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## Saudi Arabia

### Country:

[Saudi Arabia](#)



### Year:

2015

### Status:

Not Free

### Total Score:

73

(0 = Best, 100 = Worst)

### Obstacles to Access:

15

(0 = Best, 25 = Worst)

### Limits on Content:

24

(0 = Best, 35 = Worst)

### Violations of User Rights:

34

(0 = Best, 40 = Worst)

### Population:

30.8 million

### Internet Penetration:

64 percent

### Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:

Yes

### Political/Social Content Blocked:

Yes

### Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:

Yes

### Press Freedom Status:

Not Free

### Key Developments:

## June 2014–May 2015

- The Saudi television channel Rotana ordered Google to take down a video of the satirical YouTube show “Fitnah” on copyright grounds, after the show had used footage from Rotana to criticize its owner, Prince Waleed bin Talal. The video was later restored by YouTube (see **Content Removal**).
- Human rights activists Waleed Abu al-Khair and Fowzan al-Harbi have had their prison sentences extended to 15 and 10 years, respectively, upon appeals by the public prosecutor (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Raif Badawi, who co-founded the website Saudi Arabia Liberals, had his 10-year sentence suspended and later upheld by the Supreme Court and received the first set of 50 lashes in January. He was sentenced to a total 1,000 lashes, to be carried out in public (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- During a funeral for the victims of an attack by Islamic State (IS) militants on a Shiite mosque, political activist Waleed Sulais was beaten by two men who accused him of insulting them on social networks (see **Intimidation and Violence**).

### Introduction:

The repression of Saudi Arabia’s online sphere showed no signs of letting up with the accession of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to the throne in January 2015.[1] The Saudi government continues to promote the internet use as a tool for economic development and e-government services, where it is ahead of many countries in the region.[2] Mobile broadband penetration increased, Saudis remain the some of the most active users of social media in the world, and new tools for encrypting web traffic and circumventing state censorship have provided Saudi internet users with opportunities to access a greater array of information and to express themselves on certain topics. Following Salman’s appointment, the Twitter account @KingSalman[3] received some 2 million new followers in six months.[4] While the internet remains the least repressive space for expression in the country, it is by no means free, as evidenced by the numerous violations of users’ rights that took place over the past year.

Given the significance and relevance that social media has taken on in the country, authorities have not turned a blind eye to critical voices or liberal commentary. While the state focuses on combatting violent extremism and disrupting terrorist networks, it has clamped down on nonviolent liberal activists and human rights defenders with the same zeal, branding them a threat to the national order and prosecuting them in special terrorism tribunals. Waleed Abu al-Khair, Fowzan al-Harbi, Abdulah al-Hamid, Mohammed al-Qahtani, and Raif Badawi are all serving prison sentences of 10 years or longer, with charges relating in part to their online activities. Many other prisoners of conscience have been held for years without trial, according to a recent law that removed restrictions on arbitrary detention.

The repression has been institutionalized under antiterrorism and cybercrimes that have instilled fear into activists and ordinary social media users alike, creating an environment of pervasive self-censorship.[5] Surveillance, too, has a chilling effect; social media is

heavily monitored and law enforcement agencies have sought to break or bypass encryption in order to spy on users. While the internet has fundamentally changed the way that young Saudis interact with each other, the authoritarian tendencies of the country's political and religious establishments remain fully present in the minds of internet users, whose democratic aspirations remain blocked.

### **Obstacles to Access:**

*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. Young Saudis make up the majority of the user population throughout the country. Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of applications such as chat rooms, discussion forums, and social media sites.*

### **Availability and Ease of Access**

Saudis have enjoyed a rapid growth of internet and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years. Access increased to 63.7 percent of the population by the end of 2014, up from 38 percent in 2009.[6] Saudi Arabia is home to around 19.6 million internet users. Fixed broadband subscriptions stood at 43.2 percent of all households, with a majority using ADSL connections. Monthly expenditure on 4G broadband ranges from between SAR 55 (US\$11) for a 2GB allowance to SAR 95 (US\$25) for a 20GB allowance.[7] Household internet plus television packages with fiber-optic connections range from SAR 300 (US\$80) for speeds of 25 Mbps to SAR 800 (US\$213) for 200 Mbps.[8]

Mobile broadband penetration has jumped from 47.6 percent to 94.5 percent from 2013 to 2014, with some 29 million mobile broadband subscriptions. Standard mobile phone subscriptions have risen to 53 million, resulting in a penetration rate of 171.4 percent.[9] Finally, 87 percent of mobile subscriptions are prepaid. The number of mobile subscriptions has dropped from a height of 56 million in 2011 as the government deported thousands of illegal workers and deactivated prepaid mobile accounts whose owners are not in the country legally.[10]

### **Restrictions on Connectivity**

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. International internet bandwidth has increased from 318 Gbps in 2010 to 1321 Gbps in 2014.[11]

### **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. The number of ISPs in the country rose from 23 in 2005 to 36 in 2011.[12] Broadband and mobile phone services are provided by

the three largest telecommunications companies in the Middle East: Saudi Telecom Company, Mobily (owned by Etisalat of the United Arab Emirates), and Zain (from Kuwait). Two newly licensed companies have started with limited operation: Virgin Mobile in October 2014 and Lebara in December 2014.

Access to Wikipedia is provided free of charge by STC to all of its mobile data users,<sup>[13]</sup> while Zain provides unlimited access to YouTube as part of one of its prepaid mobile packages.<sup>[14]</sup>

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. Due to a mandate issued by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) on April 16, 2009,<sup>[15]</sup> all internet cafes must close by midnight, with compliance enforced by the police.<sup>[16]</sup> 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.

## Regulatory Bodies

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.<sup>[17]</sup> 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.<sup>[18]</sup> 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.<sup>[19]</sup> Furthermore, the CITC sends content removal requests to social networks in political cases (see “Content Removal” section below). The board of directors of the CITC is headed by the Minister of Communications and Information Technology.<sup>[20]</sup>

### Limits on Content:

*The Saudi government continued to employ strict filtering of internet content throughout 2014 and early 2015. Self-censorship remains prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family. Nonetheless, high levels of social media use have driven an immense diversification of online content, offering Saudis a multitude of perspectives beyond state-controlled media. These tools have also been used by ordinary citizens and human rights activists to raise awareness of issues surrounding political reform, poverty, gender inequality, and corruption. However, numerous arrests and lengthy prison sentences have had an overall chilling effect on online activism.*

## Blocking and Filtering

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. Authorities also seek to disrupt violent networks and the dissemination of extremist ideology. Criticism of the Saudi royal family or that of 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.[21] Websites that may be used to distribute copyrighted materials, such as the Pirate Bay,[22] are blocked.[23] In 2014, the communications ministry blocked dozens of websites for failing to obtain an online publication license.[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 blocked 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. Website mirroring is often used to circumvent blockage, but mirrors are often detected and blocked in a cat-and-mouse game. For example, authorities blocked the official website for the “October 26th Women Driving campaign” on September 29th, 2013. One week later, a mirror site was also blocked.[29]

The CITC has also blocked individual social media pages that demand political reforms or civil rights. However, the move by many companies to standardize encrypted “HTTPS” communication has rendered much of this blockage useless, since it is technically very difficult for authorities to block individual pages on an HTTPS domain, rather than a standard HTTP domain. 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, the site’s owner, did not restrict access to the controversial “Innocence of Muslims” video containing an offensive depiction of the Prophet Mohammed. Google later blocked the video in Saudi Arabia.[30]

The CITC also has an aggressive stance toward Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services that 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.[31] 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.[32]

The government responds to blockage requests from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding undesirable material.[33] Sites can also be unblocked through a similar process.[34] Once an individual submits the form, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. In 2014, the CITC received 466,863 blockage requests, and complied in 94.3 percent of cases. Pornographic content accounted for 85.6 percent of these requests. The CITC has been developing blocking tools based on IP address, in order to prohibit websites from

circumventing blockage by changing their domain name. Currently, this affects over 2,500 websites.<sup>[35]</sup> The manager of public relations at the CITC said the commission receives about 200 unblocking requests each day, though he would not comment on how often the CITC unblocks a site based on such an appeal.<sup>[36]</sup> In one example, the CITC unblocked the website Mustamel after the owners complied with a request from the CITC to remove illegal advertisements.<sup>[37]</sup>

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 Information Ministry for licensing violations or copyright infringement 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,<sup>[38]</sup> and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (US\$1.33 million), according to Article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.<sup>[39]</sup> 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,<sup>[40]</sup> but many other tools to circumvent blockage, such as Tor and the major VPN providers, are actively blocked by the government.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Content Removal

Blocking and filtering 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.<sup>[42]</sup> This often results, for example, in keeping only progovernment user comments. It is unusual to find any antigovernment comments 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. Facebook's Government Requests Report of the first half of 2014 cites 7 processed requests that were “reported by the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) under local laws prohibiting criticism of the royal family.”<sup>[43]</sup> On the other hand, Twitter reported no content removal requests from Saudi Arabia in the period from 2012 to 2015.<sup>[44]</sup>

Copyright takedown requests were also used to restrict political speech. In September 2014, an episode of a satirical show on YouTube called *Fitnah* was censored when the Saudi TV channel, Rotana sent a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) notice to take it down. The show used footage from the channel to criticize its owner, Prince Waleed Bin Talal, who was accused by the show of being responsible for the takedown request.<sup>[45]</sup> The video was later restored.<sup>[46]</sup>

## 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 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 Mohammed. 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. Others have decided to leave Twitter.<sup>[47]</sup> 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 creating the illusion of popular support 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.<sup>[48]</sup> 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 culled 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.<sup>[49]</sup> Individuals may also be awarded upon praising the government online. In April 2015, the MoI awarded eight young people who had published a video responding to threats from the IS militant group with progovernment rhetoric. The speaker was awarded 100,000 SAR (US\$26,600), and those sitting with him were awarded 50,000 SAR (US\$13,300).<sup>[50]</sup>

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 of the ruling system. Numerous sites have been closed for copyright violations,<sup>[51]</sup> or for featuring advertisements for drugs.<sup>[52]</sup>

While opposition blogs and online forums were once the main venue for discussing political and social matters, most Saudis now use social media to share information and express opinions. There are now dozens of comedic channels on YouTube, the most popular being “Sa7i,” “Eysh Elly,” “La Yekthar,” and “3al6ayer,” which respectively had around 351 million, 276 million, 85 million, and 68 million total views as of 2014. Omar Hussein, host of 3al6ayer, has touched on political issues and come out in support of a woman’s right to drive. On Eysh Elly, Badr Saleh compiles and makes fun of popular Saudi YouTube videos.<sup>[53]</sup> One reason for the success of these videos is their engagement in cautious criticism and their restraint against pushing the limits of acceptable discourse. 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. Opposition figures overseas use YouTube

as a platform for distributing their audio and video content, since their websites are blocked within the country.[54]

Similarly, Saudis are the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world, according to a 2014 report, with 4.8 million users[55] and producing 40 percent of all tweets in Arab countries. [56] Prominent religious scholars, such as al-Awdah, have even contributed to these debates on Twitter.[57]

## Digital Activism

Saudis have employed online tools for holding government officials accountable, mainly through the use of smartphones to capture videos of corruption or improper behavior. On April 7, 2015, the Minister of Health was filmed shouting at another citizen during a heated argument[58] and was dismissed four days later. In May 2015, the head of the Royal Ceremonies office was recorded slapping a journalist who was trying to cover the reception of the king of Morocco, and was also dismissed.[59] Local media took both cases as gestures of the new king's intolerance for public officials' moves to offend the "dignity" of citizens.[60]

The campaign to defy the ban on women driving was less successful this year.[61] Before the first anniversary of the October 26 Campaign, the spokesperson of the MoI threatened that the ministry would be "firm in enforcing the regulations against anyone who tries by any means to damage the societal harmony by spreading what splits and polarizes the society," in reference to calls for women driving.[62] This was followed by increased police presence on the day of the anniversary, and only a few videos were uploaded to YouTube showing women defying the ban.

The anonymous Twitter user @Mujtahidd continues to criticize high profile members of the royal family,[63] and to provide detailed descriptions of state corruption.[64] The popularity of the account has increased more than four times, from around 410,000 Twitter followers in June 2012 to over 1.8 million as of June 2015. In 2013, the user shared the tweets of dozens of users who defended the government using the exact same wording, thus illustrating the presence of a MoI Twitter army.[65] In March 2015, the account was suspended several times over the course of two days, but was reinstated without explanation.

The efficacy of security forces in dispersing public demonstrations has forced many Saudis to devise more creative ways of organizing protests. Two Twitter accounts, in particular @e3teqal and @almnaseron, played a major role in organizing small, distributed, low-level protests during 2012 and 2013 with anonymous participants who were sympathetic to political prisoners and imprisoned religious scholars. YouTube was instrumental in documenting the demonstrations and attracting media attention.[66] Videos documented a protest on June 6, 2012, in which a group of detainees' families carried out a demonstration inside a shopping mall after initially pretending to be regular customers.[67] Later that summer, demonstrators "marched" together in their cars on a highway.[68] In March 2013, 182 family members, including 15 women and 6 children, participated in a 12-hour sit-in in the central city of Buraidah. Police arrested 161 of the protestors and blamed social media for stirring up the protests.[69] More recently,

however, with the increased crackdown on protesters, these accounts have failed to gather momentum.

### **Violations of User Rights:**

*Saudi courts have delivered some of the harshest prison sentences against online users in the world, 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. The 2014 antiterrorism law, which equates “insulting the reputation of the state” with terrorism, was used to prosecute peaceful activists. Furthermore, as legal limits on the detention of suspects were removed, numerous Saudis are now legally detained for periods of months—and sometimes years—without charge.*

### **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).<sup>[70]</sup>

The antiterrorism law, passed in January 2014, defines terrorism in such vague terms that nonviolent acts, such as “insulting the reputation of the state,” “harming public order,” or “shaking the security of the state,” are criminalized as applicable offenses.<sup>[71]</sup> Article 1 of the law defines “calling for atheist thought in any form” as terrorism.<sup>[72]</sup> 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.<sup>[73]</sup>

### **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 in the country, many human rights activists conduct activities online given the reach of social media tools in the country. 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 2014, Loujain al-Hathloul was arrested at the border crossing between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates when she demanded to be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. She was referred to the Specialized Criminal Court, a terrorism tribunal, on charges related to political opinions she had

expressed on Twitter and other social media sites<sup>[74]</sup> and was held in detention for 73 days.<sup>[75]</sup>

In July 2014, well-known human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair was sentenced to 15 years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court. Abu al-Khair was targeted for his nonviolent activism, including statements he made on Twitter and various media outlets related to the government's detention of prisoners of conscience.<sup>[76]</sup> He had been arrested in April 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.<sup>[77]</sup> He was also banned from travel from 15 years after release and fined SAR 200,000 (US\$53,000). Originally, five years of his prison sentence were suspended, but after an appeal by the prosecution in January 2015, the court ruled Abu al-Khair must serve all 15 years.<sup>[78]</sup>

Similarly, following an appeal from the public prosecutor, Fowzan al-Harbi was sentenced to 10 years in prison in November 2014, including a 10-year travel ban upon release.<sup>[79]</sup> He had been detained in December 2013 on charges of "inciting disobedience to the ruler by calling for demonstrations," "describing the Saudi Arabian state as a 'police state'," "accusing the judiciary of being incapable of delivering justice," "signing documents that incite public opinion against the authorities," as well as charges related his co-founding of the human rights organization ACPRA. Al-Harbi was sentenced to seven years in prison in June 2014 but was released pending an appeal after signing a pledge to refrain from using social media and socializing with others.<sup>[80]</sup> However, he was accused of later publishing the charges against him online in a violation of the terms of his release, leading to his immediate arrest and the increased sentence.

A court in Riyadh disbanded the ACPRA in March 2013 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.<sup>[81]</sup> 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.<sup>[82]</sup> Six founding members of ACPRA are currently in detention.<sup>[83]</sup> Two founding members of the Islamic Umma Party, al-Wahiby and al-Gamidi,<sup>[84]</sup> have been in prison since February 2011.<sup>[85]</sup> Both the ACPRA and the Islamic Umma Party base many of their operations online.

Raif Badawi, the co-founder of the Saudi Arabia Liberals website who has been imprisoned since June 2012, had his sentence increased from 7 to 10 years in jail and from 600 to 1,000 public lashes, as well as a fine of SAR one million (US\$266,000) in early May 2014.<sup>[86]</sup> Badawi was charged with "setting up a website that undermines general security" and "ridiculing Islamic religious figures." On January 9, 2015, Badawi received 50 lashings outside a mosque in Jeddah, following Friday prayer. Footage of the punishment was uploaded to YouTube, resulting in a massive international backlash.<sup>[87]</sup> Further lashings have been postponed.<sup>[88]</sup> In February 2015, the sentence was suspended by the Supreme Court to be reevaluated,<sup>[89]</sup> but later in June, the court upheld the verdict.<sup>[90]</sup>

Several others were arrested for criticizing the state-sponsored religious institution. On October 28, 2014, Su'ad al-Shammari, co-founder of the Saudi Arabia Liberals website,

was arrested over tweets that were described as offensive to the heritage of the prophet Mohammad.[91] She was released on February 1, 2015 after signing a pledge to “reduce her activity”. Her Twitter account, however, is still critical of the religious institution.[92] In late January 2015, Waheed al-Ghamdi was arrested over a series of articles in which he addressed sectarianism by blaming the same religious body. He was released on March 2, 2015, after his case was assigned to the Ministry of Culture and Information.[93]

In April 2015, the Specialized Criminal Court sentenced a Saudi citizen from Riyadh to a year and four months in prison and a travel ban for three years for participating in protests that called for the release of the arbitrarily detained, for storing audio and video clips of protests on his computer, and for uploading them to YouTube. The court also ordered the closure of the citizen’s social media and email accounts, a common practice in Saudi Arabia.[94] Another citizen, this time from Qatif, was sentenced by the same court in December 2014 to five years in prison for charges that included “creating nicknames on the social media websites Twitter and Facebook, and using them to publish forbidden articles”.[95]

While there were numerous cases of sentences being extended upon appeal, in at least one case, charges were dropped. In April 2015,[96] the Court of Appeals overturned five to eight year prison sentences against three lawyers—Abdel Rahman al-Subehi, Bander al-Nakithan, and Abdel-Rahman al-Remaih—who were convicted of “insulting” and “interfering with the purview” of the ruler and the judiciary in October 2014[97] after criticizing the slow pace of judicial reform on Twitter.[98]

## **Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity**

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 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, Vine, and WhatsApp.[99]

According to a report from the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, the government has coordinated with the 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 developed by Hacking Team, an Italian 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.[100]

New registration requirements have undermined the ability to use ICT tools anonymously and free from government interference. 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.<sup>[101]</sup> 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.

Users are 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.<sup>[102]</sup> Nevertheless, a black market has since emerged in which vendors sell new SIM cards and prepaid refill cards with pre-existing ID numbers.<sup>[103]</sup> To stop this lucrative practice, the government is now considering linking these cards to fingerprints.<sup>[104]</sup>

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 due 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.

## Intimidation and Violence

Most gravely, in May 2015, political activist Waleed Sulais was beaten during a funeral for the victims of an IS attack on a Shiite mosque. Two men accused Sulais of insulting them on social networks, and physically assaulted him. The attackers were also Shiites, and had been wanted by the authorities.<sup>[105]</sup>

Progovernment Twitter accounts often defame and harass political and social activists using hashtags calling for their arrest. The anonymous accounts often show photos of the king or the interior minister as their avatars. In March 2014, the Ministry of Interior released a list of organizations classified as "terrorists," which included the Muslim Brotherhood. Following that, the MoI contacted influential Twitter users containing the "Rabaa" logo in their avatar and ordered them to remove it; the logo refers to the square in which anti-coup protesters in Cairo held their sit-in, before a violent crackdown by the Egyptian army in August 2013. Those who refused were called in for interrogation and ordered to stop using their Twitter accounts.<sup>[106]</sup>

## Technical Attacks

In April 2015, during the Saudi-led war against Houthi militants in Yemen, a group of Houthi supporters called the "Yemen Cyber Army" hacked into the website of Saudi-sponsored newspaper *al-Hayat*, displaying the photo of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and writing in Arabic: "We have few words to say to you, prepare your bomb shelters."<sup>[107]</sup> In May 2015, the same group attacked the mail service of the Foreign Ministry publishing thousands of email correspondences, claiming they were "top-secret".<sup>[108]</sup> The Ministry claimed that the attack was "limited."<sup>[109]</sup>

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