack-1.1184977>

113 "Threats and cyber attacks will not deter women from driving," Amnesty October 25, 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-threats-and-cyber-attack-will-not-deter-women-driving-2013-10-25>

114 "Syrian electronic army goes on hacking spree," The dailydot.com, January 16, 2014 <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/syrian-electronic-army-hacks-saudi-arabia/>

company that sells intelligence products to governments. Among other things, the app appeared to be designed to grant authorities access to individuals' mobile phone data, social network activity, as well as real-time recording capabilities using the phone's microphone and camera.¹¹⁵

115 Doug Bernard, "Saudi App Appears to Target Residents With Surveillance," Voice of America, June 27, 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/saudi-app-appears-to-target-residents-with-surveillance/1946570.html>.