

MENA  
Rights  
Group



# ANNUAL REPORT 2023

MENA Rights Group is a Geneva-based legal advocacy NGO defending and promoting fundamental rights and freedoms in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Adopting a holistic approach, we work at both the individual and structural level. We represent victims of human rights violations before international law mechanisms. In order to ensure the non-repetition of these violations, we identify patterns and root causes of violations on the ground and bring key issues to the attention of relevant stakeholders to call for legal and policy reform.

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# Foreword

We devoted a significant part of our resources to provide support to individuals who suffered abuses due the misuse of so-called security or counter-terrorism measures.

Dear friends and supporters,

As 2024 begins, it is with a heavy heart that our team is sharing its 2023 annual report. While gross human rights violations have continued to be committed throughout the region, our thoughts go to the civilians affected by the Israel-Palestine conflict, and particularly those in Gaza, who are, once again, under continued bombardment and siege. This unfolding genocide is marked by decades of apartheid and systematic oppression of Palestinians by Israel, and a climate of complete impunity. It also embodies the perpetration of gross human rights violations in the name of “security”, which is rampant throughout the region.

In fact, last year, we devoted a significant part of our resources to provide support to individuals who suffered abuses due to the misuse of so-called security or counter-terrorism measures. The security discourse has long become authoritarian regimes’ weapon of choice, with civilians and ordinary citizens bearing the brunt of conflict and injustice. In parallel, we continued to advocate for systemic structural change in the Middle East and North Africa, without which human rights violations will continue to occur.

2023 also marked five years since MENA Rights Group was founded. In 2024, we will be developing our new Strategic Framework, taking a step back to reflect on challenges and accomplishments, and striving to ensure

the greatest impact and prioritising the best interests of victims we assist. We are also pleased that MENA Rights Group has now adopted the four-day workweek, which has allowed our team to be better rested, healthier, and more productive, ultimately allowing us to best serve those we support.

As we move forward, our team remains committed to uphold the highest standards of professionalism and empathy, and to work collaboratively with those in the human rights community so we can continue to disrupt oppression, and challenge injustice.

Last but not least, I want to honour victims and their families for placing their trust in our team, despite the risks they face and the egregious abuses they are subjected to. I also want to thank our partners, funders, and supporters, as well as our incredibly dedicated team and board members, without whom none of our achievements would have been possible.

In solidarity,

Inès Osman,  
Co-founder and director.

# About us

## **Our vision**

Individuals across the MENA region live in just and peaceful societies, founded on the rule of law and the effective recognition and respect of the rights and freedoms of all.

## **Our mission**

We work directly with victims, their families, lawyers, human rights defenders and other civil society actors. We support them to claim their universally recognised rights and freedoms by adopting a holistic approach.

At the individual level, we document cases of human rights violations, provide legal assistance to victims by using primarily international law mechanisms, and raise awareness of their plight with relevant stakeholders.

At the structural level, we undertake in-depth research to assess the root causes of human rights violations. On that basis, we advocate for legal and policy reform in line with international standards.

At the internal level, we strive to balance the wellbeing of our team members with the effective and sustainable implementation of our mission.

# Our Tactics

We achieve our mission through an evolving range of six advocacy strategies using the most effective means of leverage. We adopt a collaborative approach to our work, by engaging closely with national and international civil society actors, to ensure complementarity.

## 1 Documentation and monitoring

In close cooperation with local actors, victims of human rights violations, their families, lawyers, human rights defenders and civil society, we monitor the human rights situation on the ground, document individual cases, identify patterns of violations and analyse their structural causes.

## 2 Litigation

We represent individuals subjected to severe human rights violations before international protection mechanisms. Most notably, we resort to the United Nations (UN) human rights bodies, including Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies. We may also engage with regional and domestic mechanisms, when effective and accessible.

When assisting individuals, we respect confidentiality and only act if we have obtained direct informed consent from the victim, their family or lawyer. We strive to act in the victim's best interest, while respecting their wishes. Cases are only publicised after we have obtained the victim's or the family's approval.

## 3 Analysis and reporting

Based on thorough research and monitoring, we produce reports, briefs and research papers to bring issues to the attention of relevant

stakeholders, with a view to advocating for legal and policy reform. When relevant, we directly lobby local law- and policy-makers and engage with various international and regional institutions, foreign governments, and businesses.

We bring a civil society perspective in the assessment of states' compliance with their human rights obligations by the UN mechanisms, while expanding the access of our local partners to these mechanisms.

## 4 Awareness raising

We raise awareness on human rights issues among a wide and diverse audience by publishing reports, engaging on social media, and taking part in public debates and conferences.

We highlight victims' stories by publicising and sharing their cases on our website and social media platforms, thus bringing their situation to the attention of the general public within and outside the MENA region.

## 5 Capacity building

Bringing our legal expertise and experience, we provide training and lectures for, among others, human rights defenders, practitioners and university students.

We provide technical support to local civil societies to access UN human rights mechanisms and enhance their understanding of international human rights law.

## 6 Assessing national human rights institutions

We believe that effective and accessible national human rights institutions (NHRIs) are

key to ensuring the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms at the national level.

Jointly with local partners, we assess their work, independence and efficiency. Through evaluation reports, we contribute to their review by the Subcommittee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions.

## Our Geographic and Thematic Focus

Our geographic mandate covers the 22 Member States of the Arab League. Among those, we focus on countries where we believe our work has the most added value, considering our capacities and strategic impact.

We focus primarily on violations of civil and political rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security of person, due process and fair trial rights, freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association. We believe that these must be protected above all, as a *sine qua non* condition for people to be able to claim all their other rights without fear of reprisals.

### Our thematic priorities include, but are not limited to:

- Accountability and the right to truth
- Arbitrary detention
- Business and human rights
- Counterterrorism and human rights
- Enforced disappearances
- Extrajudicial executions
- Freedom of opinion and expression (online and offline)
- Freedom of peaceful assembly and association
- Practice of torture

# 2023 at a glance

We supported **193 victims** of human rights violations across **12 countries** of the MENA region.

We monitored compliance with human rights standards of **6 countries** during and ahead of reviews of their record by international mechanisms.

We highlighted victims' stories by publicising and sharing **37 new profiles** on our website and social media platforms.

We led and supported **66** joint advocacy actions.

We launched our **monthly newsletter** "[MENA Rights Digest](#)".

We implemented the **4-day** workweek.

# Litigation

In 2023, we represented 76 individuals before international protection mechanisms while we followed up on over 117 previous cases of individuals we continue to assist.

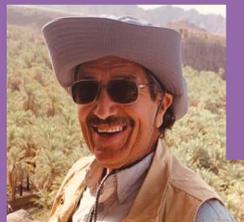
Relying on thorough documentation and monitoring, we provide legal assistance to victims of severe human rights abuses primarily by using international law mechanisms to put an end to violations, or obtain redress for past violations. We also build on documented casework to advocate for human rights-based policy reforms, and raise awareness of victims' plight with relevant stakeholders.

In 2023, we were pleased that a number of people we defended regained their freedom:



**March 9**

In Iraq, Bahaa Abdul Hadi is released after 903 days of arbitrary detention.



**March 20**

In Saudi Arabia, Saad al-Madi is released after 484 days of arbitrary detention.



**April 12**

In Saudi Arabia, Marwan al-Muraisy, is released after 1759 days of arbitrary detention.



**May 11**

In Iraq, Adel Khudair is released after 976 days of arbitrary detention.



**October 4**

In Libya, Khodr al-Nabush and Moustafa Sharaf are released after 47 days of secret detention.



**October 26**

In Algeria, Raouf Farrah is released after 254 days of arbitrary detention.

## An alarming trend: the use of counter-terrorism to stifle dissent

In 2023, MENA Rights Group (MRG) identified notable trends within the MENA region by documenting cases of human rights violations. The most prominent and troubling pattern observed was the abuse of counter-terrorism laws and policies in the region.

Throughout the year, MRG recorded 45 cases of individuals subjected to human rights abuses committed under the guise of countering terrorism across six countries. Among these instances, 16 occurred in Saudi Arabia, and 20 took place in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

This pattern notably stems from MENA states' legal frameworks, which typically

rely on overly broad and vague definitions of terrorism. This enables state authorities to extend the application of counter-terrorism legislation onto acts relating to the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms and use them as a means to target peaceful political opposition, dissidents and civil society. In 2023, Saudi Arabia extensively utilised its 2017 Law on Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing to target human rights defenders, peaceful protesters, government critics and religious minorities. Similarly, the UAE leveraged its 2014 Law on Combating Terrorism Offenses to prosecute political dissidents and human rights defenders in the country's second-largest political mass trial. Opened on December 7, 2023, the trial is still ongoing in 2024. In the UAE and in Saudi Arabia, human rights abuses are usually committed by members of the Saudi Presidency of State Security and the Emirati State Security Apparatus, which are the main agents of repression in these countries.

Anti terrorism squad with military equipment with special tactical force counter terrorism assault technology. © MAD.vertise, licensed under Shutterstock.



However, other MENA countries have also misused counter-terrorism legislation in order to repress dissent in 2023. In Algeria, the authorities have used counter-terrorism measures to stifle human rights defenders and journalists. Likewise, Egypt has been using its counter-terrorism framework to arbitrarily detain critics of the regime, which is particularly alarming as the country holds a prominent position in the UN counter-terrorism architecture. Hence, in 2023, counter-terrorism legal and institutional frameworks had a detrimental impact on fundamental rights and played a significant role in enabling a range of human rights violations across the MENA region.

## Business and human rights

The issue of business and human rights is at the heart of our thematic mandate. We firmly believe that all business enterprises are expected to respect human rights, meaning they should address adverse human rights impacts they may have. As businesses increasingly contribute to abuses in the MENA region, a number of cases we undertook targeted their involvement in human rights violations across the region.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia announced the launch of “NEOM”, a futuristic megacity project in the northwestern province of Tabuk. This region is home to a large tribal population who were forcibly displaced to make way for the construction of NEOM. Saudi authorities detained anyone who protested their eviction, sentencing them to decades in prison and even to the death penalty. In 2020, Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, a member of the al-Huwaitat tribe, was killed in his home during a confrontation with special forces for refusing to leave his house.



NEOM, Saudi Arabia - 03 June 2020: Advertisement in the NEOM Region in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia © SaudiArabiaPhotography, licensed under Shutterstock.

In March 2023, we requested the urgent intervention of UN Special Procedures regarding the forced eviction and detention of six members of al-Huwaitat tribe. Half of them were sentenced to lengthy prison time on trumped-up terrorism charges, and the other three are at imminent risk of execution.

In May 2023, seven UN experts acted on our complaint and expressed their alarm about the imminent executions of al-Huwaitat tribe members. They reiterated that the six individuals were sentenced under the overly broad Saudi counter-terrorism law. They also raised serious concern over allegations of Saudi authorities subjecting some of the detainees to torture to extract self-incriminating confessions. The communication was also sent to all investors and businesses involved in NEOM to ensure that they are not causing or contributing to human rights abuses. However, neither they nor Saudi authorities have responded to these human rights concerns, and the NEOM project remains underway.



The Balhaf gas liquefaction plant. © courtesy of IUCN Independent Review Panel.

# IN FOCUS

## Holding Total accountable for torture committed against two Yemenis

In February 2023, MRG filed a lawsuit before the Paris Court of Justice against French energy company TotalEnergies, the largest shareholder of the Balhaf gas liquefaction plant in Yemen, acting on behalf of two individuals who were subjected to secret detention and torture by Emirati forces on the Balhaf plant in 2018 and 2019.

This action follows a number of activities we carried out since 2020 to raise awareness of the violations committed in Balhaf. In June 2020, we had notified several UN Special Procedures of these human rights violations. Consequently, they sent an allegation letter to Emirati authorities in July 2020, expressing their grave concern about the violations committed in Balhaf. We also sought to establish a dialogue with Total via the “Company Response Mechanism” of the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, to discuss the steps that the company could have taken to remedy the reported violations.

As Total consistently declined all liability, we claimed that the company failed to abide by France’s Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law. The text allows harmed individuals to bring a civil lawsuit to seek damages resulting from a company’s failure to comply with its vigilance obligations.

In fact, the Balhaf plant site has been identified by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC)’s Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen as part of a larger network of detention facilities in southern Yemen where Emirati forces commit severe human rights abuses, including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture.

The two men represented by MRG suffered such abuses. The first plaintiff was arrested in May 2018 and detained in the Balhaf gas plant for several weeks, during which he was subjected to torture and other human rights violations. He was then transferred to other secret detention centres and finally released. Similarly, the second plaintiff was arrested in June 2019 and detained in Balhaf for several months, during which he was also subjected to severe torture. He was transferred to other detention centres and released in 2021.

In 2022, MRG sent a formal notice to TotalEnergies detailing the abuses in Balhaf. As Total maintained that it is not bound by the obligations contained in the Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law, we decided to refer the matter to the Paris Court of Justice. This is the first time that Total has been taken to court for failing to address violations committed in a situation of armed conflict. The Court is expected to consider the dispute in June 2024, after Total requested a postponement of the hearing in November 2023.

## Death penalty and executions

Since the ascension of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the number of death sentences and executions has skyrocketed in **Saudi Arabia**. In 2023, MRG took action on behalf of several individuals sentenced to death in the country, in the hope of compelling Saudi authorities to, at the very least, comply with international legal standards regarding the application of the death penalty.

There are currently several individuals on death row in Saudi Arabia for crimes they committed as minors, even though this is expressly prohibited by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Kingdom has ratified. In particular, five young men were tortured and sentenced to death for participating in protests and attending funerals in the al-Qatif province in 2011, while they were minors. In June 2023, we

advocated for the suspension of their death sentences by appealing to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN WGAD).

Additionally, MRG advocated for the release of Saud al-Faraj, a Saudi businessman who also took part in the 2011 al-Qatif protests. He was arrested in December 2019, tortured to extract a self-incriminating confession, and sentenced to death in 2022 for participating in protests and allegedly running a terrorist cell. In December 2023, we seized the UN WGAD, asking them to consider his detention as arbitrary and to urge Saudi authorities to release him immediately.

## Enforced disappearances

This year, MRG continued to handle a multitude of enforced disappearance cases, and filed 31 new ones before UN human rights mechanisms, regarding disappeared

NEW YORK CITY - JANUARY 17 2016: Hundreds gathered in Times Square to protest the Saudi government's execution of dissident sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr and demand the release of Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky. © a katz, licensed under Shutterstock.





Protesters demand truth and justice for their disappeared family members in Algeria. © Courtesy of Moussa Bourefis.

individuals in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. For fear of reprisals, a number of individuals on behalf of whom we advocated wished for our action before UN bodies to remain confidential.

In **Algeria**, where enforced disappearances were rampant during the Algerian civil war that ravaged the country in the 1990s, we assisted the family of Ahmed Boulares by filing his case before the UN Human Rights Committee. Boulares was arrested in July 1994 by the Military Security. Since then, his family has received contradictory information about his fate and whereabouts. While some former detainees claimed that they saw him in various detention centres, other sources suggest that he was summarily executed in the months following his arrest. Confronted with the authorities' silence and the lack of effective remedies, Boulares' family had no choice but to resort to international human rights mechanisms. In our complaint, we urged Algerian authori-

ties to release Boulares immediately if he is still alive, to undertake a thorough and diligent investigation into his disappearance and to bring perpetrators to justice.

In **Iraq**, the country with the highest number of missing persons worldwide, we continued to assist victims of enforced disappearances. We assisted a total of 106 individuals, either by filing their cases or following up on those previously filed and still pending before UN human rights protection mechanisms, in particular the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED). Among the new cases was that of Sabah al-Azzawi, an Iraqi religious preacher, who remains forcibly disappeared since 2014. Additionally, we submitted the cases of Yasser al-Alwani and the brothers Ali and Yasser al-Dulaimi to the CED. All three were abducted between 2015 and 2016 by Hezbollah Brigades while attempting to pass through the al-Razzaza checkpoint to escape the conflict against ISIL. Their fate and whereabouts have since remained unknown.

## Attacks on freedom of expression and civic space

Across the MENA region, authorities have tightened the noose on freedom of expression, including [press](#) and media freedoms, and restricted the civic landscape where activists, journalists and human rights defenders conduct their work. In response, MRG has taken a number of actions to safeguard these rights and freedoms.

In **Lebanon**, criminal defamation laws have been used to silence criticism of public authorities, and public prosecutors routinely summon journalists for interrogation at security agencies, in violation of the Publications Law. Additionally, authorities have failed to protect the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as protesters have faced harassment and intimidation.

With our partners, including the [Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon](#), we undertook a number of joint actions. For instance, we expressed our solidarity with lawyer and executive director of The Legal Agenda, [Nizar Saghieh](#), after he was subjected to reprisals by the Beirut Bar [Association](#) for his legal defence work and exercising his right to freedom of expression. We also condemned Lebanese authorities' reprisals against [Jean Kassir](#), co-founder of independent media outlet Megaphone, who was summoned by judicial authorities due to a social media post highlighting a number of Lebanese officials evading justice and prosecution for abuses committed. Similarly, we called on authorities to halt the improper investigation and prosecution of The Public Source's journalist [Lara Bitar](#) in reprisal for her article detailing environmental crimes committed by the "Lebanese Forces" political party.



Beirut, Lebanon - October 11, 2022 - Arabic Newspapers, Translation from Arabic News and articles © paul saad, licensed under Shutterstock.

In July 2023, we deplored the sentencing of Lebanese TV presenter [Dima Sadek](#) to prison for her tweets critical of the Free Patriotic Movement, which set a dangerous precedent for freedom of expression in the country. In August 2023, we urged Lebanese authorities to drop the charges against comedian [Nour Hajjar](#) for his jokes criticising the government and religious authorities. Furthermore, we denounced the interrogation and procedural violations against investigative journalist [Mariam Lahham](#) in reprisal for exposing corruption.

Moreover, on September 30, 2023, various human rights and political groups organised a peaceful [protest](#) in downtown Beirut, in response to increased violations of basic human rights and freedoms. According to witnesses and video footage of the protest, dozens of young men on motorcycles surrounded the protesters, threatening, insulting, and physically assaulting them and journalists present. Thus, Lebanese authorities failed to protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, leaving violence unchecked. In response, with our local partners, we raised the issue through an allegation letter sent to several UN Special Procedures mandate holders.



Algeria, Algiers - July 05 2019 : millions of Algerians keep up pressure in the 20th week of protest , against the current government, and against corruption in the country. © Saad-Bakhouché, licensed under Shutterstock.

# IN FOCUS

## Increased crackdown on civic space and freedom of expression in Algeria

Over the last two years, Algerian authorities have systematically clamped down on all forms of peaceful dissent. According to research conducted by Zaki Hannache, there are currently more than 220 activists, journalists, and human rights defenders who find themselves imprisoned in Algeria solely for exercising their fundamental human rights.

MRG assisted one of the victims of this crackdown, Ihsane El Kadi, journalist and Director of the Media Division of Interfaces Médias, which publishes Radio M and news website Maghreb Émergent. These two platforms, which were among the last independent media outlets in the country, were shut down by the authorities in early 2023. In June, El Kadi was sentenced on appeal to seven years of imprisonment in reprisal for his work.

Similarly, MRG advocated for the release of journalist Mustapha Bendjama and researcher Raouf Farrah, who, in October 2023, were sentenced to eight months in prison because of their peaceful activities. Though Farrah was released as he had completed his prison sentence, Bendjama received another six-month sentence in November. He remains in custody despite having completed his sentence in pretrial detention.

In 2023, Algeria also witnessed an alarming increase in judicial harassment against hu-

man rights defenders. MRG supported Kadour Chouicha, Jamila Loukil, and Saïd Boudour, former members of the dissolved Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH), who were tried for terrorism charges in December 2023. Although acquitted, the prosecutor appealed the decision, marking a continuation of their legal intimidation.

Additionally, Algeria received visits from two UN human rights experts in 2023. Prior to the visit of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, we drew his attention to the draft organic law on associations, which falls short of human rights standards. In his post-visit statement, he urged the government to address the climate of fear resulting from criminal charges under overly restrictive laws, including anti-terrorism legislation.

Likewise, we briefed the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders prior to her visit to Algeria in late 2023. Alongside NGOs, we highlighted this visit as a crucial opportunity for reform. MRG further supported the Special Rapporteur's recommendations, which included the reform of several laws in accordance with international standards and urged for the release of all prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders currently held in detention.



Credits: Protesters at COP28 call for the release of unjustly imprisoned Emirati dissidents. © Courtesy of Amnesty International Gulf.

# IN FOCUS

## UAE brings bogus terrorism charges in a mass trial during COP28

From November to December 2023, the global spotlight was on Dubai as the city hosted the UN Climate Change Conference (COP28). Prior to the Conference, we joined more than 200 global organisations to demand that the participating governments pursue accountability for the UAE’s grave human rights record. MRG also called on the UAE to release all those unjustly imprisoned before COP28 in a joint appeal endorsed by more than 20 organisations.

However, not only did the UAE not release its prisoners of conscience, but it started the second-largest political mass trial of its history, dubbed “UAE87”, on December 7, 2023, while COP28 was still underway.

This new mass trial, involving 84 defendants, targets activists and political dissidents. Many of them were previously convicted in 2013 during the country’s largest and grossly unfair political mass trial, known as the “UAE94” trial, in retaliation for signing a petition asking for democratic reforms. Although the detentions of most of the “UAE94” defendants were deemed arbitrary by the UN WGAD, Emirati authorities kept them imprisoned, even after

their sentences ended. This is notably the case of Mohammed al-Mansori, a renowned jurist, and Mohammed al-Roken, a prominent human rights lawyer. The “UAE87” trial also includes non-“UAE94” defendants, such as Nasser Bin Ghaith and Ahmed Mansoor. Both eminent human rights defenders were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

In an immediate response to the “UAE87” trial, in collaboration with the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center (EDAC), we prepared an urgent submission to the attention of UN Special Procedures. We urged them to call for the release of all 84 defendants immediately and unconditionally. Prompted by our appeal, the UN experts did so in January 2024, urging Emirati authorities to refrain from prosecuting the “UAE87” defendants.

We also joined a coalition of over 40 NGOs demanding the UAE to drop the bogus terrorism charges against the “UAE87”. Our statement emphasised that the trial proceedings were being conducted in secrecy, as the UAE authorities did not publish any substantive information on the trial.

# Reprisals against human rights defenders

In 2023, MRG continued to support multiple human rights defenders who have long faced imprisonment and human rights abuses in reprisal for their activism.



From left to right, Hoda Abdel Moneim Aziz and Aisha al-Shater.

In anticipation of the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) annual report on reprisals, we provided information on 10 individuals who were subjected to retaliation due to their cooperation with the UN human rights mechanisms in **Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco,** and

**Saudi Arabia.** The UNSG report, published in September 2023, cited cases of reprisals in 40 countries worldwide, including several in the MENA region, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

In **Egypt**, we continued to advocate for the release of human rights lawyer Hoda Abdel Moneim Aziz, who has been detained since November 2018, amidst a crackdown that targeted at least 40 human rights lawyers and activists. After three years in custody, she was charged with “joining and financing a terrorist organisation” as well as “alleging and broadcasting false news impacting peace and security”. On March 5, 2023, the Cairo Emergency State Security Court sentenced her to five years in prison, followed by a five-year police supervised parole. Consequently, we filed an urgent appeal to the UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights defenders and on the independence of judges and lawyers asking for Abdel Moneim’s immediate release.

Abdullah Al-Hamid, Waleed Abu Alkhair, and Mohammad al-Qahtani in ACPRA trial sixth hearing session. © Ahmed al-Osaimi/Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED.



We also continued to follow up on the case of Egyptian human rights activist Aisha al-Shater, who has been arbitrarily detained since 2018 and, in March 2023, was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

In **Saudi Arabia**, we supported several human rights activists who continued to be subjected to reprisals. Among them is Mohammad al-Qahtani, a prominent human rights defender and founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), who has been arbitrarily detained since 2013. Over ten years later, he remains imprisoned beyond the completion of his sentence. Held *incommunicado* since October 2022, his case remains pending before the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UN WGEID). In response to a communication from UN experts, Saudi authorities claimed that al-Qahtani was in fact charged again with committing criminal offences within the prison. Such charges, brought in secrecy, were undoubtedly a form of reprisal against his family's engagement with UN human rights mechanisms.

Meanwhile, though Saudi Arabia claims that it is strengthening women's rights in the Kingdom, authorities have increasingly been targeting women's rights defenders. For instance, Manahel al-Otaibi, a fitness instructor

and blogger, was arrested in November 2022 for her social media posts advocating for liberal dress codes for women, LGBTQ+ rights and the abolition of male guardianship. She was charged with terrorism but her trial before the Specialised Criminal Court has yet to begin. After her relatives lost all contact with her in November 2023, we assisted her family by urgently appealing to the UN WGEID and the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders to act on her case.

Similarly, Saudi authorities targeted Salma al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani because of their social media posts in favour of women's rights and the release of political prisoners. In 2022, the two women were charged on the basis of the counter-terrorism law and were sentenced to 27 and 45 years in prison, respectively, followed by a travel ban of the same length. In April 2023, based on a complaint filed jointly with NGO partners, we received an Opinion from the UN WGAD on their case, deeming their detention to be "arbitrary". The group of experts considered that both women were "discriminated against for their human rights activism and for sharing their views peacefully on social media", and urged Saudi authorities to release them. We will rely on this UN decision to continue advocating for their release.

Manahel al-Otaibi (left) and Salma al-Shehab (right).





Crime - Prison Cell Bars. © Dan Henson, licensed under Shutterstock.

## Arbitrary detention

In 2023, MRG provided assistance to several victims of arbitrary detention throughout the region, including some subjected to grossly unfair trials.

Responding to our request, the UN WGAD issued an Opinion in August 2023 on the arbitrary detention of three individuals accused of corruption, urging **Iraq** to release them immediately. Adel Khudair, Raad al-Hares and Bahaa Abdul Hadi, were arrested in 2020 by members of the “Diwaniya Committee No. 29”. Established in September of the same year, the Committee was tasked to investigate “cases of corruption and major crimes”, but was later abolished because it violated the Iraqi Constitution. The three men were sentenced from four to six years’ imprisonment following unfair trials, during which they alleged that they were subjected to torture while being secretly detained. Abdul Hadi and Khudair were released respectively

in March and May 2023, and al-Hares was released in January 2024.

In July 2023, MRG took action on the case of Ahmad Abdulrazzak Basha Kazim, an Iraqi citizen imprisoned for ‘terrorism’. First arrested and detained by U.S. forces from 2007 to 2010, he was arrested again in 2012 by Iraqi authorities. Since then, he has remained in prison, where he was allegedly tortured, leading to a coerced confession. Despite two acquittals in 2017 and 2021, Kazim was never released, and two new cases were brought against him for terrorism offences in 2023. To this day, he has not been tried for these two new cases, nor has he been informed of the full list of charges. As he remains arbitrarily detained in al-Nasiriyah central prison, MRG has sought the UN WGAD’s intervention.

Lastly, in **Morocco**, we advocated for the release of Nasser Zefzafi, a political activist serving a 20-year prison sentence since 2018. Zefzafi was a prominent leader of the 2016-

2017 Hirak El-Rif movement, advocating for socio-economic reforms through peaceful demonstrations. He was sentenced during a mass trial involving 54 defendants, all of whom were sentenced to prison. MRG documented his case and notified the UN WGAD in December 2023, requesting the UN experts to consider his detention arbitrary and call for his immediate release.

## Transnational repression

In 2023, MRG documented cases of several victims of transnational repression in the region. Our work highlights the pressing need to address the challenges posed by this crossborder phenomenon and the distressing pattern of human rights abuses it is creating.

In May 2023, we assisted Khalaf al-Romaithi, an Emirati peaceful dissident who was convicted *in absentia* and sentenced to 15 years in prison during the “UAE94” trial. While travelling to **Jordan** in May 2023, al-Romaithi was arrested based on a warrant issued by the Arab Interior Ministers Council (AIMC), a body of the Arab League, upon the **UAE’s** request, and subsequently disappeared. Fearing for his well-being, MRG urgently appealed to the UN WGEID, urging them to intervene with Jordanian and Emirati authorities to clarify his fate and whereabouts. In its response to the UN, the UAE stated that he was detained in a prison facility in Abu Dhabi, without providing further details about his location, and claimed that he would be retried. Al-Romaithi remains detained *incommunicado* at the time of writing, and it has been reported that he was one of the defendants in the UAE87 trial that began in late 2023.

Similarly, MRG documented the case of Hassan Muhammad al-Rabea, a Saudi national from the Shi’a minority. His family having faced a

long history of persecution, with several of his relatives executed or on death row, he fled to **Morocco** in 2022. However, in January 2023, al-Rabea was arrested at Marrakech airport on the basis of an arrest warrant circulated by the AIMC at the request of **Saudi Arabia**, on suspicion of “collaboration with terrorists”.

In February 2023, after his first and only hearing, the Rabat Court of Cassation ruled in favour of his extradition to Saudi Arabia, despite credible risks of such an extradition being in breach of the principle of *non-refoulement*. Fearing for his safety, we promptly submitted al-Rabea’s case to the UN Committee against Torture, which requested that Morocco suspends his extradition on February 6, 2023. However, the very same day, Morocco effectively extradited al-Rabea to Saudi Arabia, violating its obligations under the UN Convention against Torture. This act was criticised by UN experts, but Moroccan authorities claimed that they only received the Committee’s request a few hours after the extradition took place. Since his extradition, al-Rabea remains detained in Saudi Arabia.

Macro Globe Map Detail 13 Saudi Arabia. © Kent Weakley, licensed under Shutterstock.



## Protecting the rights of people in exile

In 2023, MRG advocated for the rights of an increasing number of individuals in exile, who were subjected to human rights abuses ranging from enforced disappearance to arbitrary detention.



Saida-Lebanon. Women inside an abandoned construction site occupied by Syrian refugees Saida-Lebanon on 2015-10-13. © Richard Julliard, licensed under Shutterstock.

In April 2023, security forces in **Lebanon** raided several neighbourhoods and arrested Syrian refugees, who were later unlawfully deported to Syria. In this context, Lebanese Intelligence forces arrested two Syrian refugees, Uday Ibrahim and J.A., from their homes. They were both forcibly disappeared for a few weeks, prompting MRG to request the urgent intervention of the UN WGEID. After their deportation, they were detained in several security detention centres in Damascus before being brought before a military judge who ordered their release only if they join the military. As Syria cannot be considered a safe country, Syrian refugees must be protected from forcible return to avoid any risk of persecution or torture.

Also in Lebanon, Egyptian human rights defender Abdulrahman Tareq, also known as “Moka”, was arrested in May on unclear grounds in Beirut where he had been living since November 2022. Concerned that he could be deported to Egypt, where he had faced bogus terrorism charges, we immediately requested the intervention of UN Special Procedures on the same day. Moka was finally released by the Lebanese authorities and was allowed to travel to France, where he was granted refugee status.

Moreover, we assisted Abdulrahman al-Khalidi, a human rights defender and political activist from **Saudi Arabia** facing persecution while in exile. As he was headed to the European Union with the intention of applying for asylum, he was arrested in Bulgaria in October 2021 for crossing the border irregularly and has since been held in the Busmantsi detention centre. His asylum application, despite meeting all the required criteria, was rejected by the Bulgarian Refugee State Agency and by all jurisdictions to which he appealed. Fearing his deportation to Saudi Arabia, we urgently submitted his case to the attention of several UN experts. In September 2023, we were pleased that the Supreme Court of Bulgaria annulled the decision to refuse his asylum request and sent it back for reconsideration to the State Agency. However, his case is still ongoing and he continues to be at risk of deportation.

Furthermore, in 2023, MRG assisted Zaki Hannache, an Algerian human rights defender who had fled to **Tunisia**, where he obtained refugee status from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In Algeria, he was detained for several weeks in early 2022 for carrying out his work as a human rights defender. In particular, he was accused of terrorism in reprisal for his work documenting and publishing information on



From left to right: Moka, Abdulrahman al-Khalidi, Zaki Hannache and Yidiresi Aishan.

the arrests and prosecutions of prisoners of conscience, particularly in relation to the Hirak movement. Fearing further persecution and needing medical treatment, he travelled to Tunisia in August 2022.

In November 2022, Tunisian police came looking for Hannache at two different locations in Tunis, raising fears of his potential arrest and extradition. Thus, we appealed to the UN Committee against Torture, citing a possible violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*. The Committee effectively asked Tunisian authorities not to expel Hannache and in September 2023, he was able to leave Tunisia and successfully reach a safe country. We therefore requested that the UN Committee against Torture close his case, as he was no longer at risk of being deported to Algeria.

In addition, in 2023, MRG received concerning allegations about the so-called “Emirates Humanitarian City” (EHC) in the **UAE**, where Afghan refugee populations have been stuck for over two years. The refugees were transported to the Emirates as part of an evacuation scheme from Kabul orchestrated

by U.S. private entities. The responsibility over their transportation and detention was and continues to be held by U.S. private entities and a non-judicial branch of the UAE government, without involvement from a judge or other judicial authority. We assisted one of the detainees, who has been held in EHC with their family since 2021 by documenting and submitting their case to the UN WGAD. We argued that both the UAE and the U.S. are responsible for their deprivation of liberty.

Lastly, we continued to provide assistance to Yidiresi Aishan, an Uyghur asylum seeker threatened with extradition from **Morocco** to China, where he would be at risk of torture. Aishan was arrested in Casablanca in July 2021 on the basis of a red notice issued by Interpol at China’s request “for belonging to a terrorist organisation”. On December 15, 2021, the Court of Cassation in Rabat ruled in favour of the extradition request, leading us to urgently seek the intervention of the UN Committee against Torture. Prompted by our appeal, the Committee requested Moroccan authorities to suspend his extradition, pending the consideration of his case. Although Morocco has, at the time of writing, abided by this request, Aishan remains detained pending a final decision on his case from the Committee. In July, marking the two-year anniversary of his arrest, we released a statement calling on Moroccan authorities to cancel extradition proceedings and ensure his passage to a safe country.



Lampedusa Italia April 1, 2011 landing clandestine migrant boat at Lampedusa harbour.  
© photofilippo66, licensed under Shutterstock.

# IN FOCUS

## Syrian and Lebanese migrants subjected to torture and forced labour while detained in Libya

In September 2023, we assisted and documented the cases of Syrian and Lebanese migrants who were forcibly disappeared and detained in **Libya** after having attempted to flee from Lebanon to Italy by boat. The previous month, while at sea, the migrants reported that a ship displaying a Libyan flag was pursuing them, and armed individuals were firing at their vessel. Members of a Libyan militia Tarek Bin Zeyad (TBZ) apprehended the migrants on the boat and detained them in Ganfuda detention centre in Benghazi. As a number of them were subjected to secret detention, forced labour, torture and ill-treatment, we sought the intervention of UN Spe-

cial Procedures. We namely advocated on behalf of Lebanese national Khodr Khaled al-Nabush and Syrian national Moustafa Moustafa Sharaf, who was notably subjected to torture for being a member of the Yazidi religious community.

After our documentation of the case was reported in the New Arab in September 2023, both men were released. In December 2023, the human rights violations committed by TBZ against migrants, with the complicity of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, were reported by different media outlets, including Al Jazeera and Le Monde.

We produced **2 analyses** of legislations incompatible with international human rights standards and advocated for legal and policy reform.

We assessed compliance of **6 countries** with their international obligations.

We assessed the work, independence and efficiency of **3 national human rights institutions**.

We engaged in a variety of contemporary international law issues, including human rights and counter-terrorism, transnational repression, and sanctions as a tool of accountability.

# Legal advocacy

We conducted in-depth research and identified law and policy developments pertaining to freedom of expression and of the press, civic space, and counter-terrorism.

## Aligning domestic legal frameworks with international standards

**This year, we identified a number of law and policy developments pertaining to Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, that would enable human rights violations. We therefore conducted in-depth research and analysis and advocated for legal and policy reform in line with international standards.**

In **Algeria**, in March 2023, the National People's Assembly adopted a law on information, which had been drafted by the Ministry of Communication the previous year. Although the bill intended to replace the restrictive Information Code of 2012, the new law contains a number of provisions that violate the right to freedom of expression. With ARTICLE 19, we produced a legal analysis which we shared with the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression.

Among the concerns raised is the law's vaguely formulated standards governing the activities of journalists, stipulating they must respect "the Muslim religion, Islam in the national context, and other religions, national identity, national norms, the moral and cultural values of the nation, national sovereignty, national unity and territorial unity." In a similar

vein, the bill compels journalists to refrain from publishing or disseminating "false or malicious news", a crime already punishable with one to three years in prison under the Penal Code. Such broad and imprecise language, the interpretation of which is largely left to the discretion of state authorities, therefore allows for a continued disproportionate crackdown on freedom of speech.

Another area of concern is the ban on Algerians with dual nationality to own or hold shares in Algerian media outlets. Equally concerning, the law reiterates the existing requirement for journalists to obtain "accreditation" to work in Algeria for foreign media, and sanctions with a fine for "any person working in Algeria for a foreign media without accreditation". In the past, the Algerian authorities have used the accreditation system against foreign media



Press and media photographer on duty in public news coverage event for reporter and mass communication. © stockphoto mania, licensed under Shutterstock.

deemed too critical. The new law also forbids “direct or indirect funding from a foreign entity” and subjects offenders to a fine. We fear that this provision will complement existing sanctions in the Penal Code that have been used against dissenting journalist voices such as [Ihsane El Kadi](#) and [Mustapha Bendjama](#).

Furthermore, on February 7, 2023, the Algerian president ratified a bill amending and supplementing [Law No. 05-01](#) on preventing and combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism. We produced an [analysis](#) of the text and submitted it to the Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights.

In our analysis, we found that the new law expands the list of acts considered as ‘terrorism’ under article 87 *bis* of the Penal Code, which had already been used in recent years to prosecute peaceful dissidents and human rights defenders. The law notably forbids civil society organisations (CSOs) from receiving “any donations or subsidies considered by the

law as an offence or crime, from natural or legal persons or organisations or bodies involved, inside or outside the territory of the Republic, in activities related to terrorist offences”.

This amendment is all the more concerning as it supplements the already restrictive provisions contained in the 2012 [Law](#) on Associations and the 2020 [amendments](#) to the Penal Code, which provide the authorities with excessive power to prosecute civil society activists receiving foreign funding if they consider that their activities undermine the “normal functioning of institutions” or “national unity”. Given the already wide range of ‘terrorist’ offences, we fear that the new law will further criminalise the legitimate activities of CSOs.

Furthermore, this year, we continued to partner with the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law ([ICNL](#)) and monitored legal and policy developments in Algeria affecting civic space. Our research was used to update ICNL’s [Civic Freedom Monitor](#) on Algeria.



Hand smartphone digital revolution protests. © oxinoxi, licensed under Shutterstock.

In 2023, MRG joined partners in expressing deep concern over **Iraq's** leaked draft Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content proposed by the Communications and Media Commission (CMC). The letter urged the CMC to withdraw the draft as it does not comply with the Iraqi Constitution and international human rights standards. Key concerns included the draft's vague terms, including "meaningful" and "indecent content", granting the authorities broad powers to determine what is permissible to share online. The law also contains restrictions on freedom of expression and journalism, and excessive

administrative requirements for online content. In particular, the text enables content blocking based on administrative decisions, denying the right to access information, and adopting a limited approach to freedom of expression in the digital age.

Meanwhile, in **Lebanon**, amid attacks on journalists, public figures, lawyers, and protesters, authorities have been drafting a new repressive media law behind closed doors. In its current form, the proposed text would be a dangerous setback for freedom of expression in the country, where defamation laws are already being used to harass and intimidate journalists and peaceful critics. As a member of the Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon, we joined partners in expressing concern over the secret nature of the legislative discussion and failure to engage with civil society, as the text could "grant the authorities free rein to harass, intimidate and silence peaceful critics, and perpetuate an environment of censorship." With the Coalition, we are currently working on an in-depth analysis of the draft. Additionally, the Coalition will partake in consultations with progressive Members of Parliament to propose alternatives to the text.

## Assessing states' compliance with human rights standards

**Based on thorough research and monitoring, we produced country reports and brought a civil society perspective in the assessment of the compliance of states – specifically Algeria, Djibouti, Jordan, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – with their human rights obligations within UN mechanisms.**

### Universal Periodic Review

In 2023, MRG contributed to and monitored the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of sever-

al countries. The UPR is a peer review mechanism by which UN Member States provide recommendations to improve the human rights record of the countries under review.



A general view of participants at the last day the 18th Session of the Human Rights Council. © UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED.

In November 2022, the UPR of **Algeria** and **Morocco** took place before the UN Human Rights Council (UN HRC). Prior to this, we had provided UN Member States with information on the human rights situation in both countries, by sharing our reports. In March 2023, the UN HRC adopted the final outcomes of the UPR for both countries, during which authorities informed the Council of the recommendations they wished to implement and those they rejected. We monitored the adoption of the UPR outcome and prepared press releases providing an analysis of the recommendations accepted and rejected.

Although Algeria accepted most of the recommendations received from other Member States, it merely noted recommendations geared towards strengthening the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, claiming that some have already been implemented. Many recommendations that were not accepted by Algeria also addressed the issue of arbitrary detentions, which are often carried out under the guise of counter-terrorism.

Marking the adoption of the outcome of Algeria's UPR on March 27, 2023, jointly with

partners, we called on Algerian authorities to implement the accepted recommendations while stressing the need to reconsider their stance on the recommendations that were merely noted, especially those pertaining to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, the prohibition of torture, counter-terrorism and judiciary independence. In this context, we also co-organised an online event to discuss the current human rights situation in Algeria.

Meanwhile, Morocco accepted most recommendations related to the prohibition of torture, the independence of the judiciary and freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association. However, Moroccan authorities have yet to implement most of these recommendations and the country's record on these issues remains highly concerning.

In its report submitted ahead of the UPR, MRG insisted on the decline of freedom of expression in the kingdom. In recent years, Morocco experienced a pattern of arrests, judicial harassment, and imprisonment of independent journalists, activists, and politicians, because of their critical writings and work, on trumped-up charges including "sexual assault", "serving a foreign agenda", or "money laundering." This practice, which consists of using charges, seemingly unrelated to freedom of expression, against dissenting voices has been widely documented and was the subject of a recent Human Rights Watch report. Some of the most emblematic cases include Moroccan human rights lawyer Mohammed Zian, journalists Soulaimane Raissouni and Omar Radi, as well as academic Maati Monjib.

Furthermore, MRG also contributed to the UPR of the **UAE** by participating in the pre-session



Screenshot of the UAE delegation during the 4th cycle of the UAE's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council. © UN Web TV.

in March 2023 and engaging with diplomats from UN permanent missions to brief them about the human rights situation in the country. We notably stressed that the UAE must ensure that its counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws are not an obstacle to the legitimate activities of citizens. In particular, we emphasised the role of the State Security Apparatus in the crack down on public dissent. We further stressed that the UAE's counter-terrorism law provides a legal basis for the detention of individuals beyond the completion of their sentence under the pretext of rehabilitation, commonly known as "Munasaha". We also suggested that states recommend the UAE to respect fair trial standards, ensure procedural guarantees and reject evidence obtained under torture, and expressly ensure the independence of its judiciary from the executive branch.

In May 2023, we followed the UAE's review and issued a summary of the interactive dialogue and were pleased to see that a number of countries echoed our concerns.

In October, the UAE informed the UN HRC of its decision to accept 198 out of 323 recommendations it had received, thereby rejecting almost 40% of the recommendations. On that occasion, we issued an analysis of the UPR's outcome in a press release and participated in a press conference. Importantly, we noted that the UAE accepted several recommendations to guarantee the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as well as ensure a safe environment for the work of human rights defenders. MRG will continue its monitoring of the implementation of accepted recommendations in its follow-up activities.

In April 2023, MRG also submitted a report ahead of **Djibouti's** fourth UPR. The report sheds light on the excessive restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly in the country and highlights the significant obstacle to the involvement of civil society, media, and opposition parties in the political process.



Screenshot of the Djibouti delegation during the 4th cycle of its Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council. © UN Web TV.

The report also underscores the lack of independence of Djibouti's national human rights institution (NHRI). In September 2023, MRG presented our report's findings during the UPR pre-session held by UPR-Info.

In November 2023, MRG followed Djibouti's fourth UPR session, and provided an analysis of the statements made by UN Member States, totalling over 260 recommendations to the country's delegation. These included the decriminalisation of defamation, the removal of restrictions on the creation of media and the facilitation of full and free participation in political life, as outlined in our shadow report. Additionally, member states urged Djibouti to ensure full compliance of its NHRI with the Paris Principles, as suggested by MRG

Lastly, ahead of their respective reviews in January 2024, we drafted and shared reports on the human rights situation in both **Jordan** and **Saudi Arabia** with the UN HRC.

On Jordan, our report addresses unratified treaties, such as the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances, and provides recommendations in view of improving Jordan's cooperation with international human rights mechanisms. The report also raised concerns about constitutional amendments concentrating executive power and highlighted issues with the Jordanian NHRI, the National Centre for Human Rights, notably relating to lack of independence and judicial harassment against its staff.

Moreover, our recommendations for Jordan included aligning domestic counter-terrorism laws with international human rights standards, limiting the State Security Court's powers, restricting the General Intelligence Directorate, abolishing the death penalty, addressing administrative detention issues, combating torture, upholding the principle of *non-refoulement*, and ending politically motivated extraditions. The report also advocated for freedom of expression, peaceful



MRG's Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed joins civil society partners from Amnesty International, ALQST, GCHR, ESOHR, and Reprieve at the pre-session of Saudi Arabia's UPR at the Palais. © Courtesy of ALQST for Human Rights.

assembly and association, and highlighted the lack of comprehensive legislation against gender discrimination.

MRG also submitted a report ahead of Saudi Arabia's fourth UPR cycle. The report highlighted the scope of international obligations that bind Saudi Arabia, the country's cooperation with international human rights mechanisms and key human rights issues. These include counter-terrorism, the right to life, liberty and security of persons, freedom of expression, and freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Importantly, the report emphasised that the 2017 counter-terrorism law criminalises acts falling under freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. More specifically, the State Security Presidency (SSP), which handles terrorism cases and is controlled by the Saudi Crown Prince, has been responsible for gross human rights abuses. MRG also

identified multiple cases where individuals were detained arbitrarily and convicted on the sole basis of forced confessions.

During the pre-session organised by UPR-Info in December 2023, our staff urged UN Member States to issue recommendations for Saudi Arabia to amend its counter-terrorism framework and align it with international human rights law. We also recommended that Saudi authorities release those arbitrarily detained, particularly for acts of free speech.

As part of our targeted advocacy ahead of the UPR, MRG coordinated one-on-one meetings with several permanent missions of UN Member States in Geneva, including Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, alongside a coalition of NGOs composed of ALQST, Amnesty International, the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and Reprieve.

## UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

In February 2023, the UN WGEID published a general allegation letter on the pattern of enforced disappearances in the **UAE**. The letter, prompted by a submission from MRG, contains 12 questions addressed to the UAE authorities.

In its allegation, the Working Group highlighted the UAE's pattern of arrests leading to enforced disappearance, and the general rise in the number of such cases. It also echoed our concerns regarding the targeting of journalists, lawyers and members of religious minorities.

The UN WGEID also referred to the UAE's counter-terrorism legal framework and its overly broad definition of terrorist offences. It also inquired on whether the UAE maintains official registers of persons deprived of liberty, as MRG stated that information on detainees is routinely restricted. Importantly, the Working Group insisted on the significant role played by the State Security Apparatus in the perpetration of enforced disappearances.

The allegation letter also echoed our concern that relatives of disappeared persons who seek remedies often face reprisals, threats and harassment from Emirati authorities. The Working Group also specified cases of enforced disappearance in UAE-controlled facilities in Yemen. Finally, it addressed the UAE's failure to ensure that persons are not expelled, returned or extradited to other States where there are substantial grounds to believe that they would be in danger of enforced disappearance.



View of the skyscrapers in Dubai through the iron bars. UAE. © Sviatlana Yankouskaya, licensed under Shutterstock.

At the time of writing, Emirati authorities have not responded to the Working Group's general allegation and continue to use the practice of enforced disappearance.

## UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances

In September 2023, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) examined the efforts made by **Mauritania** to implement the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).

Ahead of the review, MRG and our Mauritanian partner, the *Cadre de Concertation des Rescapés de Mauritanie* (CCR-M), submitted a report to the CED, highlighting the absence of redress for victims and their families of the *Passif Humanitaire*, a period between 1986 and 1992 during which massive human rights violations were committed against the Afro-Mauritanian population. The report also noted the lack of accountability for the perpetrators of these violations.



Mauritanian civil society testify before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances. © Courtesy of Anja Oksalampi.

During the review of Mauritania, survivors of this dark period and their relatives, as well as Mauritanian civil society activists, came to Geneva to testify before the Committee. While most of the delegation was made up of activists from the diaspora, we were able to facilitate the travel of three relatives of victims from Mauritania, thanks to the support of the City of Geneva.

Our joint advocacy effort has proven fruitful: the Committee's Concluding Observations contained strong recommendations in the area of transitional justice and the fight against impunity, disregarding the arguments raised by the government during the dialogue. The authorities claimed that they had taken sufficient measures to settle the *Passif humanitaire* and that the 1993 Amnesty Law, which prevents any accountability, predated the adoption of the Convention and that it was therefore unnecessary to address the question of its compliance.

Most notably, the Committee recommended that Mauritania “repeal any provision that would have the effect of exempting the perpetrators of enforced disappearances from prosecution or criminal penalties” adding that “all cases of enforced disappearance connected with the period of *Passif humanitaire* are investigated thoroughly and impartially and that investigations continue until the fate of the disappeared persons has been clarified”.

MRG later co-facilitated a roundtable discussion in partnership with the Committee and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Mauritania, to ensure a wide dissemination of the Concluding Observations.

The Mauritanian government has three years to report to the CED on the implementation of these recommendations. Together with our partners from Mauritanian civil society, we will continue to advocate for victims' right to truth and justice.

# Assessing the independence and effectiveness of NHRIs

**Among our tactics is assessing national human rights institutions (NHRIs) of MENA countries, which we believe are essential to ensure the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms at the national level. However, to that effect, they must abide by the Paris Principles, namely pluralism, independence and effectiveness, “in order to be considered credible and to operate effectively.” In 2023, we assessed the work, independence, and efficiency of the NHRIs of Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.**

In October 2023, ahead of the review of the NHRIs of **Bahrain** and **Egypt** by the Subcommittee on Accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), we led a campaign with 17 CSOs, urging the SCA to not grant these NHRIs “status A” considering their blatant failure to protect human rights.

Months prior, we had submitted a joint report to the SCA, assessing the National Institution for Human Rights in Bahrain (NIHRB). The report addressed a number of concerns, including the lack of independence of the NIHRB members from the executive branch, as well as reports of the institution’s Chairman being implicated in abuses against migrant workers. The NIHRB also has a record of outright denying human rights abuses committed by Bahraini authorities.

Similarly, we shared with the SCA our joint report on the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), which severely lacks independence from the government, with its Chair and Vice-President being former Egyptian officials and diplomats. In addition, the NCHR has also left hundreds of complaints unanswered and blatantly denies that authorities commit certain human rights abuses. We had also shared these concerns ahead of the UN Committee against Torture’s review of Egypt in November 2023.

We are pleased to have achieved great impact with these actions: following the October session, the SCA announced its decision to defer the review of the Bahraini and Egyptian NHRIs to 2024, citing their “lack of independence” and “cooperation with civil society” as well as their “inability to address human rights abuses”, undoubtedly echoing our concerns and referring to our submissions. The UN Committee against Torture also deplored “that the mandate of the Council does not allow it to conduct unannounced visits to places of deprivation of liberty, its visits are allegedly prearranged and do not allow for unhindered access or confidential interviews with detainees”.

United Nations Building and the flags in Geneva Switzerland. © nexus 7, licensed under Shutterstock.





Hala Mazyad Al-Tuwaijri, President of the Saudi Human Rights Commission of Saudi Arabia addresses the 52nd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council, Geneva. © UN Photo / Violaine Martin, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED.

# IN FOCUS

## The Saudi Human Rights Commission: a whitewashing tool for the Kingdom

In November 2023, MRG, together with ALQST and ESOHR, released a [joint report](#) titled “The Saudi Human Rights Commission: a Whitewashing Tool for the Kingdom”. The report draws attention to the Saudi Human Rights Commission’s (SHRC) lack of independence, as it is directly linked to the executive branch. It emphasises that while the SHRC’s stated objective is to protect and promote human rights, it actually serves as a tool to gloss over human rights violations in Saudi Arabia. The report is the first of its kind, as there was no publicly available information on the role of the SHRC before its release.

Drawing from first-hand testimonies and desk research, this report exposes the hidden reality of the SHRC through the untold stories of victims of human rights violations. The report also sheds light on the distinguished status afforded to the SHRC, underscored by invitations from states and collaboration with UN entities, and calls on the international community to fundamentally change their approach to engaging with the SHRC in light of our research findings.

The report was released ahead of the third human rights [dialogue](#) between the European Union (EU) and Saudi Arabia, represented by the SHRC. In a meeting convened by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and civil society prior to the dialogue, we briefed the EU about our research findings, stating that the SHRC could not be considered a viable interlocutor in the EU-Saudi human rights dialogue.

MRG further conveyed its concerns regarding the SHRC in the context of Saudi Arabia’s UPR, in our [report](#) released in July 2023, as well as in an [oral statement](#) during the UPR pre-session in December 2023. The same month, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed also [presented](#) our findings during the annual conference of ALQST in London.

In the coming years, we will continue to monitor the SHRC and raise awareness about its glaring lack of independence and involvement in covering up human rights violations. We aim to amplify our research findings and bring them to the attention of relevant stakeholders, urging for concerted efforts towards redress and reform.

## Engaging in key international law issues

This year, our legal team engaged in a variety of international law issues, which included human rights and counter-terrorism, transnational repression, and the use of sanctions as a tool of accountability.

### Human rights and counter-terrorism



MRG contributes to the launch of the UN Special Rapporteur's Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society and Civic Space.

In 2023, MRG greatly expanded its thematic work on counter-terrorism (CT) and human rights. In addition to documenting abundant human rights violations resulting from CT misuse in the region, we produced research identifying its root causes, solidified our engagement as a member of the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, and diversified our outreach efforts by increasing engagement with stakeholders within the UN counter-terrorism architecture.

Our analysis on the misuse of CT frameworks and policies in the region, both at the national and regional levels, was included in the Global Study on the impact of counter-terrorism on civil society and civic space published by the former UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights Fionnuala Ní Aoláin. Based on extensive data collection,

the Global Study draws on the experience of civil society from across the globe operating amidst shrinking civic space and the widespread misuse of CT and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) measures to restrict their exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms and curb their legitimate activities.

We further contributed to the Global Study by co-convening the MENA regional consultation with the former UN Special Rapporteur. There, we gathered human rights defenders and legal experts from countries across the region to discuss the impact of CT on regional civil society. The findings of the consultation were published as part of the Global Study.

MRG's Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry highlights the misuse of counter-terrorism across the MENA region. © Courtesy of Mai El-Sadany.



In June 2023, our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry attended the UN Counter-Terrorism week in New York, and spoke at the launch of the Global Study. Thiry gave a general overview of the misuse of CT legislation across the MENA region. Referring to the terrorism charges brought against members of the Algerian Human Rights League, the long prison sentences imposed in Saudi Arabia for social media posts, as well as the listing of six Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organisations by Israel, he explained that the misuse of CT measures is largely responsible of the shrinking of civic space in the region.

Our focus on CT and human rights was further expanded through our continued membership and active participation in the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism. A network composed of over 80 CSOs from all over the world, the Coalition seeks to

challenge the misuse of CT legislations, to transform the transnational CT architecture, and to protect civic space and human rights. In October, our Executive Director Inès Osman, along with 35 Coalition members travelling from 20 countries, participated in a Strategy Retreat with the Coalition in Nairobi, Kenya.

The same month, the Coalition held a side-event on the Implementation of the Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society and Civic Space in New York. On this occasion, our Legal Researcher Tanya Boulakovski spoke on how global CT efforts neglect the inclusion of human rights and civil society perspectives. Furthermore, she echoed the Global Study's call to bridge the gap between the UN counter-terrorism system and the UN human rights architecture to achieve a "fundamental transformation" of the global CT system.

MRG's Legal Researcher Tanya Boulakovski speaks at a side-event on the Implementation of the Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism in New York. © Courtesy of the CSO Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism.





Plane goes on takeoff at sunset. Landing plane at sunset. Cloudy sky. © OlegRI, licensed under Shutterstock.

## Transnational repression

In 2023, MRG developed its thematic expertise on the issue of transnational repression, particularly through our [research](#) on the Arab Interior Ministers' Council (AIMC), a body of the League of Arab States. With little publicly available information on the role of this Council, our analysis was the first of its kind, exposing how the AIMC is used as a tool for transnational repression in the Arab region.

Our unprecedented analysis revealed the alarming human rights implications of the AIMC's operations, which are similar to those of INTERPOL. Arab states can file an arrest warrant through the AIMC when a wanted person has not yet been arrested and their whereabouts are unknown, often because they have left the country. The AIMC can then circulate the arrest warrant to all Arab League Member States, in order to locate the wanted individual and proceed with their extradition. This is particularly concerning as

Arab states file arrest warrants on the basis of their domestic counter-terrorism laws, which often criminalise political acts such as dissent. Thus, the AIMC facilitates politically motivated extraditions, which its founding laws fail to adequately prohibit. In other words, Arab states use the AIMC as a tool of transnational repression.

Our research allowed us to achieve significant impact by raising relevant stakeholders' awareness of the AIMC and its role as a tool of transnational repression. In June 2023, based on our analysis, several UN experts transmitted a [communication](#) to the League of Arab States, expressing their concern over human rights violations occurring within AIMC's operations. In addition, the findings of our research on AIMC were included in the Special Rapporteur's Global Study on the impact of counter-terrorism on civic space, and served as the foundation for one of the six key findings of the MENA civil society outcome document.



Logo of the League of Arab States with stars representing the number of Arab countries and their flags with a map. © Rojo/Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED.

In parallel, our research stresses the UN's role in the development of the 2022 Arab Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy, particularly through the assistance provided by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) to the AIMC. In an effort to raise our concerns to UN CT bodies cooperating with the AIMC, throughout 2023, MRG engaged and held several meetings with multiple stakeholders in the UN CT system, including UNOCT and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

In an effort to continue raising public awareness on the AIMC, our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry wrote an op-ed titled "Politically Motivated Extraditions Are Abetting Transnational Repression", published on DAWN MENA Journal. As Thiry puts it, "*Like Interpol, the Arab Interior Ministers Council has been accused of facilitating the extradition of political opponents, human rights defenders and persecuted minorities, prompting the question of what differentiates "judicial cooperation" from transnational repression*". In July 2023, during a press conference discussing the AIMC and the extradition of peaceful dissidents, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed detailed the human rights

concerns posed by the Council's operations as found in our analysis.

## Sanctions as a tool of accountability

Since 2021, MRG has advocated for the imposition of sanctions against perpetrators of gross human rights abuses, specifically through targeted programs, similar to the Magnitsky sanctions. Such mechanisms are used by several governments worldwide to sanction human rights abuses by freezing the assets of perpetrators and/or denying them visas. They constitute an alternative avenue for accountability, considering domestic mechanisms in the MENA have proven to be ineffective. To date, very few perpetrators of human rights abuses in the region have been targeted under such sanctions programs.

As such, we investigated egregious human rights abuses committed in Saudi Arabia and the UAE by individual members of the state security forces, whose roles have been overlooked, resulting in impunity. Jointly with NGO partners, we gathered and submitted evidence to sanctions authorities in the US, UK, and at the EU level. We engaged with these stakeholders, and continue to provide them with updates. In June 2023, we met with a number of U.S. state representatives and members of Congress in Washington D.C. to discuss our requests. Throughout the year, we also held a number of meetings with UK and EU officials.

MENA Rights Group led and participated in several advocacy actions, including at the UN level.

We launched and joined various campaigns to raise awareness on human rights violations in the MENA region.

We highlighted victims' stories by publicising and sharing **37** cases on our website and social media platforms.

We organised and participated in **16** public and online events.

Our team members have been quoted in several publications and our work covered by diverse media outlets.

# Awareness raising

MRG led or supported 66 joint civil society actions, raising awareness on pressing human rights issues across the region.

## Joint advocacy actions

In order to raise awareness on a range of human rights issues, we led more than 15 advocacy actions in 2023, including joint letters to relevant authorities and stakeholders, and statements marking important international days.

For example, on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, together with a number of regional and international CSOs, we urged states across MENA to fulfil their obligations under the Convention against Torture, including the eradication of the practice of torture and accountability for perpetrators.

Furthermore, in October, we issued a joint statement marking the fourth anniversary of the “Tishreen” protests in **Iraq**, which were

met with excessive use of force as well as the abduction of protesters, 13 of whom remain forcibly disappeared. The statement, co-signed by international and local CSOs, called on Iraqi authorities to address the widespread practice of enforced disappearance and to clarify the fate of disappeared protesters.

Finally, in a joint letter to the Tunisian authorities, we urged them not to extradite human rights defender Zakaria Hannache to Algeria, where he risked being subjected to human rights abuses such as torture. We reiterated Hannache’s refugee status that protects him from *refoulement*, and reminded Tunisia’s duty to respect its international obligations. Our letter was endorsed by 16 international, regional and local CSOs and made a positive impact on Hannache’s case, as he has since left Tunisia and relocated to a safe country.

Megaphone drawn on blackboard for announce background. © memedozaaslanphotography, licensed under Shutterstock.





Paris, France - July 28 2022: The French president Emmanuel Macron welcoming the President of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman at Elysée Palace for working lunch. © Frederic Legrand - COMEO, licensed under Shutterstock.

# IN FOCUS

## Riyadh's candidacy to the World Expo 2030: whitewashing human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia

As one of our priorities was to raise awareness on egregious human rights violations committed by Saudi authorities, we led an advocacy campaign countering Saudi Arabia's candidacy to host the World Expo in 2030. MRG identified the Kingdom's pattern of sportswashing and whitewashing its grim human rights record by hosting major sports, entertainment and other events, and therefore wrote two open letters to the *Bureau International des Expositions* (BIE), which organises the World Expo.

First, we drafted an open [letter](#) to the BIE's Secretariat and Executive Committee urging them to exclude the Kingdom's candidacy, to consider it unviable, and to refrain from putting it forward to the General Assembly for a vote. Endorsed by 11 international and regional CSOs, our letter cited the Saudi authorities' widespread use of torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention, its repression of peaceful dissent and freedom of expression both online and offline, and its record-breaking number of yearly executions.

A month later, we sent a joint [letter](#) to the French President Emmanuel Macron amidst Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Paris, which was organised to seek France's support for the Saudi candidacy for the World Expo 2030. With nine partner CSOs, we urged Macron to consider the widespread human rights violations occurring in the Kingdom.

Finally, ahead of the vote in November 2023, we wrote an open [letter](#) to the BIE's General Assembly and Member States urging them not to support Saudi Arabia's candidacy given its documented appalling human rights record. Whilst Saudi Arabia unfortunately won the vote by a landslide, the letter was picked up by numerous media outlets in France, Italy, Korea and other countries. Journalists in Paris from the television journal *Quotidien* even [questioned](#) the Saudi Foreign Minister on the matter, citing our letter that was endorsed by 14 other NGOs.

To further raise awareness on human rights violations across the MENA region, we supported more than 50 advocacy actions led by our civil society partners.

We endorsed several statements pertaining to freedom of expression, press freedom and human rights defenders in **Egypt**. For instance, MRG joined 99+ signatories in condemning the harassment of Egyptian independent media outlets and journalists. Additionally, we urged authorities to release political activist Mohamed Adel, to cease the targeting of individuals exercising their freedom of speech and to uphold basic human rights and the rule of law. Finally, we joined more than 40 CSOs in condemning the Egyptian authorities' sentence against academic and researcher Patrick George Zaki for merely exercising his right to freedom of expression.

Similarly, we advocated for the respect of free speech, media freedom and freedom of peaceful assembly and association in **Morocco**. More specifically, MRG joined 41 CSOs in endorsing an open letter to the Moroccan authorities urging them to release,

among other journalists and human rights defenders, journalist Taoufik Bouachrine, who remains arbitrarily detained since 2018.

In line with our work defending the principle of *non-refoulement*, MRG endorsed a statement calling on UNHCR in **Lebanon** to increase cooperation and transparency with local organisations in order to address the unlawful deportations of Syrian refugees. We further joined 19 organisations in demanding that Lebanese authorities halt the summary deportations of Syrian refugees.

Finally, we also carried out a number of advocacy activities at the UN level. For example, in March 2023, we endorsed a joint oral statement delivered by Algerian human rights defender Kaddour Chouicha to the UN Human Rights Council. We demanded Algerian authorities to cease reprisals against human rights defenders, and ensure their right to safely engage with the UN without fear of retaliation. Furthermore, we called for the release of arbitrarily detained individuals and the overturning of the dissolution of civil society organisations.

Event convened by Al-Haqq Organisation for Human Rights, Tadaruk Organisation for Human Rights and Democracy, Tamasok for Strengthening Democracy and Transparency, Impunity Watch and MENA Rights Group on April 6, 2023, at the UN in Geneva.





November, People among the rubble of collapsed buildings caused by Israeli strikes, Gaza City. © 2023 UNRWA Photo by Ashraf Amra.

# IN FOCUS

## Condemning Israeli human rights violations in Gaza

We supported several advocacy actions following the renewed Israeli war on Gaza. As MRG recognises the historical and ongoing human rights violations committed against Palestinians and the illegal nature of the siege on Gaza, we have a moral obligation to advocate for justice and accountability for these violations.

First, we signed an [open call](#) for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, as well as a digital ceasefire for Palestinians globally who have been continuously subjected to shadowbanning (*i.e.* the act of muting a user or their content on a platform without informing them) and censorship on social media platforms.

We also endorsed a [joint statement](#) calling on Israeli authorities to restore crucial telecommunication infrastructure, internet connectivity and other essential services in Gaza in the wake of escalating Palestinian deaths, and to ensure that international and humanitarian law are respected.

Finally, we joined 160+ civil society organisations in [urging](#) states to end their complicity in Israel's international crimes by imposing a two-way embargo that would halt weapon exports to Israel, as well as demanding a ceasefire and the end of the illegal blockade on Gaza.

## Public events

In 2023, MRG organised and participated in a number of events.

### UN events

In April 2023, MRG and Impunity Watch co-convoked an [event](#) at the UN in Geneva titled "Alive or Dead: We want them back", where we brought grassroots Iraqi voices to react to

the report issued by the CED and present their ideas to tackle the issue of enforced disappearances in the country. Shortly after, we endorsed a [statement](#) reiterating Iraqi civil society's demands and urging Iraqi authorities to implement recommendations made by the CED.

On the margins of the UN Human Rights Council session in September, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed participated in a [side-event](#) organised by Salam for Democracy

and Human Rights and CIVICUS, entitled “Climate rights are Human rights: How can COP28 be a success without enduring engagement by the UAE & Gulf states with civil society?”. The session welcomed panellists from Bahrain and the UAE, as well as climate activists from the Philippines. MRG raised the restrictions on freedom of expression in different Gulf countries and their impact on COP28.

## Geneva Press Club

In May 2023, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed spoke at an event convened by the Geneva Press Club ahead of the UAE’s Universal Periodic Review at the UN HRC. Alongside Emirati human rights activists and former detainees, she reiterated our call for prisoners of conscience in the UAE to be released.

In July, Sayed spoke during another discussion “The Arab League’s ‘INTERPOL’: A sinister device for arresting political opponents abroad”. She shared MRG’s findings on how the Arab Interior Ministers Council is using an increased number of cross-border arrest warrants to track down and render political oppo-

nents and human rights activists without due process.

Lastly, in October, Sayed chaired a discussion on the UAE’s appalling human rights record, highlighting its failure to accept and implement recommendations made by UN Member States during its UPR.

## UK Parliament

In June 2023, our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry contributed to a discussion titled “The cost of doing business in the UAE” held at the UK Parliament, where he briefed MPs on human rights violations in the UAE. Although the discussion focused on the arbitrary detention of British citizens in the UAE, Thiry gave an overview of the human rights situation in the UAE, highlighting the detention of dozens of Emirati prisoners of conscience kept in detention beyond the expiration of their sentence. He also provided insights into the functioning of the judicial system, recalling the broad powers that the State’s Security Apparatus enjoy and the lack of independence of the judiciary.

In September, we participated in a panel discussion on the repression of Emirati civil society and human rights defenders ahead of COP28. During the event, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed briefed members of the UK Parliament on the UAE’s human rights record in the context of COP28. We emphasised the importance of ensuring a safe space for human rights defenders during this international conference and allowing civil society to hold their government accountable for their poor human rights record.

MENA Rights Group’s Human Rights Officer moderates a discussion about the UAE’s human rights record at the Geneva Press Club.





MRG organises a webinar on the Saudi Human Rights Commission moderated by Sarah Leah Whitson (top middle). Speakers include Lina al-Hathloul (top left), Tanya Boulakovski (top right), Abdullah Alaoudh (bottom left), and Duaa Dhainy (bottom right).

## Webinars

In April 2023, we co-organised a webinar titled “Silencing of Saudi civil society: 10+ years of reprisals against Mohammed al-Qahtani and ACPRA” with ALQST and Right Livelihood. The discussion marked the six-month anniversary of Saudi human rights defender al-Qahtani’s enforced disappearance and explored pathways for his release.

To mark the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance, we organised a webinar on August 30, 2023, moderated by our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry. The panel discussed how a context-based approach can improve the global fight against enforced disappearance. Speakers included leading civil society activists, such as Syrian journalist and activist Wafa Moustafa and member of the Syrian Truth and Justice Charter, Hiba Alhamed. Wafa and Hiba led great efforts in the establishment of an independent investigative mechanism for those who disappeared in the Syrian war. Additionally, the

panel included human rights experts Eva Nudd who thoroughly explained how international investigation mechanisms can benefit from a context-based approach, and TIMEP Fellow Mohamed Osman who spoke on pathways to addressing enforced disappearance in the Sudanese conflict.

In October 2023, we hosted a webinar titled “Does the evaluation of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) need reform?”, bringing together Bahraini and Egyptian civil society members, and experts on the NHRI system. The discussion was centred around the upcoming reaccreditation of the Bahraini and Egyptian NHRIs, and addressed whether new ways of assessing NHRIs are needed.

In November 2023, MRG organised a webinar titled “The Saudi Human Rights Commission: a whitewashing tool of the Kingdom”, which was sponsored by four of our partner CSOs. Moderated by DAWN’s Executive Director, the webinar focused on the findings of our report on the SHRC and grouped human rights

experts as well as Saudi activists. The webinar shed light on how the SHRC not only lacks independence from the Saudi government, but also deliberately ignores and covers up human rights abuses committed by the latter.

### Partners' events

In June, MRG attended RightsCon in Costa Rica, the leading event on human rights in the digital age, hosted by Access Now, and organised a discussion titled "Are we endangering victims instead of protecting them? Tips for safe documentation in the MENA", aiming to discuss challenges and solutions for safe human rights documentation in the region. The session was moderated by our Executive Director Inès Osman and welcomed panellists from ALQST for Human Rights, Tor Project, WITNESS, and Meta.

In July, we attended the fourth Regional Congress on the Death Penalty, and first



MRG's Executive Director Inès Osman organises and chairs a discussion on safe human rights documentation in the MENA region.

Congress held in the Middle East, in Amman, Jordan. Civil society organisations, including MRG, endorsed a final declaration calling on states in the MENA region to work on a step by step strategy towards abolition by establishing a moratorium and reducing the scope of the death penalty.

Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed speaks at ALQST's annual conference in London in December 2023.





MRG attends the Regional Congress on the Death Penalty in Amman, Jordan.

Our staff also participated in various webinars and conferences organised by NGO partners. In June, our Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed contributed to a webinar organised by SANID marking two years since the death of Emirati human rights defender Alaa al-Siddiq. Additionally, Sayed attended ALQST’s annual conference in December, to discuss the general state of human rights in Saudi Arabia with a particular focus on the Saudi Human Rights Commission that is being used as a whitewashing tool.

## Campaigns

In 2023, MRG took part in multiple campaigns aiming at raising awareness on human rights issues in certain countries or on certain thematic issues.

In March 2023, we launched the SANID Campaign (which stands for “Stand Up for UAE Detainees”) with five other organisations. The campaign entailed a number of activities, such as webinars, press interviews, and a petition calling on the UAE authorities to release all prisoners of conscience. The petition was hand-delivered to the UAE Permanent Mission in Geneva by our staff and ISHR.

MRG also actively took part in joint advocacy actions around the COP28 to raise awareness about issues of freedom of expression in the UAE and how it considerably impacts the climate talks. We joined 200+ organisations from around the world to call on all governments attending the annual global conference on climate change to address the UAE’s human rights record.

Finally, from October to November 2023, we launched a joint campaign with ALQST and Right Livelihood advocating for the release of human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani. This campaign included a petition and social media posts calling for his release as well as video messages during the Right Livelihood award ceremony paying tribute to him. We further hand delivered a letter of concern to the Saudi permanent mission in Geneva and sent it to various embassies in London and the United States. Moreover, we delivered a joint oral statement at the UN HRC, raising his case and urging the Council to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for its widespread practice of enforced disappearance.

MRG’s Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed and Right Livelihood hand deliver a letter of concern regarding human rights defender Mohammad al-Qahtani to the Saudi Permanent Mission in Geneva.



# Digital engagement

## 2023 in numbers



37

new profiles of victims published on our website



6,000

new website users every month



14%

increase of Twitter followers, with over **1,550,000** tweet impressions



90%

increase of Facebook page visits with **254%** increase in our reach on Facebook



54%

increase of LinkedIn followers with over **18,800** impressions on LinkedIn

In 2023, we also joined Instagram and launched our monthly newsletter “MENA Rights Digest”. Follow us on Instagram and subscribe to our newsletter!

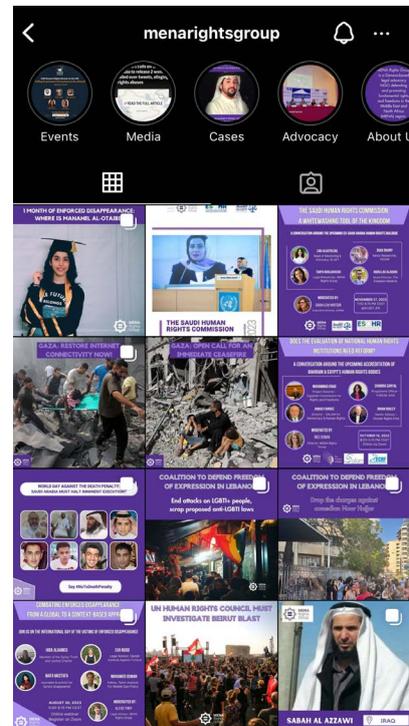
### MENA RIGHTS DIGEST

UAE, Saudi Arabia & Oman crack down on critics, Algeria acquits human rights defenders & more

### GOOD NEWS



**#Algeria:** We welcome the acquittal of 12+ **#humanrights** defenders including **@JamilaLoukil**, Kaddour Chouicha & **@SaidBoudour31**, previously facing baseless “terrorism” charges. <https://t.co/5TQWFwzkWhhttps://t.co/ydTdWliAqK>  
 — MENA Rights Group | منّا لحقوق الإنسان (@MENA\_Rights) December 5, 2023



# MENA Rights Group in the media

Throughout the year, MENA Rights Group team members have been interviewed and quoted in several publications and our work has received extensive coverage by various media outlets, including English-speaking [Reuters](#), [AP News](#), [The Washington Post](#), [Middle East Eye](#), [The New Arab](#); French-speaking [Le Monde](#), [RFI](#), [Libération](#), [l’Orient-le-Jour](#), [France24](#); Arabic-speaking [Amwaj](#), [UAE71](#), and [Al Araby](#). Our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry also gave an interview to Geneva radio station [Radio Cité](#) on the CED’s review of Mauritania in September 2023, during which he discussed the issue of impunity prevailing since the *Passif humanitaire*.

In addition, we were cited in German-speaking [DW](#); Italian outlets [Roma Today](#) and [Il Messaggero](#); and the [Korea Herald](#).



Les experts de l'ONU affirment également avoir recueilli des preuves crédibles selon lesquelles Salma al-Chehab a subi des "traitements cruels, inhumains ou dégradants". Ils évoquent "des menaces, des insultes, du harcèlement et des méthodes inappropriées utilisées durant son interrogatoire", en se basant notamment sur les informations fournies par des groupes de défense des droits humains comme ALQST (Democracy for the Arab World Now) et MENA Rights Group.



Falah Sayed, human rights officer with MENA Rights Group, said Ghamdi was sentenced on the basis of a legal framework "consistently used to silence dissidents".

"This legal framework is applied with a wide discretionary power left to judges in handing down death sentences and unfortunately Mr Al-Ghamdi's case is far from being isolated."

But, she added, the judges appointed to the Specialised Criminal Court, which sentenced Ghamdi, are selected by the Supreme Judicial Council, the majority of whose members are appointed by the king.



consumata tra il 18 e il 22 aprile, subito dopo quella in Corea del Sud. Zeinab Fayad, responsabile delle comunicazioni del Mena Rights Group, con sede a Ginevra, che ha guidato l'appello, ha dichiarato che "era fondamentale sollecitare l'organizzazione a considerare la situazione prima che il processo andasse avanti. Se la candidatura dell'Arabia Saudita andrà avanti e, peggio ancora, finirà per ospitare l'Esposizione Universale del 2030, significherà semplicemente che il mondo sta sorvolando sui terribili precedenti dell'Arabia Saudita", ha dichiarato.



**Devoir de vigilance : TotalEnergies assigné en justice pour violations de droits humains au Yémen**

Troisième assignation en justice sur le devoir de vigilance pour TotalEnergies. L'ONG Mena Rights Group a déposé une plainte le

# List of publications

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## Country reports

Examen périodique universel de Djibouti: cinq années d'immobilisme en matière de respect des droits humains, April 2023.

Evaluation report of the Bahraini National Institution for Human Rights, June 2023.

Evaluation Report of the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights, June 2023.

Universal Periodic Review of Jordan: joint report to the UN Human Rights Council, July 2023.

Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia: report to the UN Human Rights Council, July 2023.

Mauritanie: Passif humanitaire - solder les crimes du passé pour garantir leur non-répétition, August 2023.

The Saudi Human Rights Commission: a whitewashing tool of the Kingdom, November 2023.

## Thematic reports

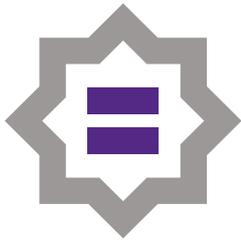
Intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the UN: Submission to the Secretary-General, April 2023.



The MENA Rights Group team. From left to right: our former Case Manager Saadeddine Shatila, Human Rights Officer Falah Sayed, Communications Officer Zeinab Fayad, Executive Director Inès Osman, Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry, Legal Researcher Tanya Boulakovski.

## Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to read our 2023 annual report. Your support greatly motivates us to continue our work. We look forward to advancing human rights in 2024 and achieving our vision of a MENA region where individuals live in just and peaceful societies, founded on the rule of law and the effective recognition and respect of the rights and freedoms of all.



# MENA Rights Group

MENA Rights Group is a Geneva-based legal advocacy NGO defending and promoting fundamental rights and freedoms in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Adopting a holistic approach, we work at both the individual and structural level. We represent victims of human rights violations before international law mechanisms. In order to ensure the non-repetition of these violations, we identify patterns and root causes of violations on the ground and bring key issues to the attention of relevant stakeholders to call for legal and policy reform.

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For more information about our work, or any issues covered in this report, please visit our website: [www.menarights.org](http://www.menarights.org).

Donate now to support our work protecting and promoting human rights in the Middle East and North Africa:  
<https://menarights.org/en/support-us>.

Make sure to subscribe to our [monthly newsletter](#), MENA Rights Digest, to stay updated on our work promoting human rights in the region.