HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

REVIEW OF 2019

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Cover photo:
Protesters clash with Iraqi riot police vehicles firing water from cannons during a demonstration against state corruption and poor services, between the capital Baghdad's Tahrir Square and the high-security Green Zone district, on 1 October 2019.
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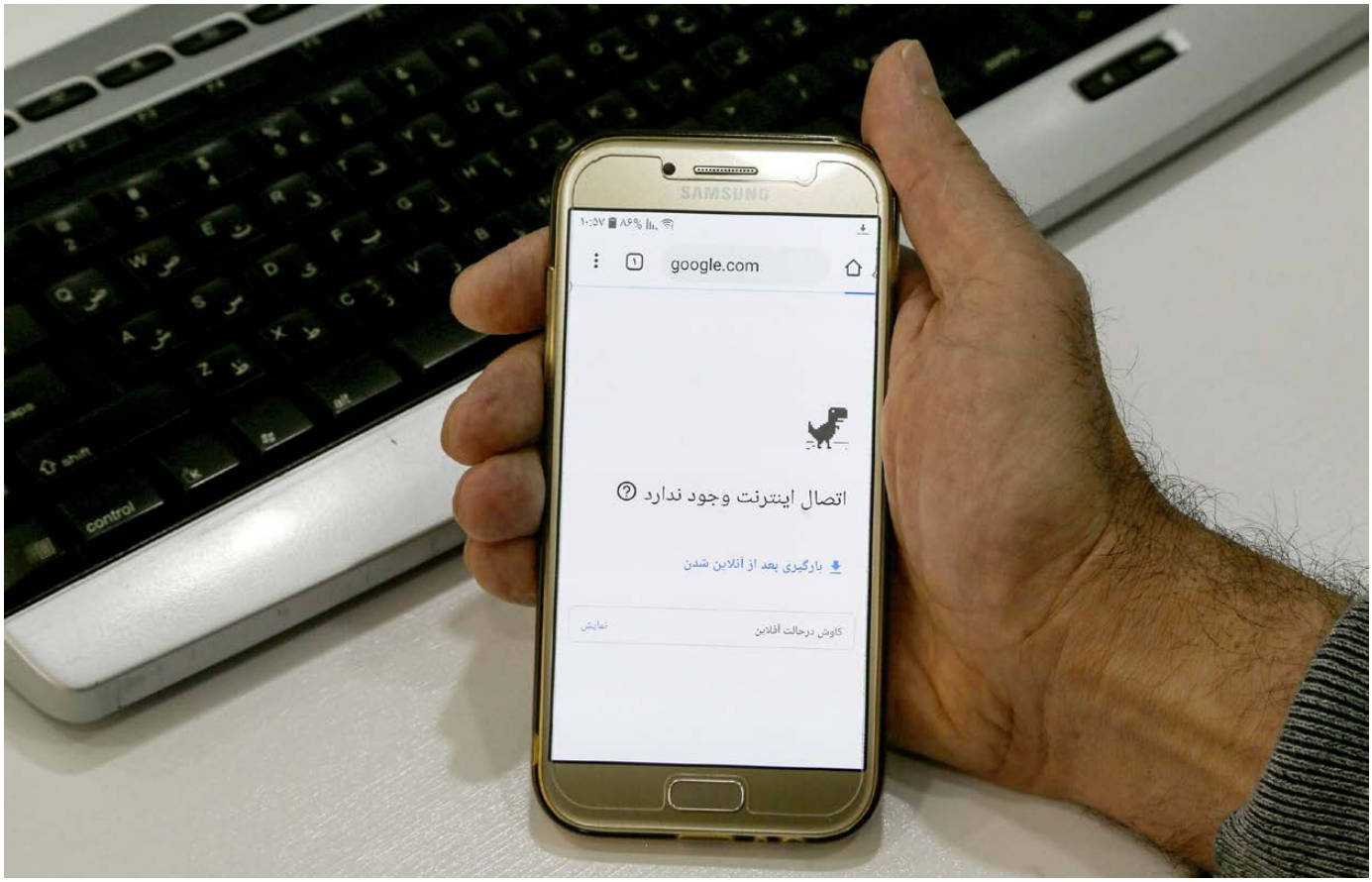
REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Mass protests shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2019, notably in Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Authorities used excessive force – most outrageously lethal force causing hundreds of deaths in Iran and Iraq – as well as arbitrary detentions in a bid to quash them. Governments across the region heavily restricted freedom of expression and civil society activities, with some particularly clamping down on those criticizing the authorities on social media. Hundreds of human rights defenders were targeted.

There were widespread patterns of violations by security forces in the context of the criminal justice system, including torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearances, most notably in Egypt, Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria. In general, security forces enjoyed impunity. The most significant initiative to shed light on and seek redress for abuses of security forces, albeit past rather than current abuses, was undoubtedly Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, which concluded its work in 2019 and made recommendations that were relevant to governments across the region.

Actors in the region's armed conflicts committed war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law, in some cases restricting humanitarian access that affected health care and other basic services. Other military powers fuelled violations through illicit arms transfers and direct military support to belligerents. In the context of widespread impunity, progress towards an investigation by the International Criminal Court into the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was welcome news. Lebanon and Jordan continued to host over 3 million refugees from Syria, but blocked the entry of new arrivals and, in Lebanon's case, expelled thousands who had entered "illegally". Military offensives and other fighting internally displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Reforms were announced in several countries, particularly in the Gulf, to improve protection for migrant workers, but they continued to face exploitation and abuse. Like the two previous years, 2019 saw a few welcome developments



A man holds a smartphone connected to a wifi network without internet access at an office in the Iranian capital, Tehran, on 17 November 2019. The authorities had implemented a near-total shudown of the internet since mass demonstrations broke out two days earlier. © Atta Kenare/AFP via Getty Images

at a legislative and institutional level with respect to women's rights and violence against women, but the severe repression of women's rights defenders in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia cast a long shadow over them. Authorities across the region heavily repressed the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, arresting scores of individuals because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and subjecting some men to forced anal examinations.

PROTESTS

Mass protests shook countries across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as many other places across the world, in 2019. Those in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, like their equivalents in Sudan, coalesced into long-running waves of contestation that challenged the entire political system and called for profound institutional reform; those in Iran might have done had they not been so violently repressed. The ability of largely peaceful protesters to maintain momentum over weeks and months was striking in a context where many assumed that the repression and armed violence that followed the uprisings in the region a decade ago – Iran in 2009, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria in 2010-2011 – had intimidated populations from taking to the streets in numbers to demand their rights and challenge injustice.

Smaller protests also broke out elsewhere in the region, including Egypt, where they represented a rare challenge to the current president, the Gaza Strip (against the de facto Hamas authorities), Jordan, Morocco and Western Sahara, Oman and Tunisia. In these and the bigger waves of protests in Algeria, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, many protesters demanded an end to corruption, while demanding better living and working conditions and greater respect of socio-economic rights. Some called for gender equality and an end to gender-based violence; women's rights groups in Algeria, for instance, called for the repeal of the discriminatory Family Code. Some were campaigning on environmental concerns.

The impact of Israel's 52-year-old occupation of Palestinian territories and its illegal 12-year-old air, land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip, which amounted to collective punishment, continued to be the focus of demonstrations by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Both the occupation and the blockade severely impacted freedom of movement and health services, particularly in Gaza, and led to the demolition of hundreds of homes in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the ensuing displacement of hundreds of Palestinians. The situation was exacerbated by Israel's expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank and the US government's announcement that – in contradiction with international law – it no longer considered those settlements as illegal.

Authorities employed a range of tactics to repress protests. Amnesty International recorded credible allegations of unnecessary or excessive use of force, such as the deployment of rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannons and baton-wielding officers, against peaceful demonstrators, by security forces during demonstrations in 10 countries in 2019. In Iran and Iraq, security forces resorted extensively to firing live ammunition at protesters, causing hundreds of deaths – over 800, according to Amnesty International's latest figures – and thousands of injuries. Israeli military and security forces killed dozens of Palestinians during demonstrations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, continuing a long-standing pattern.

Security forces arbitrarily arrested thousands of protesters across the region, particularly in Algeria, Egypt, Iran and Iraq, detaining many and accusing them of security-related offences. Governments also sought to disrupt communication networks. In Iran, authorities implemented a near-total internet shutdown during protests in November in a bid to prevent people from sharing images and videos of the lethal force used by security forces. In Egypt, authorities disrupted online messaging applications to thwart further protests.

Governments in the MENA region must respect the right to protest peacefully, rein in security forces, particularly to stop them using live ammunition when there is no imminent risk to life and open independent and impartial investigations into killings of protesters. They should also address the rights-based demands of protesters.

Four Yemeni girls at a camp for internally dispaced people in Sabr, Lahj governorate, Yemen, in June 2019. They and their families had been displaced by fighting in Ta'iz in 2018. © Amnesty International

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Authorities across the MENA region heavily restricted freedom of expression. According to Amnesty International's figures for 2019, which are by no means comprehensive, individuals were detained as prisoners of conscience in 12 countries in the region and 136 people were arrested solely for their peaceful expression online. Some governments particularly clamped down on those criticizing the authorities or challenging state policy on social media. In Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Western Sahara, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, journalists, bloggers and activists who posted statements or videos deemed critical of the head of state or other authorities on social media found themselves targeted for arrest, questioning and prosecution. In many cases, they were then detained; in some, they were convicted and sentenced to prison terms.

Human rights defenders were subjected to a range of attacks by governments. Amnesty International recorded 367 human rights defenders being subjected to detention and 118 to prosecution in 2019; the true numbers are likely to be considerably higher. In Iran alone, at least 240 human rights defenders were arbitrarily detained. In Saudi Arabia, by the end of the year, virtually all the country's human rights defenders were in detention without charge, or were on trial or serving prison terms. In Egypt, human rights defenders were increasingly targeted for arrest and torture or other ill-treatment following the 20 September protests. The Israeli authorities used a range of measures, including raids, incitement campaigns, movement restrictions and judicial harassment, to target human rights defenders, journalists and others who criticized Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syrian Golan Heights.

New evidence emerged in 2019 about the sophistication of digital attacks against human rights defenders globally, including in the MENA region. Amnesty International found, for instance, that two Moroccan human rights defenders had been targeted repeatedly by surveillance technology developed by the Israeli company NSO Group since 2017. It had previously documented the targeting of activists from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as an Amnesty International staff member, with malware from the same source. The justification for the production of this technology, and the purchase and use of it by government clients, is that it is used to fight crime and terrorism; the profile of those targeted belies this claim. Amnesty International supported legal action to take the Israeli ministry of defence to court, demanding that it revokes the export licence of NSO. Facebook and WhatsApp filed a lawsuit in a US federal court against it, alleging that, working on behalf of Bahrain, the UAE and other countries, NSO had targeted 1,400 private devices, whose users included journalists, human rights activists and political dissidents in multiple countries, including Bahrain and the UAE.

Widespread targeted phishing attacks also continued against human rights defenders, including those who had taken extra steps to secure their online accounts, such as by using more secure email providers or enabling two-factor authentication on their online accounts. Attackers created websites that imitated the log-in prompt of an online service with the objective of luring a victim into visiting the malicious page and entering their username and passwords, thereby transmitting these credentials to the attackers.

Meanwhile, a Reuters investigation exposed the UAE's involvement in an initiative in which US intelligence operatives reportedly helped the UAE keep human rights activists and others under surveillance across the globe with no judicial oversight.

Authorities also resorted to censoring the internet. In Egypt, the authorities added the websites of broadcasters BBC and Alhurra to the list of 513 websites already blocked. The Palestinian authorities in the West Bank blocked access to 59 websites on security grounds; all of them shared content critical of the authorities. In Iran, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube remained blocked.

MENA governments must release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally, tolerate peaceful criticism both offline and online, and stop harassing human rights defenders by judicial and other means. Governments worldwide should follow the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression to implement a moratorium on the sale and transfer of surveillance equipment until a proper human rights regulatory framework is put in place.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

There were widespread patterns of violations by security forces in the context of the criminal justice system. Within the MENA region in 2019, there were credible allegations of torture or other ill-treatment in state custody in at least 18 countries, particularly during the interrogation phase and often to extract "confessions". In Egypt and Iran among other countries, prison authorities also used prolonged solitary confinement or denial of medical care to punish prisoners held for politically motivated reasons; such practices violate the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. There were deaths in state custody that were credibly alleged to have resulted from torture or other ill-treatment in at least seven countries.

There were credible allegations of enforced disappearance by the state in at least eight countries. In Egypt, hundreds of dissidents were forcibly disappeared for up to 183 days. In Iran, some of those arrested following protests in November were subjected to enforced disappearance. In Yemen, Huthi forces subjected some of the scores of the critics and opponents it arbitrarily detained to enforced disappearance. In Syria, tens of thousands of people remained disappeared and security forces continued to hold thousands of detainees arrested in previous years without trial, often in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance.

In countries including Egypt, Iran, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia and Syria, exceptional courts, such as military, revolutionary and security courts, were used extensively, leading to trials that grossly violated fair trial standards. Trials before ordinary criminal courts could be just as problematic. Across the region, courts convicted defendants on the basis of torture-tainted evidence. In some countries, notably Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the death penalty was imposed and implemented following such trials.

Some of the most serious violations were carried out in the context of operations authorities qualified as counter-terrorism campaigns or security measures. In a few countries, governments had legitimate reasons to take measures to protect civilians from abuses by armed groups. In Iraq, the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) continued to target civilians in assassinations and bomb attacks. In Egypt, armed groups in Sinai conducted sporadic attacks that killed or injured people, although at a lesser rate than in previous years. However, not only did the measures taken against alleged members of such groups often involve gross human rights violations, authorities used the pretext of security to conduct thinly veiled attacks against civil society.

In general, security forces enjoyed wide-ranging impunity. The most significant initiative to shed light on abuses of security forces, albeit past rather than current abuses, was undoubtedly Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, which concluded its work in 2019. By the end of its mandate, the Commission had transferred 173 cases to specialized criminal chambers after receiving more than 62,000 complaints from victims. At least 78 trials, involving cases of torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances, began before these chambers during the year.

Many of the Commission's recommendations could be applied to states across the region, including the reform of judicial and security sectors, the creation of independent bodies to oversee the work of security services and accountability for crimes perpetrated.

ARMED CONFLICT

Armed conflicts continued to afflict the lives of civilians in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, where fluctuating levels of violence reflected shifting alliances on the ground and the interests of external military powers. In Gaza and southern Israel, sporadic bursts of armed hostilities flared up between Israel and Palestinian armed groups.

The conflicts' multiple actors committed war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law. Some

Destruction at the entrance of a hospital in the village of Kafr Nabl, in the southern part of the Syrian governorate of Idlib, on 5 May 2019. Syrian government forces, supported by Russia, carried out an assault on hospitals and other medical facilities in Idlib in May 2019. © Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images

actors carried out direct attacks against civilians or civilian infrastructure. In their military campaign in areas of north-western Syria controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, an armed group, Syrian government forces targeted civilian homes, bakeries, medical facilities and rescue operations, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians, including rescue and medical workers. In Yemen, Huthi forces, which controlled large parts of the country, targeted civilian infrastructure, including airports, in Saudi Arabia, causing civilian casualties, and claimed responsibility for attacks on oil processing facilities in the east of the country.

Almost all actors carried out indiscriminate attacks that killed and injured civilians in the form of air strikes, in the case of those with air power, and shelling of residential areas with artillery, mortars and rockets. In Syria, these actors included, in addition to Syrian government forces, Turkey and allied Syrian armed groups during the military offensive launched in October in the north-east of the country against a Kurdish-led alliance, in which scores of civilians were killed. In Libya, many of the nearly 300 civilians killed as a result of the armed conflict in 2019 were killed in indiscriminate attacks using inaccurate explosive weapons in populated civilian areas. Many fell victim to fighting in and around Tripoli between the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA), which launched an offensive to take control of the capital and surrounding areas in April. In Yemen, both Huthi and anti-Huthi forces shelled residential neighbourhoods, while bombings by the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE killed and injured hundreds of civilians.

Restriction of humanitarian access remained a tactic of some actors, undermining the economic and social rights of civilians in areas affected. In Syria, according to the UN, government forces failed to approve around half of its requests to carry out humanitarian missions to monitor, assess and accompany aid deliveries. Elsewhere the fighting itself aggravated humanitarian needs. In Libya, the battles in and around Tripoli interrupted access to health care, electricity and other basic services. In Yemen the conflict continued to have a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities.

Military powers inside and outside the region played a pernicious role, fuelling violations through illicit arms transfers and direct military support to belligerents and refusing to investigate their armed forces' own involvement in violations of international law. In Libya, rival factions increasingly relied on foreign military backing to change the balance of power. The GNA's primary sponsor, Turkey, provided it with armoured fighting vehicles and armed drones and the LNA's primary sponsor, the UAE, provided it with Chinese-manufactured drones and operated them on its behalf, all in flagrant violation of a comprehensive UN arms embargo in place since 2011.

In Syria, Russia maintained its direct support of military campaigns by government forces that violated international law, while Turkey backed armed groups that engaged in abductions and summary killings. In Syria and Iraq, Iran provided military support to government forces and militias responsible for serious violations. The USA and its coalition allies, meanwhile, continued to shirk their responsibility to investigate hundreds of civilian deaths during their bombing campaigns to defeat IS.

There was little accountability for war crimes and other grave violations of international law committed during or as a result of armed hostilities. The announcement by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court that a preliminary examination into Palestine had concluded that war crimes had been committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and that an investigation should be opened once the Court's territorial jurisdiction had been confirmed was therefore a welcome historic step, offering a crucial opportunity to break the cycle of impunity.

Given the obstacles ahead, it is crucial that all governments support the Court and other international justice mechanisms to pave the way to truth, justice and reparations for the victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the region. Parties to ongoing armed conflicts there must abide by international humanitarian law, particularly by ending direct attacks against civilians or civilian infrastructure and indiscriminate attacks and refraining from using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in civilian areas. Military powers must halt arms transfers where there is a significant risk that they will be used in violation of international law; regrettably, such risks are high in all the ongoing conflicts in the region.

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey continued to host the majority of the 5 million refugees from Syria who had fled the country since the start of the crisis in 2011, illustrating the failure of the international community to shoulder their burden-sharing responsibilities. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey all blocked the entry of new refugees. The dire humanitarian conditions there – exacerbated by the shortage of humanitarian aid, the inability of refugees to find jobs and administrative and financial obstacles to obtain or renew residency permits – pushed tens of thousands of refugees to return to Syria. Lebanon deported thousands of refugees to Syria following an announcement in April that it would expel refugees who entered "illegally", in violation of its *non-refoulement* obligations.

The situation for tens of thousands of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Libya remained bleak, as they were exposed to arbitrary arrest and abduction by militias and were regularly the victims of human trafficking and abuses by criminal groups. Those detained were kept in inhuman conditions and faced

overcrowding as well as shortages of food, water and medical treatment.

There were new waves of displacement through the year. In Syria, the military offensives in the north-west and north-east of the country displaced over half a million people, swelling the total number of internally displaced people to 6.6 million. In Yemen, renewed fighting between Huthi and anti-Huthi forces in the southern governorate of Dhale' led to thousands of people being displaced, contributing to a total of over 3.5 million. In Iraq, over 1.5 million people remained internally displaced as a result of the armed conflict against IS, the majority in camps and informal settlements following secondary displacement. In Libya, the fighting in and around Tripoli displaced more than 140,000 people.

Governments in the region must halt direct and constructive *refoulement* of refugees and asylum-seekers to Syria and other countries, while Western and other states must take on much greater burden-sharing responsibility, including through resettlement.

MIGRANT WORKERS

Reforms to improve protection for migrant workers were announced in several countries, particularly in the Gulf, where they make up a very high proportion of the workforce. Qatar promised to abolish the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which ties migrant domestic workers to their employers, and took some measures to overcome barriers faced by migrant workers when seeking justice for abuses and to combat systemic abuse during their recruitment. Jordan also announced it would be reviewing its *kafala* system. The UAE removed the job title criteria for sponsorship, allowing more residents to sponsor family members to live in the country.

Nonetheless, migrant workers in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to face exploitation and abuse as a result of existing *kafala* systems. Domestic workers generally remained excluded altogether from the protections provided by labour laws.

Legal reforms to protect migrants' rights must go further. As a start, authorities in the Gulf and elsewhere must abolish *kafala* systems completely.

WOMEN AND GIRLS

Like the two previous years, 2019 saw a few welcome developments at a legislative and institutional level with respect to women's rights and violence against women. Such changes, while limited relative to those needed, owed much to the efforts of the women's rights movement in the region. However, their achievements were undermined by the severe repression of women's rights defenders in some countries, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, the weak implementation of previous reforms, generalized discrimination in law and practice against women, notably in matters of marriage and divorce, inheritance and child custody, and inadequate action against sexual and other gender-based violence.

Saudi Arabia undertook long-overdue major reforms to the discriminatory male guardianship system, easing major restrictions on women's freedom of movement, but women still need the permission of a male guardian to marry. Ironically, five women human rights defenders spent the whole of the year in detention, partly for calling for these very reforms. Iran enacted a new law

Children play on the shore of the Mediterranean sea in Gaza City in the Gaza Strip on 23 August 2019, despite wastewater pollution that has deterred many from the water. © Loay Ayyoub for The Washington Post via Getty Images

allowing Iranian women married to men with foreign nationality to pass on Iranian citizenship to their children on condition that they passed a security screening.

However, this small step had to be set against the intensification of the authorities' crackdown against women's rights defenders campaigning against discriminatory forced veiling laws and bans on women entering football stadiums.

In welcome developments, Jordan and Tunisia followed up on steps taken in 2018 to improve protection from violence for women and girls; in doing so, they revealed the size of the challenge facing them. After the Tunisian authorities established a complaints mechanism in 2018, they received tens of thousands of complaints from women who had experienced domestic violence. In neighbouring Libya, authorities were either unwilling or incapable of tackling gender-based violence at the hands of militias and armed groups.

A shelter for women at risk of being killed by family members established in Jordan in 2018 protected dozens of such women during the year. "Honour" killings took the lives of over 20 Palestinian women and girls in the neighbouring West Bank and Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Oman strengthened the criminalization of female genital mutilation.

Authorities need to accelerate the trend towards greater recognition of women's rights in law and translate legal commitments to address violence against women into action that delivers accountability against perpetrators.

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

Authorities across the region heavily repressed the rights of LGBTI people. Security forces arrested scores of individuals on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. In Tunisia, police arrested at least 78 men under a Penal Code provision that criminalizes "sodomy", according to a local NGO; at least 70 were convicted and sentenced to up to a year in prison. In Kuwait, police arrested seven trans people and referred them for investigation. Eight LGBTI individuals were arbitrarily arrested or ill-treated by Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, according to a local NGO.

The authorities in some countries subjected some men to forced anal examinations to determine whether had engaged in same-sex sexual relations; dozens of such cases were recorded in Egypt and Tunisia. Such examinations violate the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

Authorities must repeal provisions criminalizing same-sex sexual relations, scrap anal examinations and enact legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

An elderly Algerian woman talks to a member of the security forces cordoning off a protest area during an anti-establishment demonstration in the capital, Algiers, on 10 April 2019. © Ryad Kramdi/AFP via Getty Images

ALGERIA

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Head of state: **Abdelmadjid Tebboune**
(replaced acting president Abdelkader Bensalah in December, who replaced Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April)
Head of government: **Abdelaziz Djerad**
(replaced acting prime minister Sabri Boukadoum in December, who replaced Noureddine Bedoui in December, who replaced Ahmed Ouyahia in March)

Security forces responded to the mass Hirak protest movement by using unnecessary or excessive force to disperse some demonstrations, arbitrarily arresting hundreds of protesters, prosecuting and sentencing dozens to prison terms using Penal Code provisions such as "harming the integrity of the national territory" and "incitement to an unarmed gathering". Authorities prohibited the activities of several associations, often in relation to the Hirak protests. Security forces tortured and otherwise ill-treated activists, particularly by beating them. Authorities ordered the closure of nine Christian churches. Security forces arrested and detained thousands of sub-Saharan migrants, forcibly transferring some to the far south of Algeria and expelling others to other countries. Women's rights groups were active in the Hirak movement, demanding an end to all forms of gender-based violence and the repeal of the Family Code, which discriminates against women in matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody and guardianship. Same-sex sexual relations continued to be criminalized. The right to form trade unions was unduly restricted. Death sentences were handed down; there were no executions.

BACKGROUND

In February, the protest movement known as Hirak ("movement" in Arabic) started, with millions of Algerians marching in overwhelmingly peaceful protests in cities across the country, calling for the "removal of everyone" linked to the ruling power. On 2 April, Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned as president after 20 years in power. In May, police arrested dozens of high-profile politicians and

business people on corruption-related charges; from September onwards, courts sentenced them to prison terms.

Despite strong opposition from the protest movement, in July interim President Abdelkader Bensalah named a six-member panel to oversee a national dialogue and in September announced presidential elections, which took place on 12 December.

In November, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on freedoms in Algeria calling on the European External Action Service, the European Commission and member states to support civil society groups, human rights defenders, journalists and protesters, including by arranging prison visits and monitoring trials.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities for the most part allowed Hirak protests to take place every Friday in the capital, Algiers, in a shift from the de facto ban on protests there since 2001. However, from late February, security forces used excessive or unnecessary force to disperse a number of peaceful protests in Algiers and other cities; they did so with rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannons and batons. On 19 April, Ramzi Yettou died in hospital after being beaten by police with batons on his way home from a protest that he had attended a week earlier. Security officials regularly limited access to Algiers on Fridays, mainly by setting up special gendarmerie and police checkpoints and threatening to seize vehicles and buses that entered the city and fine the drivers.

Police and gendarmerie officers, often in plain clothes, arbitrarily arrested hundreds of peaceful protesters, often seizing their phones to limit coverage of the protests. From June onwards, courts prosecuted over 100 protesters on charges related to peaceful views they expressed about or during the Hirak protests; dozens were sentenced to prison terms.

Between June and July, prosecutors charged at least 34 peaceful protesters with "harming the integrity of the national territory" simply for holding or carrying at a protest the Amazigh flag.[1] In October and November, courts sentenced at least 28 of them to up to 18 months in prison.

In September, at least 24 activists were charged with "incitement to an unarmed gathering" and "harming the integrity of the national territory" simply for peacefully taking part in protests, holding up signs or publishing pictures of the signs or posts online.[2]

In November, with the start of the presidential election campaign, security forces intensified their campaign of arrests. Human rights organizations on the ground estimated that at least 300 people were arrested between 17 and 24 November alone.[3] In December, authorities released at least 13 peaceful protesters.

Authorities prohibited the activities of several associations, often in relation to the Hirak protests. In August, local authorities in Tichy in northern Algeria banned a planned "summer university" by Youth Action Rally, an association active since 1993 that had been co-ordinating activities related to the Hirak protests. Also in August, authorities banned a meeting in Algiers planned by political groups forming part of the "Pact for a democratic alternative" to discuss the country's political situation.

During the year, at least 10 Algerian journalists covering the Hirak protests were arrested, held for a few hours and interrogated about their work, while four foreign journalists doing the same were arrested and subsequently deported. Ahmed Benchemsi, Middle East communications and advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, was arrested on 9 August while observing a protest in Algiers, held for 10 hours and deported 10 days later.

From June onwards, the authorities regularly disrupted access to independent news websites Tout sur l'Algérie and Algérie Part, apparently to censor their reporting on the protests.

Human rights defenders and politicians were also targeted in other contexts.

On 31 March, minority rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar, a former president of the section of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights in the city of Ghardaïa, was arrested with another activist for an online post that criticized local judicial authorities. Kamel Eddine Fekhar immediately began a hunger strike, which led to his death in custody on 28 May. The Ministry of Justice announced an investigation into the death, but did not make public any findings.

A military court sentenced Louisa Hanoune, head of the Workers Party, to 15 years in prison in September for "conspiring" against the army after she met two former intelligence chiefs and the brother of former President Bouteflika in late March to discuss the political situation in the country.

The authorities kept many associations, including Amnesty International Algeria, in legal limbo by failing to respond to registration applications submitted in line with the highly restrictive Associations Law.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Security forces tortured and otherwise ill-treated activists, particularly by beating them and holding them in solitary confinement. In January, journalist Adlène Mellah told Amnesty International that, following arrest, gendarmerie officers beat him, subjected him to waterboarding and forced a cloth doused in bleach into his mouth. The authorities failed to order an investigation into his torture allegations.

In November, detained Hirak activists Chems Eddine Brahim Lalami, Sofiane Babaci and Younes Rejal were beaten in custody, according to credible sources. At the end of the year, Karim Tabbou, a leader of the Democratic and Social Union party, was being held in prolonged solitary confinement following his arrest in September after publicly criticizing the head of the army.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Authorities in several regions ordered the closure of nine Christian churches, saying that they did not comply with a 2006 decree on "non-Muslim cults" and safety standards.

In June, a court in the north-western port city of Mostaganem sentenced a Christian man to a suspended prison term and a fine of 100,000 dinars (around US$840) for holding a Christian prayer meeting at his house. In another case, Amar Ait-Ouali was fined 50,000 dinars (around US$420) for holding a church meeting on his land in a village near Akbou, a town in the Kabylia region east of Algiers, following the forcible closure of the village's church in October 2018.

In October, police raided and closed the largest Protestant church in Algeria, the Full Gospel Church in Tizi Ouzou, a city in Kabylia. Officers entered the church, assaulted worshippers and forced around 15 of them to leave. The following day, police sealed two other churches in Tizi Ouzou province. On 17 October, police arrested and later released dozens of people who were protesting against the crackdown.

MIGRANTS

Security forces arrested and detained thousands of sub-Saharan migrants. They forcibly transferred some to the far south of Algeria and expelled others to other countries. According to one international organization monitoring the situation on the ground in Algeria and in Niger, almost 11,000 individuals were expelled between January and November. Most of those expelled were from Niger.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women's rights and feminist groups were active in the Hirak movement, demanding an end to all forms of gender-based violence and greater gender equality. They called for the repeal of the Family Code, which discriminates against women in matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody and guardianship, and the effective implementation of laws adopted in recent years, including the 2015 law amending the Penal Code to criminalize violence against women.

The Penal Code continued to contain a "forgiveness clause", which allowed rapists to escape sentencing if they obtained a pardon from their victim, and not to explicitly recognize marital rape as a crime.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX (LGBTI) PEOPLE

The Penal Code continued to criminalize same-sex sexual relations, prescribing a prison sentence of two months to two years, or in certain cases of six months to three years. An activist in an Algerian LGBTI group told Amnesty International that, while these provisions were rarely used, they made LGBTI people feel vulnerable and were used to pressure LGBTI victims of crime to withdraw their complaints.

In December, then Minister of Interior Salahedine Dahmoune called protesters opposed to the holding of presidential elections "traitors, mercenaries and homosexuals", causing outrage.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

The Labour Code continued to unduly restrict the right to form trade unions by limiting trade union federations and confederations to single occupational sectors; allowing only Algerian-born citizens or those who have held Algerian nationality for at least 10 years to form trade unions; and restricting foreign funding for trade unions. The authorities continued to deny registration to the independent, cross-sector General Autonomous Confederation for Algerian Workers, which it first filed its application in 2013.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences. No executions had been carried out since 1993.

1. Amnesty International, *Algeria: 41 arrested for carrying the Amazigh flag as authorities crack down on freedom of expression* (Press release, 5 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/algeria-41-arrested-for-carrying-the-amazigh-flag-as-authorities-crack-down-on-freedom-of-expression/

2. Amnesty International, *Algeria: End clampdown on protests amid wave of arrests targeting demonstrators* (Press release, 19 September 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/algeria-end-clampdown-on-protests-amid-wave-of-arrests-targeting-demonstrators/

3. Amnesty International, *Algeria: Authorities step up clampdown ahead of the presidential elections* (Press release, 5 December 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/algeria-authorities-step-up-clampdown-ahead-of-the-presidential-elections/

Supporters of refugee footballer Hakeem al-Araibi wait for his arrival at the airport in Melbourne on 12 February 2019. He was returning to Australia after a two-month ordeal that saw him jailed in Thailand and threatened with forced return to his native Bahrain. © William West/AFP via Getty Images

BAHRAIN

Kingdom of Bahrain
Head of state: **Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa**
Head of government: **Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa**

The authorities escalated their efforts to stifle freedom of expression, targeting in particular online forums, the last remaining space where Bahrainis could criticize the government. Use of unfair mass trials continued both for people facing terrorism-related charges and protesters. Denaturalization of citizens (stripping them of their nationality) continued, though hundreds of people previously made stateless had their Bahraini nationality restored. Migrant workers' rights remained limited, leaving them open to exploitation and abuse. Women were still not treated equally with men in law or in practice. Executions resumed after a lull since January 2017. Prison conditions remained poor and in many cases amounted to degrading and inhuman treatment.

BACKGROUND

The new parliament (National Assembly) had its first year in office following elections in November 2018 for the lower house that excluded all opposition candidates.

Bahrain continued to deny access to independent human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and UN human rights bodies. Bahrain remained a member of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the armed conflict in Yemen. Bahrain remained a member of the coalition imposing economic and political sanctions on Qatar, along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The authorities drastically stepped up threats against Bahrainis who criticized the system of government or state policy on social media, which after the 2017 closure of the independent newspaper *al-Wasat* had been the only venue left for dissident political speech. On 20 May, King Hamad announced that he had directed security agencies to stop the "misuse of social media" and the

Prime Minister directed the Ministry of Interior to "deal harshly" with online sites and social media that he described as "poison and filthy pus" spread by "enemies inside and outside" the country seeking to "spread dissension". The same day, the Ministry of Interior stated it was taking legal action against people with social media accounts in several European countries for "defacing Bahrain's reputation". As an example of those targeted, the statement named Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafdha, a Bahraini refugee in Germany and past vice-president of the now outlawed Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

In the following weeks the Ministry of Interior, particularly its Cyber Crime Directorate, repeatedly threatened to prosecute anyone who followed, circulated or expressed approval of social media accounts spreading "*fitna*" ("sedition" or "social discord"). Bahrainis began to receive text messages with similar warnings. On 4 June, Twitter criticized Bahrain's rhetoric as a potential threat to free expression and journalism.[1]

On 29 October, Facebook and WhatsApp filed a lawsuit in a US federal court against Israeli spyware company NSO. The lawsuit alleged that, working on behalf of Bahrain, the UAE and other countries, NSO had targeted 1,400 private devices whose users "included attorneys, journalists, human rights activists, political dissidents, [and] diplomats" in multiple countries, including individuals in Bahrain and the UAE.

On 14 July, Qatar's state-backed Al Jazeera television broadcast an interview with former Bahrain Defence Force officer Yaser Adhbi al-Jalahima in which he accused the Bahraini government of fabricating evidence that protesters had been armed during the uprising in 2011. Bahrain responded by announcing that al-Jalahima had been sentenced to death in his absence on 30 April on charges of spying for Qatar.

Throughout the year, the authorities continued to summon, interrogate and prosecute people for statements they had made online and offline.

On 16 January, former opposition MP Ali Rashed al-Asheeri was convicted and sentenced to a suspended prison term for tweeting that Bahrainis should not participate in the November 2018 parliamentary elections.

On 13 March, Ebrahim Sharif, a leader of the non-sectarian political group Wa'd, was convicted of insulting Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir via a tweet and sentenced to a suspended six-month prison sentence.

On 15 May, lawyer Abdulla AbdulRahman Hashim was summoned for interrogation and briefly detained over comments he made on Twitter that were interpreted as critical of authorities.

UNFAIR TRIALS

Use of mass trials continued both for people facing terrorism-related charges and protesters and were characterized by major fair trial concerns.

On 28 January, an appeal court upheld the convictions and sentences of around 200 citizens who had undergone mass trials on terrorism-related charges in two cases known as the "Jaw prison break" and "Dhu al-Fiqar cell" cases.

On 27 February, after a mass trial, 167 defendants were convicted on charges related to their participation in a long-term peaceful sit-in around the home in al-Duraz of the Shi'a cleric Isa Qasim to protest against his denaturalization.[2] On 16 April, after another mass trial, 138 people were convicted and denaturalized on charges relating to their alleged involvement in a "Bahraini Hizbullah" cell.[3] All convictions in both trials were upheld on appeal, though many of the sentences were reduced. Final sentences ranged from three years' imprisonment to the death penalty.

REVOCATION OF NATIONALITY AND STATELESSNESS

Courts continued to issue and uphold decisions to denaturalize citizens, but authorities reversed the denaturalization of 643 individuals, reducing the total number made stateless to around 350.

MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers continued to be exploited. Reforms announced in previous years failed to protect low-income migrant workers from abuses. Thousands of complaints relating to unpaid wages were brought to the labour courts.

Bahrain's flexi-visa scheme, introduced in 2017 to help irregular migrant workers regularize their status, was expanded temporarily to include workers who had not received their wages. The programme allows migrant workers to self-sponsor their stay in Bahrain and work for different employers in exchange for considerable fees. The fees, which were already exorbitant for low-income workers, were increased in 2019 to encourage the recruitment of Bahraini nationals. It remained to be seen if this system would better protect migrant workers.

A wage-protection system announced in 2018 was not launched as promised due to delays in implementation. The system would require employers to transfer all salaries to their employees via bank accounts, allowing the government to monitor cases of unpaid wages. Large companies were to be the first to join the system, followed by medium to small businesses and eventually the employers of domestic workers.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Bahrain continues to deny women legal equality, maintaining reservations to core articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, including Article 2, which commits states to "eliminating discrimination against women". Article 4 of Bahrain's Nationality Law denies equal transmission of nationality, so that a Bahraini woman married to a foreign national cannot pass her nationality to her children. Article 31 of the Domestic-

Sector Labour Law of 2012 authorizes the Minister of Labour "to define positions in which women's employment is prohibited". Ministry of Labour Decision No. 32 of 2013, one of the law's implementing regulations, prevents women from working "in positions which expose them to major or continuous physical effort", as well as a number of professions. Under Article 353 of the Penal Code, "Anyone who commits" rape or sexual assault "shall not be sentenced to any punishment" and will be absolved of any prior conviction "if he contracts a proper marriage between himself and the wronged woman".

DEATH PENALTY

Bahraini courts continued to hand down new death sentences and to uphold existing ones. On 27 July Bahrain carried out several executions, for the first time since January 2017. Authorities refused to give the bodies of the Bahraini men killed to their families for funeral arrangements and prevented most family members from being present at their burial.

PRISON CONDITIONS

Prison conditions remained poor, with overcrowding, inadequate supply of beds and hygienic items, punitive use of solitary confinement, poor sanitation, cases of food poisoning, skin infections, and medical neglect frequently reported, especially at Jaw, Bahrain's main prison.[4]

In many cases, conditions and practices amounted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and or punishment.

For most of the year prison authorities failed to issue inmate Ahmed Merza Ismaeel medication for his sickle-cell anaemia, a disease that causes excruciating pain if left untreated, a violation of the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment and his right to health.

1. Amnesty International, *Bahrain: General stifling of freedom of expression on social media* (Index: MDE 11/1564/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1115642019ENGLISH.pdf

2. Amnesty International, *New mass trial of protesters in Bahrain* (Index: MDE 11/0002/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1100022019ENGLISH.pdf

3. Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Mass trial revoking citizenship of 138 people 'a mockery of justice'* (Press release, 16 April 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/bahrain-mass-trial-revoking-citizenship-of-138-people-a-mockery-of-justice/

4. See, for example, Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Denial of medical care for seriously ill imprisoned activist 'latest act of cruelty'* (Press release, 11 September 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/bahrain-denial-of-medical-care-for-seriously-ill-imprisoned-activist-latest-act-of-cruelty/

Lawyer and human rights defender Mahienour el-Masry, who was arrested as she left the Supreme State Security Prosecution building in Greater Cairo, Egypt on 22 September 2019. She had been representing a detained human rights lawyer. She remained in pre-trial detention on unfounded "terrorism"-related charges at the end of 2019. © Alaa Elkamhawi

EGYPT

Arab Republic of Egypt
Head of state: **Abdel Fattah al-Sisi**
Head of government: **Moustafa Madbouly**

The authorities resorted to a range of repressive measures against protesters and perceived dissidents, including enforced disappearance, mass arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, excessive use of force and severe probation measures, particularly after protests against the President on 20 September. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained at least 20 journalists solely for peacefully expressing their opinions. The authorities continued to severely restrict human rights organizations' and political parties' freedom of association. Constitutional amendments expanded the role of military courts in prosecuting civilians and undermined the independence of the judiciary. Following the 20 September protests, the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) ordered the detention of thousands pending investigation in relation to vaguely worded "terrorism"-related charges were investigated. Extensive use of exceptional courts led to grossly unfair trials and, in some cases, death sentences. Executions continued. Torture remained rife in formal and informal places of detention. Conditions of detention remained dire, prompting mass hunger strikes. Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice. The authorities failed to protect women against high levels of sexual and gender-based violence. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people in detention were forcibly subjected to invasive anal and sex determination tests. Dozens of workers and trade unionists were arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted for exercising their right to strike and protest. The authorities restricted Christians' right to worship by closing at least 25 churches and failing to provide approval for thousands of others to be built or repaired. Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants were arbitrarily arrested and detained for irregularly entering or leaving Egypt.

BACKGROUND

In April, parliament approved constitutional amendments to lengthen the presidential term from four to six years, which would allow President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to stay in power until 2030 if he wins another election. A referendum approved the amendments. Every three months, the authorities extended the

state of emergency, in force since April 2017, thereby circumventing the constitutional six-month limit.

The government ended fuel subsidies in July. An official statistical survey concluded that 32.5% of Egyptians were living below the poverty line, a rise of nearly 5% since 2015.

In September, former military contractor Mohammed Ali released videos accusing the President and military of corruption and called for protests. In response, hundreds of people protested in Egypt's capital, Cairo, its second city, Alexandria, and other cities on 20 September.

Attacks by armed groups in Sinai continued sporadically, though at a lesser rate than in previous years. In April, a suicide bombing killed seven people and injured 26 in a market in the town of Sheikh Zuweid.

On 13 November, Egypt's third Universal Periodic Review was held at the UN Human Rights Council with members making 373 recommendations.

Egypt remained a member of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the armed conflict in Yemen. Egypt remained a member of the coalition imposing economic and political sanctions on Qatar, along with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The authorities responded to peaceful protests in March, September and October with unlawful use of force, mass arbitrary arrests, disproportionate road closures and censorship.

In March, after a spontaneous protest broke out following a train derailment that left at least 27 people dead in downtown Cairo, scores of protesters and bystanders were arrested. Many of them remained in pre-trial detention at the end of the year.

In response to the 20 September protests, authorities used excessive force, blocked off roads and closed metro stations in downtown Cairo, and arrested at least 4,000 people; it was the largest wave of mass arrests since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power.[1] The authorities carried out sweeping arrests of hundreds of peaceful protesters, including children, as well as more targeted arbitrary arrests of human rights lawyers, journalists, political activists and politicians. At least 3,715 of those arrested were detained pending investigation in relation to "terrorism"-related charges – the largest single protest-related criminal investigation in Egypt's history. Police randomly stopped individuals in Cairo and Alexandria, ordered them to hand over their phones or show them their social media accounts and, in some cases, arrested them.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained at least 20 journalists solely for peacefully expressing their opinions.

Among them were Sayed Abdellah, a journalist, and Mohammed Ibrahim, a journalist and founder of the well-known blog "Oxygen Egypt", who were arbitrarily detained from September for posting videos and news about the protests against the President.

On 23 November, security officers arbitrarily arrested Shady Zalat, editor of the independent media platform Mada Masr, at his home and held him for almost two days. The next day, security forces raided Mada Masr's office and briefly detained 16 staff. On 26 November, journalists Solafa Magdy, Hossam El-Sayed and Mohamed Salah were arrested and subsequently detained pending investigations on "terrorism"-related charges.[2]

The authorities added the websites of the broadcasters BBC and Alhurra to the list of 513 websites already blocked in Egypt, including those of news and human rights organizations.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

The authorities continued to severely restrict human rights organizations' and political parties' freedom of association. Political parties faced arbitrary restrictions on their work, such as organizing public events, and increasing arrests of their members. Leading political figures, including Zyad el-Elaimy, Hisham Fouad and Hossam Moanis, were arrested to stop them founding a coalition to contest the 2020 parliamentary elections.[3] In September and October, police arrested several members from five political parties, including Khaled Dawoud, former Secretary General of the Dostour party, after the parties called on the authorities to respect the right to assemble.

In August, the President ratified a new NGO law that maintained the most draconian provisions of the 2017 law it replaced, including giving the authorities wide powers to dissolve independent human rights groups and criminalizing legitimate activities of NGOs.[4]

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The politically motivated criminal investigation into the activities and funding of staff members of human rights organizations known as Case 173 remained active. At least 31 staff members of civil society organizations continued to be banned from travelling abroad.

Following the 20 September protests, human rights defenders were increasingly targeted for arrest, torture and other ill-treatment, prolonged detention and criminal investigations.

On 22 September, security forces arrested Mahienour el-Masry, a human rights defender and lawyer, as she left the SSSP building in Greater Cairo where she had been representing a detained human rights lawyer. The following week, Mohamed el-Baqer, a lawyer and director of the Adalah Center for Rights and Freedoms, was arrested and ill-treated after he represented a detained activist. A few days later, plain-clothes police kidnapped Esraa Abdelfattah, a human rights defender and journalist, then tortured her at an undisclosed location. All three human rights defenders

remained in pre-trial detention in relation to unfounded "terrorism"-related charges at the end of 2019.

UNFAIR TRIALS

In April, constitutional amendments expanded the role of military courts in prosecuting civilians. They also undermined the independence of the judiciary by granting the President more powers to appoint heads of judicial bodies, and enshrined impunity for members of the armed forces.

Following the 20 September protests, the SSSP – a special branch of the Public Prosecution responsible for investigating national security threats – ordered the detention of thousands of people, including at least 111 children, pending investigation in relation to vaguely worded "terrorism" charges.[5] Neither the accused nor their lawyers were allowed to examine the charges, which were based on reports by the National Security Agency (NSA). Lawyers were often prevented from adequately representing their clients; some were abducted or arrested. Such measures severely undermined due process. In at least five cases, the SSSP bypassed court decisions to release suspects by issuing new detention orders on similar charges.

Extensive use of exceptional courts, including terrorism circuits, military courts and state security courts, led to grossly unfair trials. Although the authorities reduced the number of terrorism circuits from nine to four, the circuits convicted and sentenced dozens of defendants in cases that were marred by allegations of enforced disappearance and torture, often without properly establishing individual criminal responsibility. The courts continued to extend the detention of suspects at the behest of the SSSP, in some cases for over the two-year limit specified by law. In October, a terrorism circuit court sentenced six defendants to death, eight to life imprisonment and 12, including two child offenders, to 10 years in prison. The defendants had been subjected to enforced disappearance and said they had been tortured.

Courts also imposed repressive probation measures on dozens of individuals, including prisoners of conscience imprisoned after unfair trials, to punish them after their release and hinder them from carrying out political activities, ordering them to spend up to 12 hours a day in police stations. At least four people previously detained arbitrarily were rearrested while in police stations fulfilling their probation requirements. They included Alaa Abd El-Fattah, a blogger and activist, who was rearrested on 29 September in a Cairo police station. The SSSP ordered his detention pending investigation in relation to "terrorism"-related charges.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts including military and terrorism circuits handed down death sentences against men and women after unfair, mass trials. The Supreme Military Court of Appeals and the Court of Cassation upheld death sentences, and executions were carried out.[6] In February, for example, 15 men convicted in three different trials related to the murder of officials were executed. Their trials were marred by allegations of enforced disappearance and torture, as well as the use of forced confessions.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Hundreds of dissidents were forcibly disappeared for up to 183 days. According to the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, at least 710 people were subjected to enforced disappearance during 2019. Among them was Ibrahim Ezz el-Din, a housing rights researcher at the Commission, who was arrested on 11 June. He reappeared outside the SSSP building on 26 November. The NSA alleged that he had been arrested only a day before his reappearance. Ibrahim Ezz el-Din said security forces had tortured him. The SSSP did not open an investigation into his enforced disappearance or torture allegations.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture remained rife in formal and informal places of detention. Only in rare cases did the authorities prosecute alleged perpetrators of torture.

Following his rearrest on 29 September, blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah was transferred to the notorious Tora maximum security prison 2 in the south of Greater Cairo, where prison officers blindfolded him, stripped him of his clothing, beat and kicked him repeatedly, and verbally abused him.[7]

In August, Hossam Hamad died in al-Aqrab prison. Prosecutors failed to investigate claims that he had been tortured.

Some action was taken in relation to past cases. In February, a court in Sohag sentenced three policemen to three years in prison for torturing and killing Mohamed Saleh, a detainee, in 2016, as well as a doctor to one year in prison for covering up the crime. In October, prosecution authorities indicted 10 police officers for the 2016 torture and killing of street vendor Magdy Maken in Ameriya police station in Cairo. In November, the Court of Cassation upheld a three-year prison sentence against six policemen for torturing a detainee to death in 2016. In December, the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced nine policemen to three years in prison for torturing and killing Hussein Farghali in Wayli police station in Cairo in 2016.

DETENTION CONDITIONS

Overcrowded and unhygienic cells, lack of ventilation, prolonged solitary confinement and denial of family visits contributed to inhumane conditions of detention across the country. Perceived government critics suffered prolonged solitary confinement and denial of adequate medical care that amounted to torture. Among them was Aisha al-Shater, who had been held in solitary confinement since she was arrested in November 2018, following which she was tortured with beatings and

electric shocks, sources told Amnesty International. She was critically ill at the end of the year.[8] In July, around 130 detainees in al-Aqrab prison staged a hunger strike over their detention conditions, including the denial of family visits for years.[9] Dozens of detainees died in places of detention, some reportedly as a result of their detention conditions.

In June, former President Mohamed Morsi died during a court hearing following years of detention in solitary confinement and inadequate medical care. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions found that the prison regime in Egypt may have directly led to his death.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

The authorities failed to prevent, adequately investigate or punish perpetrators of violence against women, which remained widespread. They also continued to violate survivors' confidentiality during the stages of reporting and litigation. In some cases, police forced survivors reporting violence to stay overnight at a police station or refused to register their complaint. Several cases were reported of police requiring women who submitted complaints about sexual violence to undergo virginity tests. In a rare case of sexual violence being investigated, police detained three men suspected of raping a 17-year-old woman in Farshout, a town in southern Egypt.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

The authorities continued to arrest and prosecute LGBTI individuals on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, often subjecting them to forced anal and sex determination tests, a practice that amounts to torture. In January a court sentenced Mohamed al-Ghiety, a TV presenter who had publicly expressed homophobic views, to one year's imprisonment and a fine for interviewing a gay man on TV; the sentence served to intimidate people from publicly discussing LGBTI issues.

In February, Malak al-Kashef, a transgender woman and human rights defender, was arbitrarily detained in relation to a protest. She was detained for four months in the all-male Mazra'at Tora prison and subjected to a forced anal examination at a government hospital, where she also suffered other forms of sexual assault by medical staff.[10]

WORKERS' RIGHTS

In August, parliament amended the 2017 Trade Unions Law, which undermines the right to strike and form independent trade unions. The amendments reduced the minimum number of members required to form a trade union and removed the punishment of imprisonment for breaching the provisions of the law, including falsification of the founding documents. However, the Ministry of Manpower and its affiliated directorates continued to refuse to formally recognize new independent trade unions by obstructing or delaying bureaucratic procedures, thereby restricting the right of workers to organize freely, gain legal recognition for their unions, carry out their legitimate activities and elect their executive bodies.

Security forces arbitrarily detained at least 41 workers and trade unionists, some of whom were prosecuted, solely for exercising their right to strike and protest peacefully. In September, the police detained six workers in Ismailia's investment zone who were calling for salary increases and improved benefits. In October, police detained 17 employees of the state-owned Eastern Tobacco Company for protesting for a pay rise, fixed-term contracts for temporary workers and other improvements to their conditions.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

The authorities continued to restrict in law and practice the right of Christians to worship. Christians' right to build and repair churches remained restricted under a 2016 law requiring approval from state bodies, including security agencies. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, such bodies granted full legal registration to less than 200 churches, out of a total of 5,540 that had made applications, while only 1,412 churches received preliminary conditional approvals. Security forces closed at least 25 churches on the grounds of their illegal status or on the pretext of avoiding sectarian tensions. In April, security forces closed Naga al-Ghafir church in Sohag and prohibited collective worship in it.

On 23 November, Coptic Christian activist Ramy Kamel was arbitrarily arrested days before his participation in a session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva, Switzerland. He was detained on "terrorism"-related charges for speaking out about the rights of religious minorities in Egypt and for his previous engagement with the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing during her visit to Egypt in 2018.

MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

The authorities continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Between July and September, security forces detained at least 23 Syrians, including 13 children, in police station in the southern city of Edfu for irregularly crossing the Sudanese-Egyptian border; all remained detained at the end of the year.

1. Amnesty International, *Egypt: Largest wave of mass arrests since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power* (Press release, 2 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/egypt-largest-wave-of-mass-arrests-since-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi-came-to-power/

2. Amnesty International, *Egypt: Three journalists arbitrarily detained – Solafa Magdy, Hossam el-Sayed and Mohamed Salah* (Index: MDE 12/1602/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/1602/2019/en/

3. Amnesty International, *Egypt: Three politicians arbitrarily detained – Zyad el-Elaimy, Hossam Moanis and Hisham Fouad* (Index: MDE 12/0839/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/0839/2019/en/

4. Amnesty International, *Egypt: Amendments to repressive NGO law little more than token "cosmetic" changes* (Press release, 16 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/egypt-amendments-to-repressive-ngo-law-little-more-than-token-cosmetic-changes/

5. Amnesty International, Egypt: Permanent state of exception ¬– abuses by the Supreme State Security Prosecution (Index: MDE 12/1399/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/1399/2019/en/

6. Amnesty International, Egypt: Execution of nine men after an unfair trial a monumental disgrace (Press release, 20 February 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/egypt-execution-of-nine-men-after-an-unfair-trial-a-monumental-disgrace/

7. Amnesty International, Egypt: Torture of activist Alaa Abdel Fattah illustrates use of extreme brutality to crush dissent (Press release, 10 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/egypt-torture-of-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-illustrates-use-of-extreme-brutality-to-crush-dissent/

8. Amnesty International, Egypt: Aisha el-Shater critically ill amid torture and denial of medical treatment in prison (Press release, 21 November 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/egypt-aisha-el-shater-critically-ill-amid-torture-and-denial-of-medical-treatment-in-prison/

9. Amnesty International, Egypt: Mass hunger strike at al-Aqrab prison over denial of family visits and dire conditions (Press release, 31 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/egypt-mass-hunger-strike-at-al-aqrab-prison-over-denial-of-family-visits-and-dire-conditions/

10. Amnesty International, Egypt: Forcibly disappeared transgender woman at risk of sexual violence and torture (Press release, 7 March and updated 11 March 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/egypt-forcibly-disappeared-transgender-woman-at-risk-of-sexual-violence-and-torture/

Iranian security forces firing tear gas to disperse a protest in the city of Bushehr, Bushehr province, south-west Iran, on 16 November 2019. Verified video footage from this protest showed that security forces used excessive force against peaceful protesters. © Private

IRAN

Islamic Republic of Iran
Head of state: **Sayed Ali Khamenei (Supreme Leader)**
Head of government: **Hassan Rouhani (President)**

The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Security forces used lethal force unlawfully to crush protests, killing hundreds, and arbitrarily detaining thousands of protesters. The authorities arbitrarily detained over 200 human rights defenders and imposed sentences of imprisonment and flogging against many of them. A new law allowed Iranian women married to men with foreign nationality to pass on Iranian citizenship to their children, but women continued to face discrimination and the authorities intensified their crackdown against women's rights defenders campaigning against forced veiling laws. Ethnic and religious minorities faced entrenched discrimination. Torture and other ill-treatment, including through the denial of medical care, remained widespread and systematic; they were committed with impunity. Cruel, inhuman and degrading judicial punishments were carried out. Scores of people were executed, sometimes in public; several were under the age of 18 at the time of the crime. There were systematic violations of fair trial rights. The authorities committed the ongoing crime against humanity of enforced disappearance by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents extrajudicially executed in secret in the 1980s.

BACKGROUND

Flash floods in March and April affected millions of people and left at least 77 people dead and thousands displaced, according to officials. The authorities were criticized for failing to allocate sufficient resources for relief and reconstruction.

Sanctions imposed by the USA continued to negatively impact Iran's economy, with detrimental consequences for the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

Iran provided military support to government forces and militias in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Iran remained closed to independent human rights observers. Amnesty International and multiple UN human rights bodies, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, whose mandate was renewed in March by the UN Human Rights Council, were unable to visit the country.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Security forces used unnecessary or excessive force to disperse protests and arbitrarily detained peaceful demonstrators.

In November, security forces crushed nationwide protests, killing over 300 people, including children, according to credible sources; many died from gunshot

wounds to vital organs. Thousands of protesters were arbitrarily detained. Many were subjected to enforced disappearance, torture or other ill-treatment including through being punched, kicked, flogged and beaten. Authorities implemented a near-total internet shutdown during the protests to prevent people from sharing images and videos of the lethal force used by security forces.[1]

Hundreds of others were arbitrarily detained in relation to the peaceful exercise of their rights, generally on spurious national security charges. At least 240 were human rights defenders, including lawyers, labour rights activists, environmental activists, minority rights activists, women's rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those seeking truth, justice and reparation for the mass extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances of the 1980s. Several family members of human rights defenders were subjected to interrogation and other forms of harassment. Media workers and political dissidents were also among those arbitrarily detained.

Independent civil society and human rights groups remained banned. Censorship of all forms of media and jamming of foreign satellite television channels continued.

Authorities raided private mixed-gender parties, arresting and prosecuting scores of men and women for violating "public decency". Their sentences included flogging.

Facebook, Telegram, Twitter and YouTube remained blocked. Authorities summoned for questioning some Instagram users with large followings, including models, musicians and dancers, and, in some cases, detained them and took over their accounts.

In April, the prosecutor general of Iran announced that publication of "fake news" related to the floods was a national security issue. Subsequently, Iran's cyberpolice announced the arrest of 24 social media users in Khuzestan province for "spreading distorted news and rumours" and "disturbing public opinion" in relation to the floods.

Human rights lawyers

Authorities cracked down on human rights lawyers, prosecuting some in relation to their peaceful human rights work, including their defence of clients facing spurious national security charges. In March, Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 33 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes. She is required to serve 12 years of this sentence in addition to five years from a separate case.[2] In June, lawyer Amirsalar Davoudi was sentenced to 29 years and three months in prison, of which he will serve 15, and 111 lashes.

Workers and labour rights activists

Thousands of workers staged peaceful demonstrations and strikes throughout the year in protest at unpaid wages and pensions, poor working conditions and living standards, the privatization of public sector companies leading to sub-standard conditions of employment, and other grievances. Authorities arrested scores of protesting workers on national security related charges and sentenced over two dozen to prison terms and flogging.

On International Workers' Day, security forces used unnecessary force to disperse a peaceful demonstration in Tehran, beating and arbitrarily arresting dozens of workers. They included labour rights activists Atefeh Rangiz and Neda Naji, who were sentenced, respectively, to five years and five and a half years in prison for participating in the protest.

In September, jailed labour rights activists Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi were sentenced to, respectively, 18 years and 13 and a half years in prison and 74 lashes in relation to their participation in peaceful protests over unpaid wages at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan province and to public statements in which they said they were tortured in detention. State television broadcast their forced "confessions" months before their trial.[3] In December, Sepideh Gholian's sentence was reduced to five years in prison and Esmail Bakhshi's to five years in prison and 74 lashes.

The government continued to ban independent trade unions.

Environmental activists

Dozens of environmental activists were arrested. Eight conservationists were sentenced to between four and 10 years in prison in relation to their conservation activities, including carrying out research into Iran's endangered wildlife. They were convicted of charges including "co-operating with hostile states against the Islamic Republic".

Media workers

A number of journalists were prosecuted and received prison and/or flogging sentences in relation to their work. In June, journalist Masoud Kazemi was sentenced to four years and six months in prison and a two-year ban on working in journalism, in connection with social media posts in which he alleged government corruption.

In May, journalist Marzieh Amiri was arrested while covering the International Workers' Day protest. In August, she was sentenced on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system" to 10 years and six months in prison and 148 lashes, reduced to five years' imprisonment on appeal.

In October, the Revolutionary Guards announced they had arrested Rouhollah Zam, editor of AmadNews, a popular channel on a messaging application that authorities accused of inciting the protests of December 2017 and January 2018. Iran's state television broadcast his "confession" in a propaganda video days following his arrest.

Political dissidents

Authorities detained at least 16 people who signed open letters in July demanding fundamental changes to the country's political system; some were charged with "insulting the Supreme Leader".

Political dissidents Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnavard remained under house arrest without charge or trial.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In May, the parliament approved a bill amending the civil code to allow Iranian women married to men with foreign nationality to pass on Iranian citizenship to their children. The new law came into force after the Guardian Council ratified it in October. However, while the children of Iranian men are automatically granted Iranian nationality, the new law requires women to apply for citizenship for their children and their children to undergo security screening by the ministry of intelligence before citizenship is granted.

More broadly, women continued to face entrenched discrimination in family and criminal law, including in relation to marriage, divorce, employment, inheritance and political office.

Authorities failed to criminalize gender-based violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and early and forced marriage, which remained widespread. The judiciary watered down a long-standing bill aimed at protecting women against violence that it was reviewing and sent it to the government's bills committee for its review in September.

The authorities intensified their crackdown against women's rights defenders campaigning against discriminatory forced veiling laws, sentencing some to prison and flogging for charges including "inciting and facilitating corruption and prostitution" through promoting "unveiling". In July, Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi were each sentenced to 16 years in prison and Mojgan Keshavarz to 23 and a half years in prison. All three must serve 10 years. In September, authorities arrested three family members of prominent US-based Iranian journalist and activist Masih Alinejad as retribution for her activism against forced veiling. In April, police sent text messages to female drivers who had allegedly removed their hijabs while driving, summoning them to receive official warnings that their cars would be impounded if they did so again. Authorities continued to impose a discriminatory ban on women entering football stadiums for domestic games and arrest those who defied it, charging them with criminal offences. In October, they allowed 3,500 women to watch a World Cup qualifying match in the national stadium. This followed the death of Sahar Khodayari, who set herself on fire outside a court where she was being tried on charges related to her attempt to enter a stadium.[4]

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ETHNIC MINORITIES

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced entrenched discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment and adequate housing. Economic neglect of minority-populated regions exacerbated poverty and marginalization. Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education.

Members of minorities who spoke out against violations of their rights were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, unfair trials and imprisonment. Intelligence and security bodies frequently accused minority rights activists of supporting "separatist currents" threatening Iran's territorial integrity.

Azerbaijani Turkic minority rights activist Abbas Lesani was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system" in relation to his advocacy for the rights of Azerbaijani Turks. He must serve 10 years.

Dozens of Ahwazi Arab relief volunteers providing aid to victims of the floods in Ahvaz were reported to have been arbitrarily arrested in relation to their relief efforts.

Authorities used the November protests to target ethnic minority groups and arbitrarily arrest scores of Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis and Kurds, including minority rights activists.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Freedom of religion and belief was systematically violated in law and practice. The authorities continued to impose on people of all faiths and atheists codes of public conduct rooted in a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Only Shi'a Muslims were allowed to hold key political positions. The right to change or renounce religious beliefs continued to be violated. Those who professed atheism remained at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty for "apostasy".

Widespread and systematic attacks continued against the persecuted Baha'i minority, including arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, forcible closure of businesses, confiscation of property and bans on employment in the public sector.

Dozens of Baha'i students were denied access to universities through expulsion for peacefully practising their faith.

Other religious minorities not recognized under the Constitution such as Yaresan (Ahl-e Haq) and Erfan-e Halgheh were persecuted for practising their faith and faced systematic discrimination.

Dozens of Gonabadi Dervishes remained imprisoned on charges including "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" in connection with a peaceful protest that was violently quashed in 2018.

Dozens of Christians, including converts, were subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention and prison sentences for practising their faith. Raids on house churches continued.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment, including prolonged solitary confinement, remained widespread and systematic, especially during interrogations. Authorities consistently failed to investigate torture allegations and hold those responsible to account.

Torture may have caused or contributed to the death in custody of several people. In September, Javad Khosravanian's family was informed he had died in custody following his arrest several days earlier in Khorrambid, a county in Fars province. He was reported to be fit and well prior to his arrest. The head of the provincial justice department ordered an investigation into his death. There were reports that several people died in custody following their arrests during the November protests.

Prisoners of conscience were deliberately denied adequate medical care, often as punishment. Human rights defender Arash Sadeghi continued to be tortured through denial of cancer treatment. In a new punitive measure, authorities forced prisoners of conscience in Tehran's Evin prison to pay for medical care received outside prison and severely limited family visitation rights.

Conditions in many prisons and detention facilities remained cruel and inhuman, including overcrowding, limited hot water, inadequate food, insufficient beds, poor ventilation and insect infestations.

The Islamic Penal Code continued to provide for corporal judicial punishment amounting to torture, including flogging, blinding and amputation. Scores of individuals were sentenced to flogging for theft and assault as well as for acts that, under international human rights law, should not be criminalized. These acts included participating in peaceful protests, engaging in extramarital relationships, attending mixed-gender parties and drinking alcohol. In July, Kurdish singer Peyman Mirzazadeh was subjected to 100 lashes after being convicted on charges including "drinking alcohol". In October, a prisoner's hand was amputated for theft in a prison in Sari, Mazandaran province.

DEATH PENALTY

Scores of people were executed after unfair trials, some in public. They included several individuals who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

The death penalty was maintained for conduct protected under international human rights law including some consensual same-sex sexual conduct and sexual extramarital relationships, as well as for vaguely worded offences such as "insulting the Prophet", "enmity against God" and "spreading corruption on earth".

The Islamic Penal Code continued to provide for stoning as a method of execution.

UNFAIR TRIALS

There were systematic violations of fair trial rights.

Forced "confessions" obtained under torture and other ill-treatment were broadcast on state television and used by courts to issue convictions. In August former prisoner Mazyar Ebrahimi said that ministry of intelligence authorities had arrested him and others in 2012 in connection with the killing of several Iranian nuclear scientists and repeatedly tortured them to extract "confessions" that were broadcast on state television. Subsequently, member of parliament Mahmoud Sadeghi introduced a bill criminalizing the filming and broadcasting of forced confessions, but it is unlikely to become law. In November, state media broadcast the forced "confessions" of protesters arrested during the nationwide protests that month.

Defendants tried before special courts dealing with financial corruption were denied the right to appeal against prison sentences and were given only 10 days to appeal death sentences. In July, the judiciary announced that, since their inception in mid-2018, these courts had issued 978 verdicts, including nine death sentences and 161 flogging sentences.

Authorities continued to deny individuals facing some charges, including those related to national security, access to independent lawyers at the investigation stage. Some individuals were refused access to their lawyer even at trial.

ONGOING CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

The authorities committed the ongoing crime against humanity of enforced disappearance by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents who were forcibly disappeared during a wave of secret mass extrajudicial executions in Iran between July and September 1988. The continued suffering inflicted on victims' families violated the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.

Many of the officials who are suspected of being involved in the enforced disappearances and mass extrajudicial executions of 1988, including individuals linked to the "death commissions", continued to hold positions of power.[5] Alireza Avaei remained Iran's minister of justice; in March; Ebrahim Raisi was appointed as the head of the judiciary; and, in July, Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, advisor to Iran's head of the judiciary and a former minister of justice, threatened individuals advocating for truth and accountability with prosecution for "terrorism" and "collusion" with Iran's enemies.

1. Amnesty International, Iran: *Thousands arbitrarily detained and at risk of torture in chilling post-protest crackdown* (Press Release, 16 December 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/iran-thousands-arbitrarily-detained-and-at-risk-of-torture-in-chilling-post-protest-crackdown/

2. Amnesty International, Iran: Shocking 33-year prison term and 148 lashes for women's rights defender Nasrin Sotoudeh (Press Release, 11 March 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/iran-shocking-33-year-prison-term-and-148-lashes-for-womens-rights-defender-nasrin-sotoudeh/

3. Amnesty International, Iran: Abuse of jailed activist must stop: Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi (Index: MDE 13/1295/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1295/2019/en/

4. Amnesty International, Iran: Shocking death of football fan who set herself on fire exposes impact of contempt for women's rights (Press Release, 10 September 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/iran-shocking-death-of-football-fan-who-set-herself-on-fire-exposes-impact-of-contempt-for-womens-rights/

5. Amnesty International, *Iran: Shocking statements by senior official highlight impunity for 1988 prison massacres.* (Index: MDE 13/0815/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/0815/2019/en/

An Iraqi protester gestures using the V-sign during a demonstration against state corruption, failing public services and unemployment at Tayaran square in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, on 2 October 2019. © Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP via Getty Images

IRAQ

Republic of Iraq
Head of state: **Barham Ahmed Salih**
Head of government: **Adil Abdul Mahdi**

From October onwards, security forces, including factions of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), used excessive force against protesters involved in nationwide demonstrations, killing over 500 and injuring thousands; many of those killed were shot with live ammunition or hit with previously unseen tear gas canisters. Activists, as well as lawyers representing protesters, medics treating injured ones and journalists covering the protests, were subjected to arrest, enforced disappearance and other forms of intimidation by intelligence and security forces. Authorities blocked access to the internet, apparently to prevent the circulation of images of abuses by security forces. Approximately 1.55 million people remained internally displaced; many faced severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. Abrupt camp closures in Anbar and Ninewa governorates forced many families into secondary displacement. Thousands of men and boys remained missing after being forcibly disappeared by Iraqi security forces, including the PMU, while fleeing IS-held territories. There were widespread reports of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees held by central Iraqi and KRG forces, particularly of those suspected of affiliation with IS. Iraqi courts continued to pass down death sentences, some after unfair trials. IS targeted civilians, carrying out bomb attacks in cities and assassinating community leaders.

BACKGROUND

Despite the conclusion of the military campaign to retake areas from IS in December 2017, central Iraqi and KRG forces continued to report small-scale military operations, including air strikes, in which they targeted IS cells in such areas, especially in the governorates of Anbar, Diyala and Ninewa. While over 4 million displaced Iraqis had returned to their areas of origin, the pace of reconstruction in places badly hit by the conflict, such as the governorates of Anbar, Ninewa and Salah al-Din, was

slow. Humanitarian funding continued to dwindle; residents in camps for internally displaced people reported deterioration of medical, education and other services.

After Turkish military operations in north-east Syria began on 9 October, around 17,000 Syrian refugees fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Separately, Turkish air strikes continued in the north of this region, reportedly targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

On 1 October, nationwide protests commenced to demand better employment opportunities and public services, as well as an end to government corruption. On 24 October, even larger protests began across Iraq calling for the fall of the government. On 1 December, parliament accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi who nonetheless continued in a caretaker position.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

Excessive use of force

Between October and December, security forces used excessive force against protesters, killing over 500 and injuring thousands.

Between 1 and 7 October, security forces killed scores of protesters and injured thousands when they dispersed protests by firing live ammunition as well as deploying tear gas and hot water cannons.

In Baghdad, witnesses said that apparent sniper fire coming from behind security lines killed protesters. Protesters also reported that armed men shot at them, attempted to run them over with vehicles and, in the city's Za'faraniya district, surrounded them and then fired live ammunition at them continuously.[1] Witnesses also said that security forces chased protesters trying to flee, trapped them and then beat them with metal rods and rifle butts.

In cities across several southern governorates, protesters set light to government buildings and buildings affiliated with political parties and factions of the PMU, part of Iraq's security forces since 2016. At least 12 protesters were killed after they were trapped in one such fire. PMU factions killed a number of other protesters approaching PMU buildings.

An investigation ordered by the then prime minister into the events of 1-7 October revealed that 149 protesters and eight members of the security forces were killed as a result of the use of excessive force, including the firing of live ammunition. Over 70% of the deaths were caused by shots to the head or chest. The investigation found that high-ranking commanders of security forces did not order the use of excessive force but lost control of their forces. A number of these commanders were subsequently removed from their positions.

After the second wave of protests began on 24 October, security forces again met protesters with excessive force. On 25 October in Baghdad, anti-riot forces launched previously unseen types of tear gas grenades into crowds in a manner that witnesses said was intended to kill rather than disperse protesters. The grenades were 10 times heavier than regular tear gas canisters, killing almost instantly anyone hit by them. Medical volunteers reported that the grenades were fired directly into crowds of peaceful protesters, causing men, women and children to faint or suffocate.[2]

On 28 October, security forces fired live ammunition and tear gas to disperse crowds of largely peaceful protesters in the southern city of Karbala. They also chased away protesters staging a peaceful sit-in and attempted to run protesters over with vehicles.[3]

Security forces continued to use violence against protesters throughout November, particularly in the cities of Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and Nasiriyah.[4] During the night of 27 November in Najaf, at least 12 protesters were reported to have been killed in clashes with security forces after protesters stormed and torched the Iranian consulate in the city. The following night, various security forces attacked protesters in Nasiriyah, killing at least 30 protesters and injuring many others.

Arbitrary arrests and intimidation

In the context of the protests, activists, as well as lawyers representing protesters, medics treating injured ones and journalists covering the protests, faced a campaign of intimidation by intelligence and security forces, including factions of the PMU, who systematically targeted anyone speaking out against the conduct of security forces. In many cases, activists were threatened, beaten and forced to sign pledges to cease protesting, before being released from detention. Activists said that security forces warned them that they had been added to a list compiled by intelligence services.

In Baghdad, activists reported that men in civilian clothing, who identified themselves as local intelligence agents, visited their homes and interrogated them about their activities during the protests. At no point were the activists presented with an arrest or search warrant.[5] Injured protesters were arrested from hospitals in Baghdad and Karbala, leading many others who were injured to avoid seeking medical help. Some people who were arrested in Karbala reported that security forces beat and wounded protesters, including children, during interrogation.

Dozens of protesters and activists from several governorates, including Baghdad, Amarah and Karbala, were abducted and forcibly disappeared by security forces in the period between early October and December; a few were released days or weeks later. In addition, unknown armed assailants shot and killed a number of protesters and attacked the offices of a number of local and regional media outlets in Baghdad that were covering the protests.

Curfews and internet shutdown

The authorities imposed curfews repeatedly in October and November

and intermittently blocked access to the internet across the country, excluding the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. While restricted access to the internet was restored subsequently, access to social media platforms remained blocked. Many believed that the authorities disabled internet access during the crackdown to prevent the circulation of photographs and videos of abuses by security forces.

Kurdistan region of Iraq

On 26 January, protests broke out near a Turkish military base in the area of Shiladze, Dohuk governorate, after civilian casualties were reported to have occurred as a result of Turkish air strikes carried out on 24 January. Local media and activists reported that a number of protesters stormed the base and started fires and that two of them were killed. On 27 January, the Asayish, the KRG security agency, arrested dozens of protesters, activists, journalists and individuals who may have been bystanders. Some were released without charge on the same day, while others were charged. Of these, most were released on bail in the subsequent days and weeks. Also on 27 January, the Asayish arrested a journalist and two activists, who, according to their relatives, were on their way to a gathering in the city of Duhok in support of the Shiladze protests; they were charged and released on bail at the beginning of March.[6]

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Approximately 1.55 million people remained internally displaced as a result of the armed conflict against IS, the majority in camps and informal settlements in Anbar, Ninewa and Salah al-Din governorates following secondary displacement.

Displaced families continued to face obstacles to accessing civil status documentation. This restricted their freedom of movement and their access to employment and public services, including education for their children. Security officers threatened and, in some cases, arrested lawyers who tried to help families perceived to be affiliated with IS to obtain civil documents.

Internally displaced people in camps across Iraq continued to face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement when attempting to leave camps, even for medical reasons. KRG authorities continued to prevent displaced Arabs from returning to their home towns and villages in disputed territories controlled by the KRG. Many men and unaccompanied boys living in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq following their release from KRG detention for alleged affiliation with IS – either without charge or after being convicted and sentenced – did not return to their home areas in territories controlled by the central Iraqi authorities due to risks of arrest and harassment by security forces there.

Iraqi authorities abruptly closed camps for internally displaced people in Anbar and Ninewa governorates, forcing those affected to move to nearby consolidated camps or return to their areas of origin. This violated their right to voluntary, dignified and safe return. Many people were displaced for a second time and were hard to reach and track by humanitarian agencies after local and security actors refused them entry to their areas of origin, perceiving them to be affiliated with IS.[7]

Humanitarian agencies reported that an increased number of displaced Iraqis who had returned to their areas of origin were living in poor conditions. Some families, particularly those perceived to be affiliated with IS, were evicted from their homes by armed men, including local tribal militias, who then confiscated or destroyed the properties. Women from these families were sexually harassed and intimidated by such actors.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Displaced Iraqis perceived to be affiliated with IS were subjected to enforced disappearance following arrest by central Iraqi security forces at checkpoints, in IDP camps and in areas of origin to which they had returned. Many of the arrests occurred in areas previously held by IS or considered to have been IS strongholds.

The fate of thousands of men and boys who were arrested and then forcibly disappeared by central Iraqi security forces, including the PMU, while fleeing IS-held areas between 2014 and 2018 remained unknown. Their disappearances left behind many female-headed households; these women suffered the stigma of perceived affiliation with IS.

In September, the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights called for the parliament to pass a draft law, first presented in 2015, to incorporate the provisions of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which Iraq ratified in 2010, into national legislation. This remained pending at the end of the year.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

There were widespread reports of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees held by central Iraqi and KRG forces, particularly of those suspected of affiliation with IS, who were coerced to provide “confessions” during interrogation. Courts continued to allow torture-tainted evidence to be used in trials, especially in those of IS suspects.

The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights reported deteriorating and overcrowded prison conditions across Iraq owing to the rise in the number of detainees suspected of affiliation with IS.

DEATH PENALTY

Death sentences were handed down for terrorism-related activity, drug-related crimes, murder and kidnapping. Iraqi and foreign nationals held on suspicion of affiliation with IS were condemned to death following critically flawed trials, often having had no access to an adequate defence and on the basis of torture-tainted “confessions”.

ABUSES BY ARMED GROUPS

IS continued to target civilians in assassinations and bomb attacks. The armed group claimed a bombing in the city of Karbala on 20 September that killed at least 12 civilians and injured five others. IS assassinated community leaders in Diyala and Ninewa governorates in an apparent attempt to deter residents from co-operating with security forces and to allow IS fighters to move unhindered through the area.

Bodies exhumed from a mass grave in the Sinjar region of Ninewa governorate, under the supervision of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD), were identified as those of Yazidi men and boys killed by IS in August 2014. The fate of over 3,000 Yazidi women and girls abducted by the armed group remained unknown.

Over 400 hectares of agricultural land were set ablaze in central governorates, allegedly by IS. Iraqi authorities ordered an investigation, but no results were made public.

1. Amnesty International, Iraq: Deadly sniper attacks and intimidation as protesters face intensifying crackdown (Press release, 9 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-deadly-sniper-attacks-and-intimidation-as-protesters-face-intensifying-crackdown/

2. Amnesty International, Iranian tear gas grenades among those causing gruesome protester deaths in Iraq (Press release, 31 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-gruesome-string-of-fatalities-as-new-tear-gas-grenades-pierce-protesters-skulls/

3. Amnesty International, Iraq: Horrific scenes as security forces resort to lethal force to disperse Karbala protests (Press release, 29 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-horrific-scenes-as-security-forces-resort-to-lethal-force-to-disperse-karbala-protests/

4. Amnesty International, Iraq: Rein in security forces to prevent a bloodbath (Press release, 9 November 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/iraq-rein-in-security-forces-to-prevent-a-bloodbath/

5. Amnesty International, Iraq: Stop security forces from threatening, forcibly disappearing and abusing activists (Press release, 18 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-stop-security-forces-from-threatening-forcibly-disappearing-and-abusing-activists/

6. Amnesty International, Iraq: Fist around freedom of expression tightens (Index: MDE 14/9962/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/9962/2019/en/

7. Amnesty International, Iraq: Stop forced returns of hundreds of internally displaced people (Press release, 28 August 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/iraq-stop-forced-returns-of-hundreds-of-internally-displaced-people/

Israeli authorities demolish a Palestinian building that was under construction in the Palestinian village of Sur Baher in occupied East Jerusalem on 22 July 2019. © Ahmad Gharbali/AFP via Getty Images

ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

State of Israel
Head of state: **Reuven Rivlin**
Head of government: **Benjamin Netanyahu**

Israel continued to impose institutionalized discrimination against Palestinians living under its rule in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Israeli forces killed 38 Palestinians, including 11 children, during demonstrations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank; many were unlawfully killed while posing no imminent threat to life. Israel failed to ensure accountability and redress for victims of such grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Israeli air strikes and shelling in the Gaza Strip killed 28 Palestinian civilians who were not directly participating in hostilities, including 10 children. Israel maintained its illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip, subjecting its residents to collective punishment and deepening the humanitarian crisis there. It continued to restrict freedom of movement of Palestinians in the OPT through checkpoints and roadblocks. Israeli authorities unlawfully detained in Israel thousands of Palestinians from the OPT, holding hundreds in administrative detention without charge or trial. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were committed with impunity. Israel displaced over 900 Palestinians in the West Bank as a result of home demolitions. The authorities used a range of measures to target human rights defenders, journalists and others who criticized Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syrian Golan Heights. The authorities denied asylum-seekers access to a fair or prompt refugee status determination process. Conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned.

BACKGROUND

Israel held legislative elections on 9 April, but no party leader was able to form a governing coalition. As a result, new elections were triggered and held on 17 September. No government was formed and third elections were scheduled for March 2020. On 21 November Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Israel continued to expand illegal settlements and related infrastructure in the occupied West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, by legalizing outposts

built without Israeli state authorization, including on private Palestinian land. On 19 November, the US government announced that it would not consider Israeli settlements in the West Bank as illegal under international law. On 25 March, US President Donald Trump had recognized Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, contravening UN Security Council resolutions that declared Israel's annexation illegal.

On 20 December, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that the preliminary examination into the "Situation in Palestine" had concluded that war crimes had been committed in the OPT and that "all the statutory criteria… for the opening of an investigation have been met." However, before proceeding with an investigation, the Prosecutor decided to seek confirmation from the ICC's judges that the territory over which the Court may exercise its jurisdiction comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

In March, Palestinian armed groups fired a rocket from the Gaza Strip into central Israel, wounding seven civilians. Israel retaliated by striking Hamas targets in Gaza. Between 3 and 6 May, Israeli forces launched hundreds of air strikes and artillery shells on Gaza, killing 25 people; Palestinian armed groups fired hundreds of rockets into Israel, killing four. Between 12 and 16 November, after Israel killed a leading member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad armed group, in an air strike, hostilities flared up again. Israel launched air strikes killing 33 people, including 15 civilians, while Palestinian armed groups fired rockets into Israel, causing injuries.

Israel also launched air strikes against Iranian and Hizbullah targets in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

UNLAWFUL KILLINGS

Israeli military and security forces killed at least 38 Palestinians, including 11 children, during demonstrations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Many were unlawfully killed by live ammunition or other excessive force when posing no imminent threat to life. Many of the unlawful killings appeared to be wilful, which would constitute war crimes.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continued weekly "Great March of Return protests" that began in March 2018. According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, by 27 December, 215 Palestinians had been killed, among them 47 children, four paramedics and two journalists. Some Palestinian protesters engaged in violence, including by throwing stones and Molotov cocktails towards Israeli soldiers.

On 28 February, the UN Commission of Inquiry into violations committed in the context of the protests in Gaza between March and December 2018 found that Israeli forces may have committed war crimes, including by deliberately firing at Palestinian civilians.[1] In July, Israeli media reported that the Israeli military had decided to change their open-fire regulations, which had allowed snipers to fire at protesters' lower limbs above the knee, but only after over a year of it being aware that they were leading needlessly to deaths and devastating injuries; snipers were briefed, in the future, to shoot below the knee.

On 16 May, the Israeli army closed the investigation into the killing of Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, who used a wheelchair, during the Gaza protests in December 2017, without pressing any charges.

On 30 October, the army sentenced an Israeli soldier who shot dead 15-year-old Palestinian Othman Halas during a protest in Gaza in July 2018 to community service and reduced his rank for "endangering a life by deviating from orders".

Israeli air strikes and shelling in the Gaza Strip killed 28 Palestinian civilians who were not directly participating in hostilities, including 10 children; 13 civilians were killed in the hostilities of 3-6 May and 15 in those of 12-16 November. Some of the attacks in which civilians were killed or injured appeared to have been indiscriminate or disproportionate or to have been carried out without adequate precautions to spare civilians.

Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank resulted in the killing of two Palestinians and the injuring of 112, according to OCHA. There has been a pattern of Israeli forces failing to intervene to stop such attacks and the Israeli judiciary failing to hold perpetrators to account.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, RIGHT TO HEALTH

Israel's illegal air, land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip, restricting the movement of people and goods in and out of the area, continued to have a devastating impact on the human rights of Gaza's 2 million inhabitants for the 12th year in a row. The measures amounted to collective punishment. In January, the World Health Organization warned that the Israeli blockade of fuel into Gaza was severely impacting hospitals and other health services. Between 26 August and 1 September, following rocket attacks into Israel, the Israeli authorities halved the fuel supply to Gaza, resulting in a daily maximum of four hours of electricity.

In June, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights reported an acute medicine shortage for patients with cancer and chronic diseases in Gaza. Israel continued to arbitrarily deny medical permits to Gaza residents to allow them to enter Israel or the West Bank for treatment. In January, Israel expanded the fishing limits off the Gaza coast to 12 nautical miles, still below the 20 nautical miles agreed in the Oslo Accords signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1990s.

In the West Bank, at least 100 Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks continued to heavily restrict the movement of

Palestinians, and holders of Palestinian identification cards faced an ongoing bar on using roads built for Israeli settlers.

DETENTION

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Israeli authorities conducted hundreds of raids throughout the West Bank to arrest Palestinians, usually at their homes at night. They were detained in prisons in Israel, along with thousands of other Palestinians from the OPT arrested in previous years. This violates international humanitarian law, which prohibits the transfer of detainees into the territory of the Occupying Power.

Israeli forces arrested Khalida Jarrar, a former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and former board member of the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, on 31 October. She was charged with "holding a position in an illegal association" and remained in detention at the end of the year.

Israeli authorities used renewable administrative detention orders to hold Palestinians without charge or trial. Some 4,638 Palestinians from the OPT, including 458 administrative detainees, were held in Israeli prisons as of 30 November, according to the Israel Prison Service. Many families of Palestinian detainees in Israel, particularly those in Gaza, were not permitted entry to Israel to visit their relatives.

Palestinian civilians, including children, from the OPT were prosecuted in military courts that did not meet international fair trial standards.

Children in custody

Israel held 182 Palestinian children in prison, including two in administrative detention, as of 30 November. Defence for Children International-Palestine said that children were interrogated without their parents present and placed with adults in prison. Under international law, detention of children should be a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time.

On 22 January, Israeli forces arrested 14-year-old Suleiman Abu Ghosh from Qalandia refugee camp and held him in administrative detention for four months.

Discrimination

In September, the Israel Prison Service refused a request to translate prison regulations into Arabic filed by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. It argued that it was not required to do so by the nation-state law, a law of constitutional nature that makes self-determination a right reserved for Jews and discriminates against Palestinian civilians, including by downgrading the status of the Arabic language.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT, DEATHS IN CUSTODY

Israeli soldiers, police and Israel Security Agency (ISA) officers continued to torture and otherwise ill-treat Palestinian detainees, including children, with impunity. Reported methods included beating, slapping, painful shackling, sleep deprivation, use of stress positions and threats. Prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes for months, was commonly used as a punishment.

On 29 September, the Ministry of Justice launched an investigation after Samir Arbeed was hospitalized with broken ribs and kidney failure following torture by Israeli forces during interrogation.[2]

Four Palestinians died in custody allegedly as a result of torture or other ill-treatment by Israeli forces. One of them, Nassar Taqatqa, who was interrogated by the ISA, died on 16 July in prison within a month of arrest. The Israel Prison Service said it was investigating his death. The authorities refused to release the bodies of three of the prisoners.

RIGHT TO HOUSING, FORCED EVICTIONS

Israel demolished 621 Palestinian residential and livelihood structures in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, displacing 914 people, according to OCHA. Israeli authorities said many of the buildings demolished lacked Israeli-issued permits; these are virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain. The law of occupation prohibits such destruction unless absolutely necessary for military operations. On 22 July, Israeli forces demolished up to 16 residential buildings in the West Bank village of Sur Baher because of their proximity to the fence/wall, which Israel largely built on Palestinian land.[3]

Israel punitively demolished at least 14 Palestinian homes in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which left 36 people, including 15 children, homeless, according to B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization. Punitive demolitions constitute collective punishment and are prohibited under international law.

Israeli settler organizations initiated, with the support of Israeli authorities, forcible evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem. OCHA estimated in January that around 200 Palestinian households had eviction cases pending against them, placing 877 adults and children at risk of displacement.

On 10 July, Israeli authorities forcibly evicted the Palestinian Ilham Siyam and her family from their home in Silwan, East Jerusalem, after the Jerusalem District Court ruled in favour of the Israeli settlers' foundation Elad over the ownership of the house, ending a legal battle that had lasted nearly 30 years.

On 28 January, the Israeli authorities announced a plan to forcibly transfer 36,000 Palestinian Bedouin citizens living in "unrecognized" villages in the Negev/Naqab in Israel to government-planned townships; Israel refuses to recognize these villages as legal or provide them with municipal services. In December, Israeli authorities demolished the Palestinian Bedouin village of al-Araqib for the 169th time.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

The authorities used a range of measures, including raids, incitement campaigns, movement restrictions and judicial harassment, to target human rights defenders, journalists and others who criticized Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syrian Golan Heights.

In February, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs published a report that listed Palestinian human rights workers and Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) activists, labelling them as "terrorists in suits". Among them were Shawan Jabarin, general director of the Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq; Raja Sourani, director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights; and Salah Hamouri, a French-Palestinian researcher with Addameer. On 19 September, Israeli forces raided the office of Addameer in Ramallah and seized equipment.[4]

Israel continued to deny human rights bodies entry to the OPT, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the OPT. In October, Israel prevented Amnesty International's campaigner on Israel and the OPT, Laith Abu Zeyad, from leaving the West Bank for "security reasons", apparently as a punitive measure against the organization's human rights work.[5]

During the night of 21/22 July, Israeli authorities attempted to forcibly deport Palestinian photojournalist Mustafa al-Kharouf to Jordan, where he has no citizenship or residency rights, apparently because he had documented human rights violations by the Israeli authorities in East Jerusalem. Jordan blocked the attempt, which would have amounted to a war crime. He was held in arbitrary detention from 22 January until his conditional release on 24 October.
The Anti-Boycott Law was used to target activists and organizations critical of Israel's policies. In November, the Israeli Supreme Court upheld a deportation order against Human Rights Watch's Israel and Palestine director, Omar Shakir, which had been initiated under the law. On 25 November, he was deported. In June, the state energy company Energix used the law to sue Al-Marsad - Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights after it published a report on the company's large wind energy project on private lands owned by Syrians in the occupied Golan.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Violence against women persisted in Israel, especially against female Palestinian citizens of Israel. At least 13 women were killed as a result of gender-based violence.

REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND MIGRANT WORKERS

Israel continued to deny asylum-seekers access to a fair and prompt refugee status determination process, leaving many without access to basic services. About 30,000 asylum-seekers were living in Israel. As of 30 June, no asylum claims had been granted, while about 15,000 claims remained pending.

In September, the Supreme Court rejected a petition to freeze the deportation of Israel-born children of migrant workers residing in Israel without a legal status.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

At least three Israeli conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned. In August, conscientious objector Roman Levin was released after 82 days in solitary confinement.

1. Amnesty International, *Israel/ OPT: Findings of UN inquiry into Gaza killings must pave way for justice over war crimes* (Press release, 28 February 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/israel-opt-findings-of-un-inquiry-into-gaza-killings-must-pave-way-for-justice-over-war-crimes/

2. Amnesty International, *Israel/ OPT: Legally-sanctioned torture of Palestinian detainee left him in critical condition* (Press release, 30 September 2019, updated 30 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/israel-opt-legally-sanctioned-torture-of-palestinian-detainee-left-him-in-critical-condition/

3. Amnesty International, *Israel continues policy of systematic forced displacement with wave of home demolitions in Sur Baher* (Press release, 22 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/israel-continues-policy-of-systematic-forced-displacement-with-wave-of-home-demolitions-in-sur-baher/

4. Amnesty International, *Israel ramps up assault on civil society with chilling raid on Palestinian NGO Addameer* (Press release, 19 September 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/israel-ramps-up-assault-on-civil-society-with-chilling-raid-on-palestinian-ngo-addameer/

5. Amnesty International, *Israel/ OPT: Amnesty staff member faces punitive travel ban for human rights work* (Press release, 31 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/israel-opt-amnesty-staff-member-faces-punitive-travel-ban-for-human-rights-work/

A woman raises a Jordanian national flag as she stands amidst public school teachers demonstrating and demanding pay raises at the Professional Associations Complex in Jordan's capital, Amman, on 3 October 2019. © Khalil Mazraawi/AFP via Getty Images

JORDAN

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan
Head of state: **King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein**
Head of government: **Omar Al-Razzaz**

The authorities detained over a dozen journalists and activists critical of the government or the King, as well as demonstrators demanding their and others' release, and blocked a website of activists abroad. A new government shelter for women at risk of being killed by family members helped dozens of women, but others were administratively detained under discriminatory charges and unmarried women were forcibly separated from their newborn children. The minimum age for girls to be married "in special cases" was raised from 15 to 16. Migrant domestic workers were granted permission to return home without paying a fine if they did not have valid permits, but continued to be inadequately protected from abuse by their employers and agents. Jordan continued to offer sanctuary to over 2.8 million refugees, but many Syrian refugees were prevented from entering the country and the number of professions barred to non-Jordanian nationals was increased. Death sentences were passed; there were no executions.

BACKGROUND

In March, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the outcome of Jordan's Universal Periodic Review at a session in which Jordan accepted 149 out of 226 recommendations received. Jordan argued that the 77 others were already implemented within its legal framework or would be difficult to implement because of the challenges of security and hosting refugees. In April, Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz issued a memorandum to all ministries and governmental associations with instructions to implement the 149 recommendations accepted.

Jordan remained a member of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the armed conflict in Yemen.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

In February, parliament's lower house refused to enact a draft cybercrime law

presented by the government on the basis that the definitions were vague and that some provisions contradicted the penal code; the definition of hate speech was overly broad and risked severely curtailing freedom of expression. Between 17 and 31 March, the authorities blocked local access to alurdunyya.net, a website set up by Jordanian activists abroad seeking to document political developments and arrests of activists in Jordan.

The authorities continued to harass and detain activists and journalists who criticized the government or King Abdullah. Between March and June, the authorities arrested two journalists and over a dozen activists, most of them linked to al-Hirak al-Shaabi (Popular Movement), a coalition of political activists. Some were charged with offences such as online slander and undermining the King and brought to trial before Jordan's State Security Court. Between September and November, at least seven activists were arrested over social media posts that showed them participating in protests or criticizing the government. Media reports indicated that dozens of those arrested during the year remained detained at the end of it.

In June, the authorities arrested at least 20 demonstrators demanding the release of those detained, on the grounds that they had not obtained a permit to hold a public protest. The demonstrators were released a few hours later after they were made to sign pledges that they would refrain from participating in actions that would "disrupt public security".

In May, the authorities had arrested at least 20 other demonstrators who were demanding the release of detainees they considered to be "political prisoners" and better living conditions for Jordanians as a whole. They were accused of "working to change the structure of the state" and "foul language". Some remained in prison at the end of the year, charged with "blasphemy".

In September, thousands of teachers went on strike for a month over pay. The Minister of Interior banned a protest by them on the grounds that it would disrupt traffic. When thousands of teachers gathered nonetheless, security forces used tear gas and, in some cases, batons to disperse the protesters. The strike ended with an agreed pay deal. On 5 October, the Prime Minister publicly apologized to the teachers and expressed cabinet's commitment to implementing the recommendations of an investigation opened by the National Centre for Human Rights, Jordan's national human rights institution, into alleged violations.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Dar Amneh, a shelter for women at risk of being killed by family members that was established by Jordan's Ministry of Social Development in July 2018, had helped 86 women by the end of October 2019. The shelter provides an alternative to the administrative detention of women at risk in "protective custody". However, women were not allowed to leave the shelter without the approval of a provincial governor. Concerns remained about the lack of protective orders issued or prosecutions initiated in response to threats of violence by family members.[1]

Provincial governors continued to use the Crime Prevention Law to administratively detain women, often for months and for discriminatory reasons, such as for being "absent from home" without a male guardian's permission, or for having sex outside marriage (*zina*), begging or homelessness. On 14 October, the Prime Minister's office reported that 85 women had been administratively detained after being accused of *zina* in 2019.

Women who became pregnant outside marriage faced arbitrary detention and the forcible removal of their newborn child. Amnesty International documented cases where Family Protection Department police came to the hospital soon after an unmarried woman had given birth and took the baby. The child was then handed to the care of the Ministry of Social Development without the mother's consent or any individual assessment of risk.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In April, the senate passed an amendment to the Personal Status Code raising the minimum age for girls to be married "in special cases" from 15 to 16. The "special cases", which include situations in which the "marriage is necessary" and in "the interest" of both parties, require court approval and apply only to girls. The standard minimum age of marriage continued to be 18 for both boys and girls.

Citizenship laws continued to discriminate against children of Jordanian mothers and non-Jordanian fathers, who, unlike children of Jordanian fathers married to non-Jordanians, were denied Jordanian citizenship.

The Family Protection Department and the Ministry of Social Development continued to forcibly remove newborn children from unmarried mothers, without consideration of the best interests of the child.[2]

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

In March, the Ministry of Labour announced it would be reviewing the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which ties migrant domestic workers to their employers, and addressing violations by agencies and employers. In September, new Ministry of Labour measures came into effect, giving migrant workers without valid permits a grace period during which they could return to their country of origin without paying a fine and reducing the fee paid by employers for the work permit of a migrant domestic worker from 600 to 500 Jordanian dinars (from US$846 to 705).

Migrant domestic workers continued to be inadequately protected from abuse by their employers and agents, and remained at risk of arbitrary detention by the state. Around 600 women migrant domestic workers were released from administrative detention in the first half of the year; they had been detained for leaving their employer's residence without permission or not paying fines for overstaying their visas.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Jordan continued to host around 655,000 Syrian refugees, more than 10,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria, over 2 million long-term Palestinian refugees, the vast majority of whom have Jordanian nationality, and more than 87,000 refugees of other nationalities and. Based on Jordanian government lists, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, reported that 28,889 Syrian refugees had voluntarily returned to Syria during 2019. Jordan is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and continued to apply strict criteria for the entry of new Syrian refugees, preventing many from entering.

On 14 October, the Ministry of Labour raised from 11 to 39 the number of professions barred to non-Jordanian nationals seeking employment. Among them were long-term Palestinian refugees not holding Jordanian citizenship, most of whom were from the Gaza Strip; they continued to be denied other basic rights and services, too.

DEATH PENALTY

Death sentences continued to be passed; no executions took place.

1. Amnesty International, *Imprisoned women, stolen children: Policing sex, marriage and pregnancy in Jordan* (Index: MDE 16/0831/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde16/0831/2019/en/

2. Amnesty International, *Imprisoned women, stolen children: Policing sex, marriage and pregnancy in Jordan* (Index: MDE 16/0831/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde16/0831/2019/en/

Kuwaiti demonstrators take part in a demonstration against corruption in the capital, Kuwait City, on 6 November 2019. © Yasser Al-Zayyat/AFP via Getty Images

KUWAIT

State of Kuwait
Head of state: **Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah**
Head of government: **Jaber al-Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah**

The authorities detained and prosecuted government critics and activists under legal provisions criminalizing speech deemed offensive to the head of state, as well as for peaceful assembly. Members of the stateless Bidun minority continued to face entrenched discrimination, including the denial of their rights to access employment and public services. Migrant workers remained inadequately protected against exploitation and abuse. A new personal status law for Shi'a Muslims codified provisions discriminating against women in relation to divorce, child custody and inheritance. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people faced arrest. Eight Egyptian men were returned to Egypt despite risks that they would be tortured or forcibly disappeared. Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were reported.

BACKGROUND

Kuwait continued to lead mediation efforts to resolve the Gulf crisis that erupted in 2017, when Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates severed relations with Qatar. Kuwait remained a member of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the armed conflict in Yemen.

In August, Iraq handed over the remains of 48 Kuwaiti nationals who disappeared during the 1991 Gulf War.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities detained and prosecuted government critics and activists under provisions in the cybercrime law and Penal Code criminalizing speech deemed as threatening state security or being offensive to the Emir (the head of state), critical of neighbouring countries or blasphemous, as well as for peaceful assembly.

In July, the suicide of Ayed Hamad Moudath, a stateless Bidun man who had been unable to obtain official documents and lost his job, triggered peaceful protests calling for citizenship rights for the Bidun.[1] Fifteen Bidun men, including human rights defender Abdulhakeem al-Fadhli, were arrested and charged with offences including calling for and participating in protests and put on trial. On 22 August, they went on hunger

strike in protest at their detention. On 17 September, five of them were released on bail, but the trial continued.

In October, a criminal court sentenced, in his absence, blogger and online activist Abdullah Saleh to three years in prison for insulting the Emir and the judiciary on social media. In July, an appeal court had upheld another three-year prison sentence against him, imposed for "insulting Saudi Arabia" on his Twitter account.

DISCRIMINATION - BIDUN

In August, a law was passed allowing the granting of Kuwaiti citizenship during the year to up to 4,000 individuals who could prove that their ancestors were recorded in Kuwait's population census of 1965, served in the army or police, and lived in Kuwait. The annual measure stood to benefit some of the stateless Bidun people living in Kuwait, but no official statistics on the number of such individuals granted citizenship was available by the end of the year.

Stateless Bidun persons remained unable to access a range of public services, including education for their children. In mid-April, at the request of a government body, banks suspended the accounts of Bidun individuals who could not provide the necessary documents to renew their IDs.

On 4 November, the Chairman of Kuwait's National Assembly presented a draft law that, if enacted, would put severe pressure on Bidun persons to surrender their long-standing claims to Kuwaiti nationality in order to safeguard their socioeconomic survival in the short term.[2]

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

In March, the Kuwait Trade Union Federation relaunched an office to help address legal cases brought by migrant workers, including domestic workers, in relation to wage theft or other forms of exploitation. Migrant workers continued to be inadequately protected and faced abuse facilitated by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.

Two Filipina domestic workers allegedly died at the hands of their employers. In May, Constancia Dayag was reported to have been killed by her employer, who was charged with murder. In December, Jeanelyn Villavende was reported to have been killed by her employer's wife, who was arrested along with her husband. In June, another Filipina domestic worker, Jessielyn Española, was allegedly beaten by her employer's son after he accused her of theft. She was severely injured and filed a complaint in court. In September, the Court of Cassation acquitted a Kuwaiti woman who had been convicted by an appeal court of inflicting injuries on a Filipina domestic worker, including with an iron.

In June, at least 95 Sri Lankan migrant workers returned to their home country for reasons that included non-payment of wages and other abuses.

From July the authorities forcibly evicted unaccompanied male migrant workers from residential neighbourhoods, including by shutting off their water and electricity supplies.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

On 25 August, the Ja'fari Personal Status Law came into force, setting out personal status provisions for Shi'a Muslims, which had previously been uncodified. Like Kuwait's pre-existing Personal Status Law, which applies to Sunni Muslims, it accorded women fewer rights than men in relation to divorce, child custody and inheritance. In a welcome contrast to the Personal Status Law for Sunni Muslims, the new law prohibits a man from forcing his wife to quit her job if she was employed before marriage.

In July, the cabinet approved a draft amendment to the Nationality Law that would increase the period of marriage needed for a foreign woman married to a Kuwaiti man to be granted Kuwaiti nationality from 15 to 18 years.

There continued to be no legislation criminalizing domestic violence, which disproportionately affects women.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

In July, an LGBTI group, al-Hurriya, announced it would apply to the Ministry of Social Affairs for a permit to be recognized as an official association.

At the end of July, police arrested seven trans people in the city of Salmiya and referred them to the Criminal Investigation Department. Same-sex sexual conduct continued to be criminalized.

REFOULEMENT

In July, the authorities arrested eight Egyptian men with alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood who had been tried and convicted in their absence in Egypt on terrorism-related charges. They handed the men over to the Egyptian authorities, despite serious concerns that they would be at risk of torture and enforced disappearance, so breaching the absolute prohibition on *refoulement*. The men were arrested on arrival in Cairo and were forcibly disappeared.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were reported.

1. Amnesty International, *Kuwait: Authorities crackdown on protesters demanding citizenship rights* (Press release, 17 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/kuwait-authorities-crackdown-on-protesters-demanding-citizenship-rights/

2. Amnesty International, *Kuwait: Rising signs of despair among Bidun highlight cruelty of draft law* (Index: MDE 17/1362/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde17/1362/2019/en/

A Lebanese demonstrator displays the word "Revolution" in Arabic on the palm of their hand during a protest against dire economic conditions in Zouk Mosbeh, north of the Lebanese capital, Beirut, on 18 October 2019. © Joseph Eid/AFP via Getty Images

LEBANON

Lebanese Republic
Head of state: **Michel Aoun**
Head of government: **Hassan Diab (replaced Saad Hariri in December)**

In response to nationwide protests and strikes that broke out shortly after the government announced new tax measures, the security forces used excessive force to disperse protesters, and failed to protect people's right to protest peacefully. Security forces continued to use torture and other ill-treatment; dozens reported being subjected to such treatment. Lebanon hosted 1.5 million Syrian refugees, but deported around 2,500 in violation of its *non-refoulement* obligations. It imposed barriers that hindered Syrian refugees accessing services and aid, leading to many living in dire conditions. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and organizations continued to be denied their rights. Security forces interrogated peaceful activists, journalists and others for social media posts criticizing political or religious authorities. Women migrant workers continued to suffer discriminatory practices under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Death sentences were passed; no executions were carried out.

BACKGROUND

A new government was formed in January after nine months of political deadlock. Four of the 30 ministers were women, the highest proportion to date.
In September, the Prime Minister declared an economic emergency. Government announcements about austerity measures led to protests. On 17 October, in response to the government's new tax plans, nationwide protests and strikes erupted. On 29 October, the government resigned. At the end of the year, the crisis in providing essential services, including waste, electricity and water, persisted.

On 19 December, the President appointed Hassan Diab to serve as prime minister. He was not able to form a government before the year's end.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

In October, the army used excessive force to disperse protesters in the northern towns of Beddawi and Abdeh and the

southern city of Saida, including by firing live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas bombs, and by beating protesters with rifle butts. On 26 October, soldiers shot and seriously injured at least two protesters in Beddawi.[1]

On 17-18 October, riot police used excessive force to disperse an overwhelmingly peaceful protest in downtown Beirut, the capital; they fired large amounts of tear gas into crowds, chased protesters at gunpoint and beat them.[2]

On several occasions in October and November, the security forces failed to intervene effectively to protect demonstrators in Beirut and the cities of Baalbek, Nabatiyeh and Sour from violent attacks by supporters of political parties.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be perpetrated by all the security apparatuses.[3] Dozens of former detainees told Amnesty International and other human rights organizations that, among other torture methods, they were beaten with hoses, metal chains and other implements; given electric shocks on their genitals; and hung in stress positions for long periods.

In May, Hassan al-Dika died in custody allegedly following torture in detention. His father submitted three complaints, but judicial authorities failed to investigate. The Ministry of Interior opened an internal investigation; it concluded that Hassan al-Dika had died of an illness he had prior to his detention.

In March, the government appointed the five members of the National Preventative Mechanism, an independent body within the National Human Rights Institute mandated to investigate torture allegations and monitor detention conditions. However, it failed both to issue the decrees necessary to operationalize the mechanism and to allocate a budget to it.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Lebanon continued to host 1.5 million Syrian refugees, including 919,578 people registered with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and, according to the government, around 550,000 who were unregistered. A 2015 government decision continued to bar UNHCR from registering newly arrived refugees from Syria. As of 31 July, there were 31,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

In April, the Higher Defence Council, an inter-ministerial body headed by the President, announced that refugees who entered Lebanon "illegally" after 24 April would be deported, in violation of Lebanon's *non-refoulement* obligations. Between May and August, 2,447 Syrian refugees were deported to Syria.

In September, President Aoun told the UN General Assembly that a total of over 250,000 Syrian refugees had returned from Lebanon to Syria, either spontaneously or in organized groups.[4] The authorities had been returning Syrian refugees since July 2018 under an agreement with the Syrian government. The Lebanese authorities presented these as "voluntary" returns, but their policies towards Syrian refugees raised questions about whether in some cases they amounted to "constructive" *refoulement*, prohibited in international law.

The authorities imposed barriers that hindered Syrian refugees accessing services and aid, leading to many living in dire conditions. UNHCR said that about 73% of refugees did not have legal residency and, in June, revealed that the authorities had tightened restrictions on Syrian refugee children under 15 seeking regular residency status. In April, the Higher Defence Council had announced it would start demolishing "semi-permanent structures" built by Syrian refugees in informal camps after 10 June, and implemented its decision shortly afterwards in several places.

Lebanon also continued to host tens of thousands of long-term Palestinian refugees, who remained subject to discriminatory laws excluding them from owning or inheriting property, accessing public education and health services, and working in at least 36 professions. At least 3,000 Palestinian refugees who do not hold official identity documents faced further restrictions, denying them the right to register births, marriages and deaths.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In June, parliament passed a law exempting children of Lebanese mothers married to non-Lebanese fathers, who hold residency cards but not Lebanese nationality, from the need to apply for work permits. However, the President returned the law to parliament for further review.

In September, the parliament's Committee on Women and Children approved a draft law on sexual harassment in the workplace, but its general assembly failed to discuss it.

Lebanese legislation continued to discriminate against women.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

LGBTI organizations and individuals continued to be denied the freedom to exercise their rights. Article 534 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes "sexual intercourse which contradicts the laws of nature", alongside other laws that criminalize sex work, drug use and trafficking, were used to prosecute LGBTI people.

In May, the Ministry of Telecommunications blocked access to the Grindr app, which is mainly used by gay and trans men.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Security forces continued to arrest and interrogate human rights and peaceful political activists, journalists

and other individuals for social media posts criticizing political or religious authorities. The Muhal Observatory for Freedom of Expression said 78 people were summoned for interrogation in 2019 simply for expressing their views online.

In July, church leaders called on the organizers of a festival to cancel the appearance of the band Mashrou' Leila, saying its songs were "offensive to religious and humanitarian values and Christian beliefs". The statement triggered a social media storm accusing the band of propagating sexual perversion and a protest threatened violence against the band and its fans. The Ministry of Interior failed to announce that it would protect the band and its fans, while the judiciary failed to investigate those who incited violence. The festival's organizers cancelled the band's appearance, stating they were forced to do so "to prevent bloodshed and maintain security and stability".

MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Women migrant workers continued to suffer discriminatory practices under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which restricted their rights to freedom of movement and communication, education and health, including sexual and reproductive health. Amnesty International documented serious human rights abuses faced by many of the country's 250,000 migrant domestic workers, mostly women, at the hands of their employers. Exploitative working conditions included long working hours, deprivation of rest days, denial of pay or imposed deductions, deprivation of food and proper accommodation, verbal and physical abuse, and denial of access to health care.[5]

In April, the Minister of Labour formed a working group to look into dismantling the *kafala* system. The working group submitted a plan in May, but none of its recommendations had been implemented by the end of 2019.

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

In September, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon confirmed an indictment against Salim Jamil Ayyash on charges relating to attacks on politicians Marwan Hamade, Georges Hawi and Elias El-Murr in 2004 and 2005. The judge issued both an arrest warrant for execution by the Lebanese authorities and an international arrest warrant.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were carried out.

1. Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Investigate excessive use of force including use of live ammunition to disperse protests* (Press release, 1 November 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/lebanon-investigate-excessive-use-of-force-including-use-of-live-ammunition-to-disperse-protests/

2. Amnesty International, Lebanon: *Authorities must immediately end the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters* (Press release, 19 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/lebanon-authorities-must-immediately-end-the-use-of-excessive-force-against-peaceful-protesters/

3. Amnesty International, *Lebanon is failing torture survivors by delaying implementation of crucial reforms* (Press release, 26 June 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/lebanon-is-failing-torture-survivors-by-delaying-implementation-of-crucial-reforms/

4. Amnesty International, Lebanon: *Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature?* (Index: MDE 18/0481/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/0481/2019/en/

5. Amnesty International, *'Their home is my prison': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon* (Index: MDE 18/0022/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/0022/2019/en/

A smoke plume rises following an air strike behind a tank and armed pick-up trucks belonging to forces loyal to Libya's Government of National Accord, during clashes on 12 April 2019 in the suburb of Wadi Rabie, about 30km south of the capital, Tripoli. © Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

LIBYA

State of Libya
Head of state: **Fayez Serraj (disputed)**

Militias, armed groups and security forces committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes. Fighting in and around Tripoli between forces and militias loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) killed scores of civilians, injured hundreds more and displaced tens of thousands. Militias, armed groups and security forces arbitrarily detained thousands of people, most indefinitely without any judicial process. They also took some hostage for ransoms or to press for the release of a detainee or captive. Torture and other ill-treatment were widespread in prisons, detention centres and unofficial places of detention. Militias, armed groups and security forces suppressed freedom of expression by harassing, abducting and attacking politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and other activists; one journalist was unlawfully killed and 10 others arbitrarily detained. The Libyan authorities failed to protect women from gender-based violence at the hands of militias and armed groups. Intimidation, threats and violence against lawyers and judges by armed groups and militias seriously undermined the judicial system. The situation for tens of thousands of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants remained bleak, as they were exposed to arbitrary arrest and abduction by militias and were regularly the victims of human trafficking and abuses by criminal groups. The authorities continued to unlawfully detain thousands of people in centres where they were subjected to exploitation, forced labour, torture and other ill-treatment. People were targeted by security forces, armed groups and militias because of their sexual orientation. Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were reported.

BACKGROUND

Militias, armed groups and security forces affiliated with the UN-backed GNA, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and based in Tripoli, and the self-proclaimed LNA, led by General Khalifa Haftar and

affiliated with the interim government in the east of Libya, continued to operate outside the rule of law.

In January, the LNA, supported by local armed groups, launched an operation to seize the city of Sabha and other areas of southern Libya from the GNA and local factions, thereby asserting the LNA's territorial control in south-west Libya. In April, the LNA launched an offensive to take control of the capital, Tripoli, and surrounding areas, which led to fighting between the LNA and GNA and their allied militias. This conflict was ongoing at the end of 2019, with neither side making significant territorial gains. The armed group calling itself Islamic State maintained a presence in the far south of Libya. The group continued to carry out sporadic attacks and was targeted by US air strikes.

The political process remained stalled. The LNA's April offensive began days before a UN-facilitated national conference was due to start. The international community failed to come to a unified position on Libya and instead fuelled both sides' willingness and ability to sustain hostilities. The LNA was supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France and Russia; the GNA was supported by Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

ARMED CONFLICT

In the context of armed hostilities, militias, armed groups and security forces continued to commit with impunity serious violations of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes, and gross human rights violations. According to the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 284 civilians were killed and 363 injured as a result of the armed conflict in 2019. The majority of these deaths and injuries were the result of violations of international humanitarian law by the LNA and GNA, including indiscriminate attacks using inaccurate explosive weapons in populated civilian areas.[1]

Air strikes, artillery barrages and shelling by the LNA and GNA struck civilian homes and other civilian infrastructure, including schools and businesses in and around Tripoli, and Tripoli's Mitiga airport. On 2 July, an attack by the LNA on an migrant detention centre in Tajoura, on the eastern outskirts of Tripoli, killed and injured dozens of migrants and refugees. Amnesty International also documented several attacks by the LNA on field hospitals and ambulances. One of the most devastating attacks was on 27 July, when five medics and rescuers were killed and eight were injured in a missile strike on a temporary field hospital near Tripoli international airport, south of the city. The fighting in and around Tripoli displaced more than 140,000 people, aggravated humanitarian needs and interrupted access to health care, electricity and other basic services.

The LNA operation in the south in early 2019 led to the death and injury of scores of civilians. Intermittent clashes in the southern town of Murzuq continued. On 4 August, an air strike on a town hall meeting in the residential district of Qalaa in Murzuq killed at least 43 people. The LNA confirmed launching a strike on Murzuq on that date but denied targeting civilians. The attack sparked heavy urban fighting between the Tebu and Alahali communities, the looting of homes and businesses, and mass displacement.

In violation of a comprehensive UN arms embargo in place since 2011, third countries supported the LNA and GNA through illicit arms transfers and direct military support. The GNA's primary sponsor, Turkey, provided it with Kirpi armoured fighting vehicles and Bayraktar TB2 armed drones. The LNA's primary sponsor, the UAE, provided it with Chinese-manufactured Wing Loong drones and operated them on its behalf.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

Militias, armed groups and security forces continued to arbitrarily detain thousands of people. Many had been held since 2011, and most were detained indefinitely without judicial oversight or the means to challenge the legality of their detention. Hundreds of detainees in Mitiga prison in Tripoli's eastern outskirts, run by the Special Deterrent Forces (Radaa forces), a militia group affiliated to the GNA and on its payroll, were held indefinitely without judicial process. They were kept in overcrowded cells with insufficient food and water and denied access to medical services.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment by militias, armed groups and security forces were widespread in prisons, detention centres and unofficial places of detention. Amnesty International documented cases in which detainees were subjected to mock executions, beatings and floggings, and prolonged solitary confinement. Detainees were also raped, including by having objects forcibly inserted into their anuses, and suffered other sexual violence.

HOSTAGE-TAKING

Militias, armed groups and security forces, operating independently or under the orders of the LNA or GNA, continued to abduct people for the purpose of taking them hostage. Abductions were often carried out for ransoms or to press for the release of a detainee or captive. Victims were generally targeted on the basis of their regional origin, perceived political opinions, profession or perceived wealth. For instance, in October, six medical workers were abducted and held captive for 12 days by a local armed group from the north-western city of Zintan to pressure the GNA to release a Zintan resident detained by the Radaa forces.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Security forces, armed groups and militias suppressed freedom of expression

by harassing, abducting and attacking politicians, human rights defenders and other activists, forcing many to flee the country. The targeting of journalists was a particularly worrying trend in 2019, with UNSMIL documenting one unlawful killing and more than 10 arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists. For instance, the al-Kaniat Brigade, an armed group affiliated with the LNA, held Mohamed al-Qaraj and Mohamed al-Shibani, journalists for Libya Alahrar TV, for 22 days near Tripoli in May.

Journalists, bloggers, media workers and others active on social media across Libya were also targeted for questioning by security forces, militias and armed groups as a way of intimidating them and silencing dissent. According to the Libyan Center for Freedom of the Press, the true number of journalists and bloggers targeted for intimidation or abuse will never be known as many refuse to speak publicly about such incidents, fearing reprisals against themselves or their families.

On 6 May, the LNA issued a statement threatening with "punishment by the Libyan law" all journalists, media figures, activists and political analysts who publicly opposed its offensive on Tripoli, saying that such people were guilty of "inciting hate and crime against the army forces" and "supporting terrorism". On 17 July, gunmen abducted parliamentarian Siham Sergiwa in a night-time raid on her home in Benghazi after she criticized the LNA's offensive to capture Tripoli in a TV interview earlier that day. Family members had received no news on her whereabouts by the end of the year.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Libyan authorities failed to protect women, including journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and other activists, from gender-based violence at the hands of militias and armed groups or to ensure that they were able to express themselves freely. Women who spoke out against corruption or the violent actions of militias, the LNA or the GNA were subjected to threats, abduction and gender-based violence.

In October, gunmen raided two cafés in Tripoli to intimidate women unaccompanied by a male family member. The armed men asked to see customers' marriage certificates, took male customers who were with female friends out of the café for questioning and told women they should be accompanied by their husbands or male relatives. The raids sparked a wave of criticism on social media against the Radaa forces, though a spokesperson for the Radaa forces denied they were responsible.

JUSTICE SYSTEM AND IMPUNITY

The judicial system continued to operate at very limited capacity. Judges across the divided country acted formally under a single authority, the Supreme Judicial Council. However, prosecutors and judges were generally unable to provide recourse for victims of crimes, including human rights violations, owing to armed groups' and militias' consistent use of intimidation, threats and violence against lawyers and judges.

At the international level, the International Criminal Court continued to have jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since 2011, under a referral made by the UN Security Council. However, the arrest warrants for Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, Mahmoud Al-Werfalli and Al-Tuhamy Mohamed Khaled remained unenforced and their whereabouts remained unknown. At the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council in September, the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General emphasized the need for accountability in Libya and called for the establishment of an international investigative mechanism to document violations and abuses.

REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

The situation for tens of thousands of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants remained bleak, as they were exposed to arbitrary arrest and abduction by militias and were regularly the victims of human trafficking and abuses by criminal groups. They were also exposed to increased dangers due to the ongoing hostilities.

The authorities continued to unlawfully detain thousands of people in centres run by the General Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), where they were subjected to exploitation and forced labour. They were also tortured and otherwise ill-treated, including by being raped, often to extract money from their families in exchange for release.

Those detained were kept in inhuman conditions and faced overcrowding as well as shortages of food, water and medical treatment. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 22 detained migrants and refugees died of tuberculosis and other illnesses contracted while in detention at a facility in Zintan between September 2018 and July 2019. Refugees and migrants continued to be held in detention centres near active combat zones. This put them at risk of death and injury during indiscriminate or targeted attacks, such as the 2 July attack on Tajoura migrant detention centre.

In 2019, at least 9,798 migrants were evacuated through "assisted voluntary returns", and 2,427 refugees were evacuated through resettlement programmes or on humanitarian grounds. However, the centres were regularly repopulated, as Libya's maritime authorities, in particular the Libyan Coast Guard, intercepted at least 9,225 refugees and migrants crossing the central Mediterranean and returned most of them to Libyan detention centres. Threats against NGOs conducting search and rescue operations and the use of violence against refugees and migrants continued during such operations and at points of disembarkation. For instance, in September, the Libyan authorities shot dead a Sudanese man during disembarkation when a group of refugees and migrants attempted to avoid detention. In September, the GNA

adopted a code of conduct to restrict rescue operations by NGOs and others.

Throughout the year, Italy and other EU member states continued to support Libya's maritime and other authorities, including through the donation of speedboats, training of crews and other assistance.

Libya, which is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, continued to refuse to fully recognize UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. The Gathering and Departure Facility, established by UNHCR and the DCIM in late 2018, operated throughout the year. The UNHCR described the facility as overcrowded and under resourced, with "deteriorating living conditions", and, in November, the agency called the situation at the facility "unsustainable". In September, UNHCR set up an emergency transit mechanism in Rwanda to evacuate a limited number of refugees and asylum-seekers.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

Amnesty International received numerous reports of people being blackmailed, abducted, detained or otherwise targeted by security forces, armed groups and militias because of their sexual orientation.

DEATH PENALTY

While no executions were reported, courts continued to hand down death sentences.

1. Amnesty International, *Libya's relentless militia war: Civilians harmed in the battle for Tripoli, April-August 2019* (Index: MDE 19/1201/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/1201/2019/en/

Demonstrators hold up signs during a protest calling for the release of Hajar Raissouni, a Moroccan journalist who was sentenced to one year in jail for an "illegal abortion" and sexual relations outside marriage, in the Moroccan capital, Rabat, on 2 October 2019. © Stringer/AFP via Getty Images

MOROCCO/ WESTERN SAHARA

Morocco/Western Sahara
Head of state: **Mohammed VI**
Head of government: **Saad-Eddine El Othmani**

The authorities harassed journalists, bloggers, artists and activists for expressing their views peacefully, sentencing at least five to prison terms for "insulting" public officials and apparently targeting others with spyware. They restricted the rights to freedom of association and assembly by preventing some groups critical of the authorities from operating and using unnecessary or excessive force to disperse demonstrations in Morocco and Western Sahara. Following an unfair trial, a court upheld prison sentences of up to 20 years against 43 people convicted in relation to social justice protests in 2017 in the northern Rif region. Security forces arrested and detained thousands of migrants, forcibly transferring some to the south of Morocco and others to other countries. Women continued to face discrimination, including sexual and other gender-based violence, and prison sentences were issued in relation to alleged illegal abortions. Police continued to harass lesbian, gay, bisexual and intersex people (LGBTI) people; same-sex sexual relations between consenting adults remained a criminal offence. A new law confirmed Amazigh as an official language, alongside Arabic. Courts handed down death sentences; there were no executions. The Polisario Front, which administers camps in Algeria for refugees from Western Sahara, detained at least two critics.

BACKGROUND

In October, the National Human Rights Council recommended decriminalizing sexual relations between unmarried adults. That same month, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) for a year without adding a human rights component.

In February, Morocco suspended its membership of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the armed conflict in Yemen.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The authorities continued to harass journalists, bloggers, artists and activists for expressing their views peacefully.

Courts sentenced at least five individuals to prison terms for "insulting" public officials. The charges were based on Penal Code provisions that criminalize legitimate speech.

In February, a court in the city of Tétouan sentenced blogger Sofian al-Nguad to two years in prison for online posts that criticized the authorities. In November, a court in Salé convicted rapper Mohamed Mounir (known as Gnawi) for "insulting" public officials and sentenced him to one year in prison and a fine.[1]

In April in Western Sahara, Moroccan authorities arrested Sahrawi activist Ali Al Saadouni after he posted online a video showing activists raising the flag of the Polisario Front, which calls for the independence of Western Sahara and has set up a self-proclaimed government-in-exile. In July, a court in Laayoune fined citizen journalist Nazha El Khalidi 4,000 dirhams (US$400) for livestreaming on Facebook a protest in 2018 without the correct media accreditation. In November, Laayoune court sentenced Sahrawi activist Mahfouda Bamba Lefkir to six months in prison for "offending" public officials after she "misspoke" to a judge in court.

Amnesty International found that two Moroccan human rights defenders – Maati Monjib and Abdessadak El Bouchattaoui – had been targeted repeatedly by surveillance technology developed by the Israeli company NSO Group since 2017.[2] Both received messages containing links that, if clicked, would secretly install Pegasus software, allowing the sender to gain near-total control of the phone. In December, eight civil society activists targeted by the spyware filed a complaint with the National Control Commission for the Protection of Personal Data. NSO Group is known to sell its spyware only to government agencies, raising serious concerns that Moroccan security agencies were behind the surveillance.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

The authorities failed to investigate allegations of torture and other ill-treatment adequately, leading to unfair trials. Prolonged solitary confinement of prisoners, which amounts to torture or other-ill-treatment, was recorded in several cases.

In April, Casablanca's appeal court upheld prison sentences of up to 20 years against 43 people convicted in relation to social justice protests in 2017 in the northern Rif region (the Hirak El-Rif protests). They were convicted on the basis of evidence allegedly obtained by torture or other ill-treatment. Prison authorities punished prisoners who staged protests with solitary confinement and restricted family visits.

Taoufik Bouachrine, former editor of the independent newspaper *Akhbar al-Yaoum,* continued to be held in prolonged solitary confinement in the prison of Ain El Borja, as he had been since February 2018. In October, an appeal court in Casablanca increased his sentence for sexual assault from 12 to 15 years' imprisonment.

Authorities continued to hold 23 Sahrawi men after they were convicted in unfair trials in 2013 and 2017 based on verdicts marred by a failure to adequately investigate torture claims. The defendants were convicted of responsibility for the deaths of 11 security force members during clashes that erupted when the forces dismantled a large protest encampment in Gdeim Izik, in Western Sahara in 2010.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

Authorities restricted the rights to freedom of association and assembly on several occasions.

In April, the government dissolved the legally registered cultural group Racines after guests at an online talk hosted by the group criticized the authorities.[3] In July, the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) was banned from holding a previously authorized event after it had to be moved to the premises of the Democratic Confederation of Labour in Azrou.

The authorities used a loophole in the law to prevent 62 local branches of the AMDH from operating legally. It refused to accept registration renewal documents submitted by 52 of them and failed to provide 10 others with receipts for such documents. Moroccan law allows an association to operate once it has submitted registration documents to the local administrative authorities and received a corresponding receipt, as long as the authorities do not formally object to its formation.

On 23 April, police used unnecessary and excessive force against a peaceful protest by teachers in Rabat calling for better working conditions. Police used water cannons and batons to disperse demonstrators and prevent them from marching. In October, local authorities banned for "security reasons" demonstrations organized in Al Hoceima to commemorate the death of Mouhcine Fikri, a fisherman killed in the town in 2016 during a police campaign against illegal fishing.

On 19 July in Western Sahara, police used excessive force, including rubber bullets, batons and water cannons, against protesters celebrating Algeria's victory in the final of football's Africa Cup of Nations. Sabah Njourni died after she was run over by two Moroccan Auxiliary Forces cars. Authorities opened an investigation, but results had not been made public by the end of the year. Up to 80 people were thought to have been injured, but the exact number remained unclear as many did not go to hospital fearing reprisals.[4]

MIGRANTS

Security forces arrested and detained thousands of migrants. They forcibly transferred over 11,000 to the south of the country and expelled over 1,000 to their countries of origin, allegedly without following due process in many cases. According to the AMDH, the authorities

held dozens of sub-Saharan men, women and children in an informal detention centre in Arekmane, close to the city of Nador in the Rif region, before forcibly transferring them to cities in the south of the country or deporting them to Algeria, where they faced further detention, or expelling them to countries including Cameroon, Mali and Senegal.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women continued to face discrimination, including sexual and other gender-based violence. Although Morocco passed a law for the prevention of violence against women in 2018, mechanisms for its implementation remained weak. According to a national survey on the prevalence of violence against women carried out between January and March, over half of Moroccan women had been affected by violence, but only 6.6% of survivors had filed complaints with the authorities for lack of trust in the authorities' ability to carry out proper investigation and hold perpetrators accountable.

Abortion remained criminalized in all circumstances unless the health of the pregnant woman was at risk and her spouse agreed to the procedure, restricting women's autonomous decision-making. In all other cases, women seeking or undergoing abortion and any health professionals involved in performing abortions risked imprisonment and other penalties. On 30 September, journalist Hajar Raissouni was sentenced to one year in prison for allegedly having an illegal abortion and premarital sexual relations. Her fiancé Amin Rifaat was also sentenced to one year in prison in relation to the same allegations. A doctor allegedly involved was sentenced to two years in prison and banned from practising medicine for two years. Two other medics received suspended prison terms. On 17 October, the King pardoned all five on grounds of compassion.[5]

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER & INTERSEX PEOPLE

Police continued to harass LGBTI people on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Survivors of homophobic and transphobic attacks reported being afraid to approach the police to file complaints because of the risk of arrest under Article 489 of the Penal Code. Consensual same-sex sexual relations between adults remained a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison under this article.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

In April, the government submitted a draft bill to parliament to regulate strikes. The bill contained severe restrictions on the right to strike, as guaranteed by both the constitution and international law, including measures that would impose criminal and financial penalties on workers for peacefully going on strike. Following pressure by national and international labour organizations, the bill was withdrawn. However, its status remained unclear.

In June, after decades of campaigning by activists, parliament unanimously approved a bill that confirmed Amazigh as an official language, alongside Arabic. The language was initially recognized as such in the 2011 constitution, but the new law aimed to operationalize the language's official status in all priority areas of public life, integrating it into education, legislation, media and communication, as well as artistic and cultural activities. According to a 2004 census, 8 million people – a quarter of the population – spoke one of the three main dialects of Amazigh in Morocco every day.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences; there were no executions. The last executions were in 1993.

POLISARIO CAMPS

From June onwards, the Polisario Front, which administers camps in Algeria for refugees from Western Sahara, detained at least two critics while an investigating judge explored treason and other charges against them.

The Polisario Front failed to ensure that those responsible for committing human rights abuses in the camps in previous decades were brought to account.

1. Amnesty International, *Morocco: Sentencing of rapper Gnawi to one year in prison a flagrant assault on freedom of expression* (Press release, 25 November 2019). https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/morocco-rapper-sentenced/

2. Amnesty International, *Moroccan human rights defenders targeted using malicious NSO Israeli spyware* (Press release, 10 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/moroccan-human-rights-defenders-targeted-using-malicious-nso-israeli-spyware/

3. Amnesty International, *Morocco: Abandon attempts to dissolve cultural group* (Press release, 18 January 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/morocco-abandon-attempts-to-dissolve-cultural-group/

4. Amnesty International, *Morocco/Western Sahara: Investigate brutal crackdown on Sahrawi protesters* (Press release, 1 August 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/morocco-western-sahara-investigate-brutal-crackdown-on-sahrawi-protesters/

5. Amnesty International, *Morocco: Release of journalist jailed after being accused of having an abortion* (Press release, 17 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/morocco-release-of-journalist-jailed-after-being-accused-of-having-an-abortion/

An Omani woman casts her ballot at a polling station in the Gulf state's north-eastern town of Izki during Consultative Council elections on 27 October 2019. While the authorities introduced reforms in 2019 and recent years to improve respect for women's rights, women in Oman continued to face discrimination in law and practice. © Mohammed Mahjoub/AFP via Getty Images

OMAN

Sultanate of Oman
Head of state: **Qaboos bin Said Al Said**
Head of government: **Qaboos bin Said Al Said**

The authorities unduly restricted the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Women were accorded the same rights as men with respect to freedom of movement and the freedom to choose their place of residence, but remained inadequately protected in matters such as divorce and domestic violence. A new decree criminalized genital mutilation and accorded children further protection. Migrant workers continued to face exploitation and abuse. The death penalty remained in force; no executions were reported.

BACKGROUND

Sporadic protests driven by unemployment broke out on 1 January prompting the government to establish the National Center for Employment. The Center, which will become functional in January 2020, is meant to oversee implementation of the government's policy of "Omanization" of the workforce, which began in 2018 and seeks to replace foreign workers with Omani nationals in order to tackle rising unemployment, and provide employment advice to job seekers. The Ministry of Manpower extended its visa ban on foreign recruitment to senior management roles.

Oman maintained a neutral stance in the regional crisis in which Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates severed relations with Qatar in June 2017.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities continued to unduly restrict the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, arresting protesters, journalists and online activists. In January, several protesters were arrested at a demonstration against unemployment in front of the Ministry of Manpower in the capital, Muscat, but were later released. Two radio journalists from Hala FM were also arrested while covering the demonstration; both were released the same day.

The Internal Security Service pursued its campaign against activists critical of the relations between Oman and Israel. In February, Musab al-Thehli and Haitham al-Mashaikhi were detained for three days and two weeks respectively in relation to posts they had made online. In January, Bader al-Arimi and Obeid bin Hashl al-Hinai were released; they had been arrested for similar reasons in December 2018.

Amnesty International received reliable information that in September 2019 three individuals from the Shuhuh tribe in Musandam province were arbitrarily detained for speaking out against the construction of industrial rock-crushing facilities in the area, which they believed were detrimental to the local community's health. They were released without charge. The detentions appear to have been intended to silence dissent in the province, in a pattern similar to that seen in previous years. Prisoner of conscience Mohammed Abdullah al-Shahi and five other individuals remained in prison serving life sentences handed down following unfair trials of Shuhuh members in 2018 in which they were convicted on vague charges related to national security. In November, the authorities detained civil society activist Musallam al-Ma'ashani for several days in relation to a book he was writing on the al-Hakli tribe, which had been subjected to state intimidation in recent years; he was released on bail.

The organizers of Muscat's 24th International Book Fair withdrew around 30 books from the government-run event, but did not disclose the reason.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In August, the Ministry of Social Development issued an executive decree clarifying provisions of the Child Law, which was passed in 2014. The Child Law criminalizes "traditional practices that are harmful to the health of the child". The executive decree specifies that these include genital mutilation and "rituals that cause harm to the child's body". The decree limits the employment of children under 15 to agricultural, administrative and industrial activities, fishing and crafts, provided that the work is run by family members and does not affect the child's health or education. However, this could, in some cases, still amount to child labour that should be eliminated. The decree also sets out guidelines to regulate the establishment and operation of nurseries.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Oman withdrew its reservation to Section 4 of Article 15 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, thereby according to men and women the same rights with respect to movement of persons and the freedom to choose their place of residence. However, women continued to face discrimination, in law and practice, in relation to matters such as divorce, child custody, inheritance and passing their nationality on to their children. The law still does not prohibit gender-based violence or marital rape.

MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers continued to face exploitation and abuse as a result of the shortcomings of Oman's labour laws and the restrictive *Kafala* (sponsorship) system that ties them to their employers. The laws prevent migrant workers from changing jobs or leaving the country without their employers' permission. This severely limits their ability to escape abusive working conditions and facilitates exploitation. Domestic workers continued to bear the brunt of this system and remained excluded from the protection of the labour laws.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were reported.

Palestinian journalists lift placards supporting freedom of expression during a rally in the West Bank city of Ramallah, on 23 October 2019, to protest a court ruling to block access to dozens of websites. © Ahmad Gharabli/AFP via Getty Images

PALESTINE (STATE OF)

Palestine (State of)
Head of state: **Mahmoud Abbas**
Head of government: **Mohammad Shtayyeh (replaced Rami Hamdallah in April)**

The Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and the Hamas de facto administration in the Gaza Strip arbitrarily arrested tens of peaceful demonstrators and critics. The West Bank authorities persisted in their crackdown on online expression, blocking access to dozens of websites. Palestinian forces in Gaza used excessive force in response to peaceful protests. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees were commonly reported and were committed with impunity under both authorities. Women in the West Bank and Gaza faced discrimination and violence; at least 24 women and girls were reported to have been victims of "honour" killings. At least eight lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people were subjected to arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Courts in Gaza continued to hand down death sentences. The High Judicial Council, a body established to enhance the independence of judges, was dissolved. Punitive measures imposed by Palestinian authorities in the West Bank exacerbated the dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Palestinian armed groups in Gaza occasionally fired indiscriminate rockets into Israel, killing four Israeli civilians.

BACKGROUND

Gaza remained under an Israeli air, sea and land blockade, in force since 2007. Egypt continued to enforce an almost total closure of the Rafah border crossing with Gaza. Such actions deepened the already dire economic and humanitarian crisis for Gaza's 2 million inhabitants.

On 29 January, the national consensus government led by Rami Hamdallah resigned. The new government, headed by Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, was sworn in on 13 April.[1] Mohammad Shtayyeh is a senior member of the Fatah party; his appointment was seen by Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine as a blow to unity efforts. On 6 October, President Mahmoud Abbas said that he would discuss with all factions, including Hamas, plans for new parliamentary elections.

On 17 February, Israel passed a law to cut 5% of the funds it transfers to the Palestinian authorities on the basis of tax revenues it collects from Palestinians. According to Israeli officials, the deducted sum represented the money paid by the Palestinian authorities to families of Palestinians convicted and jailed by Israel for "security offences".

In protest, the Palestinian authorities refused to accept the partial tax remittances for nearly eight months. The disagreement forced them to slash the salaries of tens of thousands of civil servants.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

The Fatah-led Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and the de facto Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip arbitrarily arrested tens of peaceful demonstrators and critics, including journalists, university students and human rights activists. The West Bank authorities persisted in their crackdown on online expression.

The authorities in the West Bank were responsible for 150 attacks on media freedom, according to the Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms. These included arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment during interrogation, confiscation of equipment, physical assaults and bans on reporting. The Hamas authorities in Gaza were responsible for 41 such attacks. On 4 June, security forces in the West Bank attacked members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-violent Islamist group, in a mosque in Hebron, after the group announced the celebration of a Muslim holiday a day before the official announcement. Security forces besieged the mosque, assaulted worshippers and arbitrarily arrested about 15 of them, releasing them without charge shortly afterwards.

On 10 March, the Hamas authorities in Gaza arbitrarily arrested 13 activists from the "We Want to Live" movement, which was planning to stage demonstrations four days later against the rising cost of living and deteriorating economic conditions. The arrests happened during a private meeting at a house belonging to the activist Jihad Salem al-Arabeed in the town of Jabalya in the northern Gaza Strip. Security forces stormed into the house without an arrest warrant. According to the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), the Palestinian national human rights institution, the activists were tortured and otherwise ill-treated in detention.

The authorities in the West Bank continued to clamp down on online freedom of expression using the draconian Electronic Crimes Law. The Ramallah Magistrate's Court blocked access to 59 websites after a court decision on 21 October was made at the request of the Palestinian Attorney General. The websites were blocked on the basis that their content would "threaten national security" and "disturb public order" under Article 39 of the Electronic Crimes Law. All of the websites shared content that was critical of the authorities. Amnesty International believes that the Electronic Crimes Law arbitrarily restricts media freedom and bans online dissent, and has called for it to be repealed.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

Palestinian security forces in Gaza used excessive or unnecessary force to disperse peaceful demonstrations. Between 14 and 16 March, thousands of Palestinians demonstrated across the Gaza Strip against their dreadful living conditions. Hamas security forces used excessive force against scores of non-violent demonstrators, bystanders, journalists and NGO workers, deploying sound grenades, batons, pepper spray and live ammunition to disperse protesters.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and Gaza routinely used torture and other ill-treatment with impunity. As of the end of November, the ICHR had received 143 such allegations in the West Bank and 156 in the Gaza Strip.

Journalist and activist Amer Balousha, one of the ''We Want to Live'' organizers, alleged he was tortured in custody on 16 March by Hamas security forces. He said he was put in stress positions and beaten. He started a hunger strike in the initial days of his arrest to protest his detention and prison conditions. He was transferred to Kamal Adwan hospital in Beit Lahia in northern Gaza on 19 March for medical treatment for health concerns related to his hunger strike. He was released from detention on 26 March.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women and girls continued to face discrimination in law and practice, and were inadequately protected against sexual and other gender-based violence, including "honour" killings. The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling documented at least 24 cases where women and girls were reported to have been victims of "honour" killings in the West Bank and Gaza in 2019, mainly by male relatives.

On 22 August, Israa Ghrayeb, a make-up artist from Beit Sahour town in the southern occupied West Bank, died after being beaten by members of her family. Israa Ghrayeb's death sparked protests across the West Bank and Gaza, with people demanding greater protection for women and the repeal of discriminatory laws. Subsequently, on 12 September, the Palestinian Attorney General announced that his office had conducted an investigation which concluded that her death was caused by domestic violence and that three unnamed individuals had been charged with manslaughter, which is punishable by at least five years in prison.

Palestinian women's rights groups continued to push for a comprehensive domestic violence law, a campaign launched in 2007. The Palestinian authorities in the West Bank continued to review a draft Family Protection Law, a process begun in 2016. Domestic violence is still not criminalized in the West Bank or Gaza.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

Even though same-sex relationships are not criminalized in the West Bank, Palestinian police stated on 17 August that they would prevent any organized activities by alQaws for Sexual and

Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, a Palestinian NGO that works on LGBTI issues. The statement outraged human rights groups, but also sparked a wave of messages on social media inciting violence against alQaws and members of the LGBTI community, including death threats. The statement also violated provisions of the amended Palestinian Basic Law and international treaties ratified by the State of Palestine. The Palestinian police quickly rescinded the statement.

Meanwhile, alQaws documented at least eight cases of LGBTI individuals who were arbitrarily arrested or ill-treated by Palestinian security forces in the West Bank in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Section 152 of the Penal Code applicable in Gaza continued to criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity and make it punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment.

DEATH PENALTY

Neither the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank nor the Hamas de facto administration in Gaza took any steps to translate the State of Palestine's commitments under the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to abolish the death penalty.

In Gaza, Hamas-administered courts sentenced at least four people to death; no executions were reported.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

On 19 July, President Abbas dissolved the West Bank-based High Judicial Council, a body established in 2002 to enhance the independence of judges, ensure the transparency and efficiency of their work, improve court performance and facilitate case proceedings. Palestinian authorities in the West Bank used a 1954 law to administratively detain dozens of people for periods up to six months on the order of a regional governor, many on political grounds, according to Palestinian human rights organizations. Such detentions require no charges and lack due process. The ICHR had documented 195 such detentions as of the end of November.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

The Palestinian authorities in the West Bank continued to impose punitive measures against Gazans, including decreasing electricity and water subsidies, restricting the entry of medicine into Gaza, and decreasing or holding salaries. These measures exacerbated the dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza caused by Israel's 12-year blockade.

ABUSES BY ARMED GROUPS

Palestinian armed groups in Gaza occasionally fired indiscriminate rockets into Israel, killing four Israeli civilians. While the Hamas authorities prevented rocket firing much of the time, they failed to prosecute those responsible. Most of the Palestinians responsible for stabbing, shooting and carrying out other attacks on Israelis in the West Bank and Israel, which killed three Israeli civilians during the year, were not members of Palestinian armed groups. However, these groups often praised the attacks.

1. Amnesty International, *Palestine: New government must reverse human rights decline* (Press release, 11 March 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/palestine-new-government-must-reverse-human-rights-decline/

Handout image of Lusail Stadium under construction released by Qatar's 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, which is delivering the stadiums and infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Migrants working on the stadiums and infrastructure have been abused and exploited in Qatar. © 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy via Getty Images

QATAR

State of Qatar
Head of state: **Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani**
Head of government: **Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani**

The authorities announced new reforms to better protect the rights of migrant workers, but the weak implementation of previous reforms meant that migrants were generally not protected from labour abuse and exploitation in practice. Migrant workers seeking justice in labour disputes over unpaid wages waited for months for their cases to be processed, and hundreds were ultimately forced to return home without their wages. Freedom of expression was unduly restricted, and women faced discrimination in law and practice. Several hundred members of the al-Ghufran clan of the al-Murra tribe, one of the largest tribes in Qatar, remained stateless. Qatari laws continued to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals. Courts continued to issue death sentences; no executions were reported.

BACKGROUND

Qatar continued to face a diplomatic crisis with Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The crisis restricted population movement between the countries involved.

Several UN Special Procedures visited Qatar following invitations from the government.

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

As part of the country's three-year technical co-operation agreement with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the authorities announced several new reforms to improve protection for migrant workers, who make up 90% of Qatar's workforce. However, the weak implementation of prior reforms meant that, in practice, migrants generally remained unprotected from labour abuse and exploitation.

On 16 October, the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs (MADLSA) promised to abolish the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, under which migrant workers depend on their employer for almost every aspect of their presence in Qatar. Without providing details, it announced reforms to end the exit permit requirements for all workers, except military personnel; allow workers to change their employer without their sponsor's permission, following a probationary period; and establish a non-discriminatory minimum wage.

The same month the MADLSA released a study with the ILO and Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy that found that individuals working outdoors were "potentially performing their job under significant occupational heat stress conditions for at least four months of the year". This followed a study by a group of climatologists and cardiologists, published in July in *Cardiology Today*, which concluded that the increase in the number of migrant workers dying of cardiovascular problems was most likely due to severe heat stress, especially during summertime. The government subsequently said it had closed down more than 300 work sites for violating regulations on outdoor work between 11.30am and 3pm from mid-June to the end of August.

The Committees for the Settlement of Labour Disputes, judge-led mechanisms that were introduced in 2018 to resolve labour disputes within six weeks, overcame some barriers faced by migrant workers when seeking justice, but generally failed to provide remedies for abuses. Workers continued to wait months for their cases to be processed. While the government awarded some workers compensation for unpaid wages, it generally failed to do so. In three cases documented by Amnesty International, hundreds of workers waited for several months for their claims regarding unpaid wages and compensation to be processed. Most of them returned home without their wages, while some continued to wait for them in Qatar.[1]

In August, hundreds of migrant workers went on strike to protest about unpaid and delayed wages and poor working conditions. Subsequently, the government said it had arrested the employers responsible and blamed a "negative cash flow" at the companies concerned for causing salary delays, which were then resolved. Hundreds of other migrant workers continued to face salary delays at the end of the year.

The MADLSA took some measures to combat systemic abuse during the recruitment of migrant workers. However, enforcement remained weak. Migrant workers reported paying substantial recruitment fees, leaving them indebted and at high risk of labour abuse, including forced labour.

Domestic workers, mostly women, remained at particular risk of exploitation and abuse, despite the domestic workers' law passed in 2017. The law failed to protect domestic workers adequately as it fell short of international standards and was poorly enforced. A number of domestic workers told Amnesty International about the abuse they faced at the hands of their employers and dire working conditions, including excessively long working hours, denial of rest days and passport confiscation. All feared repercussions if they reported their employers to the authorities.

In September, the Independent Expert for human rights and international solidarity called on Qatar to "expand recently enacted protection to all foreign workers, including to migrant domestic workers and others not currently covered". In November, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention urged Qatar to ensure that workers could leave their employers without fear of being arrested and that allegations by employers against workers do not lead to the automatic detention of workers during investigations. In December, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance highlighted "the severe human rights violations that still persist, including on the basis of national origin, and the existence of racial, ethnic and national stereotypes and discriminatory structures", and called on the government to do more to end discrimination based on race and country of origin.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression remained restricted in law and practice. The authorities retained broad surveillance powers over citizens. For instance, Article 19 of Law No. 3 of 2004 on Combating Terrorism grants the authorities extensive powers to conduct surveillance by any means for 90 days prior to any judicial review and to seize any forms of communication whenever this is useful in "uncovering the truth" regarding "terrorist crimes". The cybercrime law includes similarly broad and vague provisions that allow, for example, the imprisonment of anyone founding or managing an internet site that spreads "incorrect news, with the intention of subjecting the safety of the state or its public order or internal or external security to danger".

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice. Family law discriminates against women, including by making it much more difficult for women than men to seek a divorce, and placing women at a severe economic disadvantage if they seek a divorce or if their husband leaves them. Women also remained inadequately protected against violence, including within the family.

STATELESSNESS

Several hundred members of the al-Ghufran clan of the al-Murra tribe, one of the largest tribes in Qatar, remained stateless. As a result, they are deprived of their rights to work, access health care and education, own property and move freely, among other things. Some stateless members of the al-Ghufran clan who spoke out on social media about their situation were arbitrarily detained, but later released without charge.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

Qatari laws continued to discriminate against LGBTI individuals. Article 296(3) of the Penal Code, which punishes with imprisonment anyone who "leads or induces or tempts a male, by any means, into committing an act of sodomy or debauchery", criminalizes a range of same-sex consensual sexual acts. Article 296(4) criminalizes anyone who "induces or tempts a male or female, by any means, into committing acts contrary to morals or that are unlawful".

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to issue death sentences. No executions were reported.

1. Amnesty International, *All work, no pay: The struggle of Qatar's migrant workers for justice* (Index: MDE 22/0793/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/0793/2019/en/

(From left to right) Saudi Arabian human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul (© Marieke Wijntjes / Amnesty International), Samar Badawi (© Private) and Nassima al-Sada (© Private).

SAUDI ARABIA

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Head of government: **Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud**

The authorities escalated repression of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. They harassed, arbitrarily detained and prosecuted dozens of government critics, human rights defenders, including women's rights activists, members of the Shi'a minority and family members of activists. Shi'a activists and religious clerics remained on trial before a counter-terror court for expressing dissent. The authorities used the death penalty extensively, carrying out scores of executions for a range of crimes, including drug offences. Some people, most of them members of the country's Shi'a minority, were executed following grossly unfair trials. The authorities implemented major reforms to the repressive male guardianship system, including allowing women to obtain passports, travel without the permission of a male guardian and become heads of households; however, women continued to face systematic discrimination in law and practice in other areas and remained inadequately protected against sexual and other violence. The authorities granted hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals the right to work and access to education and health care, but arrested and deported hundreds of thousands of irregular migrant workers, who were exposed to labour abuses and exploitation by employers and torture when in state custody. Discrimination against the Shi'a minority remained entrenched.

BACKGROUND

In December, Saudi Arabia assumed the presidency of the G20, the next meeting of which is due to be held in its capital, Riyadh, in November 2020. Before this, the authorities announced several reforms, including the introduction of tourist visas for citizens of 49 countries.

Amnesty International continued to be denied entry to Saudi Arabia. In January, the organization called on the authorities to allow it and other independent monitors access to detained activists, including women human rights defenders, following allegations of torture, ill-treatment and sexual harassment of at least 10 detained activists.[1] Amnesty International received no response. The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders sent reminders to the Saudi Arabian authorities for requests to visit the country in 2019. No response was reported.

Saudi Arabia remained a member of the coalition imposing economic and political sanctions on Qatar, along with Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Saudi Arabia continued to co-lead the coalition in neighbouring Yemen, a coalition that is implicated in war crimes and other serious violations of international law (see Yemen entry). In September, a drone attack for which Yemen's Huthis claimed responsibility targeted facilities of the state-owned oil company Aramco in Abqaiq, Eastern Province and cut Saudi Arabia's oil production by about half for several weeks.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

The authorities escalated repression of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, including in their crackdown on online expression. They harassed, arbitrarily detained and prosecuted government critics, human rights defenders, members of the Shi'a minority and family members of activists. In April, the authorities arbitrarily

arrested 14 individuals for their peaceful support of the women's rights movement and women human rights defenders. Among them were Salah al-Haidar, the son of Aziza al-Yousef, who remained on trial for her women's rights work; Abdullah al-Duhailan, a journalist, novelist and advocate for Palestinian rights; and Fahad Abalkhail, who supported the Women to Drive Campaign. They remained in detention without charge or trial at the end of the year. In November, the authorities arbitrarily detained at least 10 men and women, including entrepreneurs, writers and intellectuals, for a week. Activists believe that the majority were released without charge.

The authorities continued to try individuals before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), a counter-terror court, on charges arising from the peaceful expression of views, in some cases on capital charges. Religious cleric Salman al-Awda, who had been arbitrarily detained since September 2017, remained at risk of the death penalty after the public prosecution called for his execution on charges related to, among other things, his alleged affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood and his calls for government reforms and regime change in Arab countries.

The authorities did not permit the formation of political parties, trade unions or independent human rights groups, and continued to prosecute and imprison those who set up or participated in unlicensed human rights organizations. All gatherings, including peaceful demonstrations, remained prohibited under an order issued by the Ministry of Interior in 2011.

Human rights defenders

The authorities continued to arrest, prosecute and imprison human rights defenders for their peaceful activities and human rights work under, among other legislation, the counter-terrorism law and the cybercrime law, which criminalizes online criticism of government policies and practice as well as commentary on current affairs. By the end of the year, virtually all Saudi Arabian human rights defenders were in detention without charge, or were on trial or serving prison terms.

After more than a year in detention, 11 women activists, including human rights defenders Loujain al-Hathloul, Iman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, were brought to trial before the Criminal Court in Riyadh in March 2019. Two other women human rights defenders, Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada, were brought to trial three months later, in June.[2] The court sessions were closed and diplomats and journalists were banned from attending. Several women activists faced charges for contacting foreign media, other activists and international organizations, including Amnesty International. Some were also charged with "promoting women's rights" and "calling for the end of the male guardianship system". While eight of the 13 women activists were temporarily released in 2019, the five women human rights defenders among them remained in detention; all 13 remained on trial at the end of the year.

The authorities continued to arbitrarily detain human rights defenders for prolonged periods without bringing them before a judge or charging them. Mohammed al-Bajadi, a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, remained held without charge or trial since his detention in May 2018.

In July, Mohammad al-Otaibi, already serving a 14-year prison sentence for his human rights work, was brought before the SCC for additional charges related to his communication with international organizations and attempt to seek political asylum in 2017. He remained on trial on the new charges at the end of 2019.

Government critics abroad

In October, on the first anniversary of the extrajudicial execution in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Crown Prince stated that he bore full responsibility for the killing because "it happened under my watch". In December, the Public Prosecution announced that eight individuals suspected of involvement in the murder had been convicted; five were sentenced to death and three to prison terms. The authorities permitted the attendance of diplomats throughout the trial, which began in January, but closed the trial to journalists and the broader public, failed to provide information on the proceedings and thereby prevented independent monitoring.[3]

Saudi Arabia failed to co-operate with an inquiry by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions into the murder. The inquiry concluded in June that Jamal Khashoggi was the victim of a deliberate, premeditated extrajudicial killing for which Saudi Arabia was responsible. The Special Rapporteur found "credible evidence, warranting further investigation of high-level Saudi officials' individual liability, including the Crown Prince's". The report also revealed abuses committed by the Saudi Arabian authorities or non-state actors associated with it against other dissidents abroad, abduction, enforced disappearance, threats, harassment and electronic surveillance, as well as psychological threats targeting the families of detained activists.[4]

In November, two former employees of Twitter were charged by US federal prosecutors with spying for Saudi Arabia by accessing information on dissidents who used Twitter. Among those targeted was Omar Abdulaziz, a prominent Saudi Arabian dissident residing in Canada.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to impose death sentences for a wide range of crimes and carried out scores of executions; there was an increase in executions for drug offences and terrorism-related crimes. The authorities generally failed to abide by international standards of fair trial and safeguards for defendants in capital cases. Such cases were often held in secret and their proceedings were summary with no legal assistance or representation for defendants, as well as no translation services for foreign nationals, through the various stages of detention and trial. Death sentences were regularly based on "confessions" that

defendants said were extracted under torture.

On 23 April, 37 Saudi Arabian men were executed. They had been convicted in various trials before the SCC. Most were Shi'a Muslims convicted after grossly unfair trials that relied on "confessions" tainted by torture allegations. Among the 37 were 11 convicted of spying for Iran. At least 15 others were convicted of violent offences related to their participation in anti-government demonstrations in the Shi'a-majority Eastern Province between 2011 and 2012. They were subjected to prolonged pre-trial detention and told the court that they were tortured or otherwise ill-treated during interrogation to make them "confess". Among them was Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, a young Shi'a man who was arrested when aged 16.[5]

Those who remained at risk of execution at the end of the year included other individuals who were under the age of 18 at the time of their alleged offence. Some of these death sentences appeared to have been based solely on "confessions" that the defendants said were obtained through torture or other ill-treatment.

The authorities routinely failed to warn families of their relatives' imminent execution or inform them immediately after the executions. Families of the Shi'a men executed on 23 April only found out that their loved ones had been executed when the authorities announced the news publicly on the same day. The authorities also failed to return the bodies of those executed to their families or inform them of the place of burial.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In August, in a positive and long-overdue development, the authorities announced major reforms to the discriminatory male guardianship system. Among other things, these allowed women aged over 21 to apply for and obtain a passport and travel without the permission of a male guardian; women aged over 18 to register the birth of a newborn child, the death of a relative and their own marriage or divorce, as well as to apply for and obtain a family record; and women to act as the head of a household. While the reforms brought the recognition of women's rights in these areas into line with those of men and also eased major restrictions on women's freedom of movement, they did not abolish the guardianship system.[6] The reforms did not allow women to marry without the permission of a guardian or to provide consent for her children to marry. Women and girls continued to face systematic discrimination in law and in practice in other areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and the ability to pass on citizenship to their children.

Women and girls remained inadequately protected from sexual and other forms of violence. They continued to need a male guardian's permission to leave shelters for those who had experienced domestic abuse.

In January, the Shura Council approved regulations for early marriage that prohibit marriage contracts for girls and boys under the age of 15. The draft regulations also stipulated that applications for a medical report to assess the maturity of individuals aged under 18 wishing to marry and for the marriage itself must be heard by a specialized court.

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

In October, the authorities announced that they had granted citizenship to more than 50,000 individuals and their families and had issued identity documents to more than 800,000 people who had moved to Saudi Arabia "following political, economic and social turmoil in their home countries". The documents would enable the recipients to work and access education and health care. Saudi Arabia continue to deny asylum-seekers access to a fair refugee determination process.

Meanwhile, the authorities continued their crackdown on irregular migrants. In November, the Ministry of Interior announced that, in the previous two years, about 4.1 million people had been arrested and over 1 million deported in a campaign targeting migrants accused of violating residential, border security and labour regulations and laws. In 2019 alone, over 2 million foreign workers were arrested and 500,000 were deported.

The 11 million migrant workers living in Saudi Arabia continued to be governed by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which granted employers vast powers over them. They could not leave the country or change employment without the permission of their employers, increasing their vulnerability to labour abuses and exploitation. In many cases, migrant workers lost their legal status in the country after their employers failed to renew their residence permits or filed complaints that they had absconded.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch, Ethiopian migrant workers detained for labour law violations were tortured and otherwise ill-treated in detention facilities across the country; migrant workers said they had been beaten, denied food or water and chained together in overcrowded cells.

According to reports, over 900 Bangladeshi domestic migrant workers returned home from Saudi Arabia in 2019. Over 100 of them had been living in a shelter in Saudi Arabia after alleging that their employers had subjected them to physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Others said that they had been forced to work without pay.

DISCRIMINATION – SHI'A MINORITY

Shi'a Muslims continued to face discrimination because of their faith, limiting their right to express religious beliefs and access justice, as well as their right to work in a number of public sector professions and access state services.

A number of Shi'a activists accused of supporting or taking part in demonstrations in Eastern Province or expressing views critical of the government were prosecuted and imprisoned or faced the death penalty in ongoing trials. Others were executed following unfair trials in previous years.

1. Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Access for independent monitors urgently needed amid more reports of torture of activists* (Press release, 25 January 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/saudi-arabia-access-for-independent-monitors-urgently-needed-amid-more-reports-of-torture-of-activists/

2. Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia: *Further information: Women activists on trial* (Index: MDE 23/0057/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/0057/2019/en/

3. Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Joint open letter to states monitoring the Jamal Khashoggi trial* (Index: MDE 23/0157/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/0157/2019/en/

4. Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: UN findings on Jamal Khashoggi's murder highlight need for independent criminal investigation to uncover truth* (Press release, 9 June 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/saudi-arabia-un-findings-on-jamal-khashoggis-murder-highlight-need-for-independent-criminal-investigation-to-uncover-the-truth/

5. Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: 37 put to death in shocking execution spree* (Press release, 23 April 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/saudi-arabia-37-put-to-death-in-shocking-execution-spree/

6. Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Women's rights reforms must be followed by release of detained activists* (Press release, 2 August 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/saudi-arabia-womens-rights-reforms-must-be-followed-by-release-of-detained-activists/

Displaced people riding a motorcycle on the outskirts of the Syrian town of Tall Tamr on 16 October 2019 as they flee a deadly cross-border Turkish offensive against Kurdish areas of north-eastern Syria. Smoke plumes in the background are from tyres that have been burnt to decrease visibility for Turkish warplanes in the area. © Delil Souleiman/ AFP via Getty Images

SYRIA

Syrian Arab Republic
Head of state: **Bashar al-Assad**
Head of government: **Imad Khamis**

Parties to the armed conflict in Syria continued to commit with impunity serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes, and gross human rights abuses. Government and allied forces carried out indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects using aerial and artillery bombing, killing and injuring hundreds of people in Idlib and Hama in north-west Syria. Government forces continued restricting access to humanitarian and medical aid to civilians living in government-controlled areas. Security forces arbitrarily arrested civilians and former fighters who had reconciled with the government and continued to detain tens of thousands of people, including peaceful activists, humanitarian workers, lawyers and journalists, subjecting many to enforced disappearance and torture or other ill-treatment, and causing deaths in detention. Armed groups working with the support of Turkey continued to subject civilians in Afrin to a wide range of abuses, including confiscation and looting of property, and arbitrary detention. They and Turkey were likely responsible for indiscriminate attacks during hostilities in north-east Syria. In the same region, the Autonomous Administration carried out several arbitrary detentions. The US-led coalition failed to investigate the many civilian deaths caused by its 2017 bombing campaign on Raqqa against the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS). Military offensives in north-west and north-east Syria internally displaced 684,000 and 174,600 people respectively. Tens of thousands of displaced people continued to live in makeshift camps, schools and mosques that did not provide an adequate standard of living.

BACKGROUND

The armed conflict continued throughout 2019. In February, Syrian government and allied Russian forces launched a military offensive on Idlib governorate, held by the armed opposition group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, to capture the strategic Damascus-Aleppo highway, known as M5. In August, talks brokered by Russia and Turkey resulted in a ceasefire agreement in Idlib. On 19 September, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Idlib because it did not include an exemption for attacks on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

On 9 October, Turkey and the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of armed opposition groups, launched a military offensive on territory in north-eastern Syria that was controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led alliance of armed groups, capturing the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain on the border with Turkey. Concurrently, the USA withdrew its military forces from north-east Syria, while leaving those stationed at the al-Tanf base in Homs governorate. In an attempt to stop Turkey and the SNA controlling the remaining parts of the Syrian side of the north-eastern border, the SDF struck a deal with the Syrian government that allowed the Syrian army to deploy there.

On 17 October, Vice-President Mike Pence of the USA, which had been supporting the SDF, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan brokered a 120-hour ceasefire to allow the SDF fighters to pull back to 32km from the border with Turkey and thereby create a "safe zone". On 21 October, the day the ceasefire was set to expire, President Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin struck an agreement which led to: Turkey ending its military operation, while retaining control of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain; the Syrian government and Russia deploying forces near the border with Turkey (which they did on 22 October, entering Qamishli, Hassake, and Derbassiye) and overseeing the withdrawal of the SDF; and Russian and Turkish forces jointly patrolling a narrower, 10km strip of land in the "safe zone" from 29 October.

Several Israeli air strikes targeted Iranian and Hizbullah forces in Syria.

The UN made some progress in its efforts to broker a peace deal and establish a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution. On 30 September, it announced the formation of a 150-member committee with 50 representatives each from the Syrian government, political opposition and Syrian civil society. The sponsors of the talks – Iran, Russia and Turkey – aimed to address the issue of detentions and abductions in Syria as well as the situation in Idlib.
The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Commission of Inquiry), established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, continued to monitor and report on violations of international law committed by parties to the conflict, although it remained barred by the government from entering Syria.

In March, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that a chemical weapon had been used in Douma in Damascus Countryside governorate in April 2018.

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND ALLIED FORCES

Direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, and indiscriminate attacks

Government and allied forces continued to commit war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law, including indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects. Government forces, with the support of Russia, repeatedly attacked Idlib and Hama governorates in north-western Syria and the northern part of Aleppo governorate, all of which were controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. They carried out indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilian homes, schools, bakeries, rescue operations, hospitals and medical facilities, including by artillery shelling and air strikes, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians, including rescue and medical workers.

On 26 March, Syrian government forces fired rockets at a school in Sheikh Idriss, east of Idlib city, killing a 10-year-old boy and injuring two other boys aged nine and 10.

Between April and September, at least 51 medical facilities and 59 schools were damaged as a result of hostilities in Idlib, Hama and northern Aleppo, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). For example, Syrian government forces dropped four munitions in an aerial attack on 9 March that struck al-Hayat hospital, a blood bank, an ambulance response unit and a facility of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets – all located within 100m of each other – as well as residential neighbourhoods, killing at least two civilians and injuring a medical worker.

On 1 August, the UN Secretary-General established a board of inquiry to investigate "incidents" that destroyed or damaged "facilities on the deconfliction list and UN-supported facilities" in Idlib.

Restriction of humanitarian access

Government forces continued to restrict access to UN humanitarian aid agencies across Syria. According to the UN, government forces did not approve around half of their requests to carry out humanitarian missions to monitor, assess and accompany aid deliveries, and provide security, logistics and administrative support.

The government continued to obstruct humanitarian access to Rukban camp near the border with Jordan, despite the dire humanitarian conditions there. Government forces only allowed UN humanitarian agencies to accompany their implementing partners on aid deliveries three times during the year. On 20 December, Russia and China vetoed the renewal of a mechanism established by UN Security Council resolution 2165 of 2014 which had allowed the UN and its implementing partners to deliver aid from neighbouring countries into areas under the control of the opposition.

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances

According to local monitors, government forces arbitrarily detained and, in some cases, forcibly disappeared civilians in areas under the control of the government, especially Daraa and

Eastern Ghouta in Damascus Countryside governorate. Those detained included former fighters who had reconciled with the government, family members of armed group commanders, humanitarian workers and families of activists displaced to north-west Syria. Many were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment, some dying in detention as a result.

Syrian security forces also continued to hold thousands of detainees arrested in previous years without trial, often in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance. Tens of thousands of people remained disappeared, the majority since 2011. They included humanitarian workers, lawyers, journalists, peaceful activists, government critics and opponents, and individuals detained in place of relatives wanted by the authorities.
Families of the disappeared endured emotional and psychological consequences of living in uncertainty, compounded by the devastating economic impact.

TURKEY AND ALLIED ARMED GROUPS

Indiscriminate attacks

Following the military offensive launched by Turkey and the SNA in north-east Syria against the SDF on 9 October, the hostilities were marked by indiscriminate attacks in residential areas, including attacks on a home, bakery and school. The evidence strongly suggested that Turkey and allied Syrian armed groups carried out the attacks.[1]

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 120 civilians were killed between 9 and 20 October. For example, a Turkish air strike on a market on 13 October hit a civilian convoy that included many journalists travelling to Ras al-Ain. According to the Kurdish Red Crescent, six civilians were killed and 59 injured. In another incident, medics rescued an eight-year-old girl who was injured when mortars landed near where she was playing with her 11-year-old brother outside their home in Qamishli on 10 October. Her brother died from his wounds later that day.

Confiscation and looting of property

Turkey's military and armed opposition groups receiving military support from Turkey, including Ferqa 55, al-Jabha al-Shamiye, Faylaq al-Sham, Sultan Mourad and Ahrar al-Sharqiye, continued to control Afrin, a predominantly Syrian Kurdish area in the north of Aleppo governorate. Residents continued to be denied access to their property and belongings, which have been appropriated by members of these armed groups and their families. Some of the appropriated properties were used as military facilities for the different groups. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, some residents paid money to recover stolen vehicles and other belongings, and olive farmers paid armed groups taxes on their harvests.

Arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment

Armed groups supported by Turkey were responsible for at least 54 incidents of arbitrary detention of civilians for ransom, according to local monitoring groups, as punishment for asking to reclaim their property or for allegedly being affiliated to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or People's Protection Units (YPG), both Syrian Kurdish groups.
For example, a man living in Afrin was detained by al-Jabha al-Shamiye in April having been falsely accused of affiliation to the previous civil administration led by the PYD. The armed group refused to tell his relatives his whereabouts or fate.

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, individuals critical of the armed groups' conduct or perceived to support the former administration in Afrin, including activists, were targeted for arrest, detention, torture and extortion.

Summary killings and abduction

On 12 October, the Turkey-backed armed opposition group Ahrar al-Sharqiye ambushed civilian and military cars on the SDF-controlled Latakia-Saraqeb international highway, known as M4. Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish politician and Secretary General of the Future Syria political party, was in one of the civilian cars. She was dragged out, beaten and shot dead. According to the medical report, her body showed several injuries, including multiple gunshot wounds, fractures to her legs, face and skull, and detachment of skin from her skull and loss of hair as a result of being dragged by the hair. The armed groups also summarily killed her bodyguard. During the same ambush, the armed group captured and killed two Kurdish fighters. They also abducted two civilian men, both of whom work with a local medical organization and were transporting medicine when they were captured. The armed group did not disclose the fate or whereabouts of the abducted men.

AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Arbitrary detention

The PYD-led Autonomous Administration continued to control some of the predominantly Kurdish north-east region of Syria, including Raqqa and Qamishli. It arbitrarily arrested and detained eight individuals in Raqqa employed by local and international educational and development organizations active in Raqqa since 2017. The Autonomous Administration subjected the eight individuals to enforced disappearance. All were released without charge after being held for at least two months without access to a lawyer.

US-LED COALITION

Lack of investigations into civilian deaths

Despite mounting pressure, the US-led coalition continued to deny responsibility for causing hundreds of civilian deaths in Raqqa during the four-month bombing campaign to defeat IS in 2017. On 28 February, the coalition accepted responsibility for 25 civilian deaths in

Raqqa, bringing to 180 the total number it has acknowledged so far. However, this admission did not lead to any measures to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law or compensate victims, and the coalition continued to block requests to disclose the circumstances in which the fatal strikes took place.

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

By the end of the year, 6.6 million people had been displaced within Syria and more than 5 million people had sought refuge outside the country since the start of the crisis in 2011. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, the countries hosting most of the refugees, continued to block the entry of new refugees, exposing them to further attacks, abuses and persecution in Syria. The number of resettlement places and other safe and legal routes for refugees offered by Western and other states fell far below the needs identified by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. Between January and October 2019, 82,554 Syrian refugees returned to Syria and 412,662 internally displaced people returned to their place of origin, according to UNHCR and OCHA respectively. The dire humanitarian conditions in neighbouring countries – exacerbated by the lack of humanitarian aid, unemployment, and administrative and financial obstacles to obtaining or renewing residency permits – pushed some refugees to return to a precarious future in Syria.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that, between 2014 and 2019, government forces detained around 1,916 refugees upon their return to Syria, of whom 638 continued to be subjected to enforced disappearance at the end of the year.

During 2019, the military offensives in north-west and north-east Syria internally displaced 400,000 and 174,600 people respectively, according to OCHA. Tens of thousands of displaced people continued to live in makeshift camps, schools and mosques that did not provide an adequate standard of living, and had limited access to aid, basic services, food, health care, education and livelihood opportunities. Also, 3,122 people fled hostilities in north-east Syria seeking refuge in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Between January and March, tens of thousands of people, including women and children of nationalities other than Syrian, were displaced from their homes to camps and informal sites in north-east Syria following the offensive by the US-led coalition and the SDF against IS in Deir el-Zour. Internally displaced people were dispersed across at least 10 camps and large informal sites. In October, two camps near the Turkish border closed as a result of the military offensive in north-east Syria, and internally displaced people were transferred to other locations. Al-Hol camp in Deir el-Zour governorate hosted the largest number of internally displaced people: around 68,000 individuals, the vast majority of them women and children. Because of the dire humanitarian conditions in al-Hol, at least 390 displaced people died of pneumonia, dehydration or malnutrition, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry. A few European, African and Asian governments repatriated some of the displaced women and children who were nationals of their countries.

Between March and September, around 18,787 internally displaced people in Rukban left the camp and went to Homs, Hama, Latakia, Damascus, Damascus Countryside and other areas of origin. Around 12,000 continued to live in Rukban in dire humanitarian conditions with limited access to food and other life-saving necessities, and a lack of access to health care and medication.

DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty remained in force for many offences. The authorities disclosed little information about death sentences passed and no information on executions.

1. Amnesty International, *Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies* (Press release, 18 October 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/

Tunisian lawyers hold up protest statements during a demonstration outside the National Bardo Museum in the capital, Tunis, on 27 September 2019. The lawyers were calling for the reinforcement of the independence of the judiciary. © Yassine Gaidi/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

TUNISIA

Republic of Tunisia
Head of state: **Kaïs Saïed (replaced Mohamed Ennaceur in October, who replaced Béji Caïd Essebsi after his death in July)**
Head of government: **Youssef Chahed**

The work of the Truth and Dignity Commission ended with the publication of its final report, which included recommendations for reforms, and the referral of 173 cases to specialized criminal chambers.

At least 78 trials, which concerned grave human rights violations, began before these chambers during the year. Families of people who died at the hands of the police in recent years continued to await justice. There were reports of torture and other ill-treatment. Steps were taken to advance a bill to end discrimination against women with regard to inheritance but stalled. A new complaints mechanism for women victims of violence received tens of thousands of submissions. Bloggers and social media users were prosecuted for the peaceful expression of their views online. Authorities used excessive and occasionally unnecessary force, as well as prosecutions, against peaceful protesters. Refugees and asylum-seekers were detained for irregular entry into Tunisia. Dozens of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people were arrested and imprisoned for consensual same-sex sexual relations. Death sentences were handed down; there were no executions.

BACKGROUND

President Béji Caïd Essebsi died on 25 July. Mohamed Ennaceur took over as interim president. On 13 October, after presidential elections, Kaïs Saïed was elected president. Following parliamentary elections on 6 October, a new parliament met for the first time on 13 November. On 16 November, Kaïs Saïed tasked former minister Habib Jemli with forming a government, but the process was still ongoing at the end of the year.

The Constitutional Court, which had been due to be set up since 2015, remained unestablished as Tunisia's parliament again failed to elect the first third of its members.

The authorities renewed the nationwide state of emergency eight times; it had been in place since November 2015. Protests continued over the lack of employment opportunities, poor living conditions and water shortages, particularly in marginalized and underdeveloped regions.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

In March, the Truth and Dignity Commission (Instance Vérité et Dignité, IVD) published its final, 2,000-page report on human rights violations committed by Tunisian

authorities between 1957 and 2013. Its recommendations included reform of the judicial and security sectors, the creation of an independent body to monitor the work of the security forces, the harmonization of laws with the Constitution, measures to establish accountability for crimes committed and other steps to strengthen the rule of law. The government failed to publish the report in the official gazette or present a plan to implement the IVD's recommendations, as required by Article 70 of the Transitional Justice Law. The parliament had yet to establish a specialized parliamentary committee to oversee implementation of the recommendations.

By the end of its mandate, the IVD had transferred 173 cases to specialized criminal chambers after receiving more than 62,000 complaints from victims. At least 78 trials, involving cases of torture, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, wrongful convictions and excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, began before these chambers during the year. Among the accused are several former interior ministers, security chiefs and government officials under former President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali and before him Habib Borguiba. Progress was slow due to repeated postponement of trial sessions and the frequent non-appearance in court of accused police officers, politicians and former government officials. The largest trade union for the security forces asked its members not to appear in court, saying that the trials were vindictive. The Ministry of Interior appeared reluctant to implement court subpoenas of indicted suspects to the hearings.

UNLAWFUL KILLINGS, TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Families of people who died at the hands of the police in recent years continued to await justice. In November, 14 police officers were indicted for involuntary manslaughter and failure to assist a person in danger following an investigation into the death of 19-year-old football supporter Omar Labidi in the southern suburbs of the capital, Tunis, on 31 March 2018. However, they remained on active duty. Omar Labidi drowned after police pushed him into a river despite his protests that he could not swim. He was fleeing police who were chasing football fans involved in clashes. The investigation into the killing of 19-year-old Ayman Othmani, whom customs officers shot dead during a raid on a warehouse in Tunis in October 2018, failed to progress. According to his family and lawyer who saw the forensic report, he was shot in the back and upper leg.[1]

Suspicious deaths in custody were reported. In June, police arrested Abderrazek Selmi in the region of Kairouan. Around two hours later, the police called an ambulance, but he died on the way to hospital. The General Prosecution acknowledged that his death was suspicious; the Ministry of Interior later stated that he had died of a heart attack. The investigation into the death was ongoing at the end of the year. Dozens of detainees reported being subjected to torture or other ill-treatment by the police or the National Guard. In many cases, police denied detainees the right to call their lawyer or a family member or denied them a medical examination.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In February and May, a parliamentary committee ran two sessions with representatives of the presidency and the Justice Minister to discuss a bill to end discrimination against women with regard to inheritance. A significant number of members of parliament considered the bill to be contrary to Islam. The parliament failed to resume discussions on the bill during the year.

In August, the Minister of Women, Family, Children and Seniors announced that the Justice Ministry had received around 40,000 complaints from women who had experienced domestic violence during the first seven months of the year. The complaints were submitted in line with the Law on Eliminating Violence against Women, which came into effect in 2018 and established a complaints mechanism for victims of violence. However, the government failed to establish a national observatory to prevent violence against women as required by Article 40 of the law.

Women were severely underrepresented in the presidential and parliamentary elections, with only two women among the 26 presidential candidates and only 56 women among the 217 members of parliament elected in October, compared to 68 women elected in 2014.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

Bloggers and social media users were prosecuted on criminal charges under the Penal Code and the Communications Code for the peaceful expression of their views online.

In April, the Court of First Instance of Gafsa sentenced Ahmed El-Jedidi in his absence to one year's imprisonment for "insulting others through a public communications network" after criticizing a female parliamentarian in a Facebook post. The sentence was overturned on appeal in May.

In October, the Court of First Instance of Manouba convicted blogger Aymen Ben Khassib of "insulting others through the press" for a Facebook post in which he named two members of the municipal council responsible for a controversial project in his neighbourhood. He was fined 1,000 Tunisian dinars (around US$350).

Authorities used excessive and occasionally unnecessary force against peaceful protesters as well as prosecutions to restrict freedom of assembly. Peaceful protesters were prosecuted on charges of "disturbing freedom of work" or "obstructing freedom of movement" in connection with protests over high rates of unemployment and poor living conditions. In Gafsa alone in 2019, at least 20 protesters were tried in

their absence in various trials before the Court of First Instance following peaceful protests.[2]

In June, police and National Guard officers used excessive force, including tear gas, to disperse a peaceful protest by asylum-seekers in front of a centre in the town of Medenine run by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. The police chased the protesters, beating them with batons, and arrested 25 of them. In July, 18 of the asylum-seekers appeared before Medenine Court of First Instance on charges that included "obstructing freedom of movement", "disturbing a public road" and "insulting a public official". The case was dismissed in October.

In July, police forcibly entered the medical technology institute of Tunis El Manar University and used unnecessary and excessive force to end a peaceful student sit-in. They used batons and fired tear gas at close range, including against three visually impaired students. Police officers later charged six students with "assaulting a public officer while performing their duty."

In September, police arbitrarily detained 18-year-old activist Maissa al-Oueslati while she was filming a protester threatening to set himself on fire in front of a police station in Jbel Jloud, a suburb of Tunis. They also arbitrarily detained her 16-year-old brother. The siblings were held overnight and interrogated without a lawyer. Both were charged with insulting and assaulting a public officer before being tried and acquitted later the same month.

REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

On several occasions, the National Guard detained refugees and asylum-seekers for irregular entry into Tunisia. Two refugees interviewed in August by Amnesty International in the refugee centre in Medenine said that they had been held for 17 days in the detention and orientation centre in Ben Guerdane upon their arrival in Tunisia. They said they were not informed of the reasons for their detention.

On 3 August, the security forces arrested 36 Ivorian migrants – 22 men, 11 women and three children – on suspicion of planning an irregular crossing to Europe by sea. The Ivorians were transferred to a closed military zone near Ras Jdir, a coastal town near the Libyan border, and left there. Three days later, the Tunisian army gave them some bread and milk, but left them without access to humanitarian assistance. On 8 August, the authorities allowed the group to leave the military zone and remain in Tunisia.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

LGBTI people continued to be arrested and prosecuted under laws that criminalize consensual same-sex sexual relations, "indecency" and acts deemed "offensive to public morals. According to DAMJ, the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality, Police arrested at least 78 men under Article 230 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes "sodomy", and conducted anal examinations as part of their investigations to determine whether they had engaged in same-sex sexual relations. Such examinations violate the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. At least 70 men were convicted under the article and sentenced to between four months and a year in prison.

DEATH PENALTY

Courts handed down dozens of death sentences, and there was an increased use of capital punishment in terrorism-related cases. No executions have been carried out since 1991.

1. Amnesty International, *Tunisia: Investigations into deadly police abuses must deliver long awaited justice* (Press release, 4 April 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/tunisia-investigations-into-deadly-police-abuses-must-deliver-long-awaited-justice/

2. Amnesty International, *Tunisia: Hundreds of peaceful protesters tried in their absence in Gafsa* (MDE 30/0380/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/0380/2019/en/.

Migrant workers on the construction site of Dubai's Expo 2020, a global trade fair, on 22 October 2019. Migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates have been vulnerable to labour abuses and exploitation. © Giuseppe Cacace/AFP via Getty Images

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

United Arab Emirates
Head of state: **Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan**
Head of government: **Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum**

The authorities, particularly the State Security Agency (SSA), subjected detainees, including foreign nationals, to arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and enforced disappearance. The authorities also restricted freedom of expression, imprisoning government critics and holding them in dire conditions. In a positive development in women's rights, almost 200 women stood in the Federal National Council (FNC) elections in October, more than double the number in the last elections; still, women continued to face discrimination in law and in practice. On migrants' rights, the authorities removed the job title criteria for sponsorship, which allowed more migrant workers to sponsor family members to live in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, migrant workers remained tied to employers under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which made them vulnerable to labour abuses and exploitation. The UAE continued to deny nationality to thousands of individuals who were born within its borders. While no executions were reported, courts continued to issue death sentences.

BACKGROUND

The UAE continued to co-lead the coalition in the armed conflict in Yemen, a coalition that is implicated in war crimes and other serious violations of international law. The UAE also illicitly diverted weapons and military equipment to militias in Yemen (see Yemen entry).

The UAE supported the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), which committed serious violations of international law in Libya. The UAE also provided arms to the LNA and operated drones on its behalf, in violation of a UN arms embargo (see Libya entry).

The UAE remained a member of the coalition imposing economic and political sanctions on Qatar, along with Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

Amnesty International documented several cases in which the rights of detainees were disregarded. In these

cases, most often involving the State Security Agency (SSA), detainees were arrested without warrants, held incommunicado for weeks or months and tortured or otherwise ill-treated. In some cases, detainees were held in degrading conditions.

Alia Abdelnoor Mohamed Abdelnoor, who had terminal cancer, died in May while chained to a hospital bed in al-Ain, a city in Abu Dhabi Emirate. After her arrest by the SSA in 2015, she was held in solitary confinement and forcibly disappeared for three months. At the time of her death, she was serving a 10-year prison sentence on vague and unsubstantiated "terrorism" charges, based on forced "confessions".

Foreign nationals were among those arbitrarily detained and ill-treated. On 15 May, three Lebanese men were convicted on terrorism-related charges after being detained by the SSA, for long periods incommunicado, and then subjected to an unfair trial. One received a sentence of life imprisonment and the others received 10-year sentences. The State Security Prosecutor accused them of acting on behalf of the Lebanese party and armed group Hizbullah. One of the defendants, Abdel Rahman Chouman, told the court he had been tortured to make him "confess".

Lebanese prisoner Ahmad Ali Mekkaoui was placed in incommunicado detention in April after new charges were imposed on him "for harming the reputation of the UAE" following a television interview in which his sister and his Lebanese lawyer spoke about his case. He was serving a 15-year prison sentence after being convicted on terrorism-related charges in 2016 and arrested by the SSA in 2014. During his trial, he described being tortured, including by being anally raped with a metal rod. In 2017 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his detention was arbitrary.

Concerns remained regarding the freedom of movement and wellbeing of Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, daughter of Dubai's ruler. She was detained at sea by Indian and UAE security forces in 2018 and forcibly returned to the UAE, after which she was only seen once in a staged photo opportunity.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The authorities continued to arbitrarily detain and prosecute peaceful dissenters, effectively stifling criticism of the government. Dozens of prisoners of conscience continued to languish in detention, in dire conditions.

Prisoner of conscience and human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor remained in detention after being sentenced in 2018 to 10 years in prison for comments posted on social media. He went on hunger strike in March for four weeks to protest against prison conditions and his sentence, and again in September for at least 44 days after he was beaten for his protests, according to the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, citing a local source.

Prisoners of conscience Nasser bin Ghaith, an academic, and Mohammed al-Roken, a human rights lawyer, remained incarcerated.

The authorities released Osama al-Najjar more than two years after he had finished serving his prison sentence. In 2017, the Public Prosecution had requested the extension of his detention on the pretext that he remained a threat. He was originally imprisoned for tweets addressed to the Minister of Interior expressing concern about the ill-treatment of his father in prison.

A Reuters investigation exposed the UAE's involvement in "Project Raven", an initiative in which former US intelligence operatives reportedly helped the UAE keep individuals, including human rights activists, under surveillance across the globe with no judicial oversight.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In a positive development, almost 200 women stood in the Federal National Council (FNC) elections in October, more than double the number in the last elections. This followed a decree by President Al Nahyan calling for women to make up half of the FNC. Ultimately, seven women were elected and 13 were appointed to the 40-member FNC.

However, women continued to face discrimination in law and in practice. For example, the Personal Status Law of 2005 states that "a husband's rights over his wife" include the wife's "courteous obedience to him" (Article 56), and places conditions on a married woman's right to work or leave the house (Article 72). Under Article 356 of the Penal Code, "debasement of honour with consent" is punishable by one year or more in prison. On the basis of this law, a Swedish-run hospital in Ajman Emirate was forced to report pregnant, unmarried women to the police. In some cases these referrals have led to prosecution and deportation.

The government failed to adequately protect women from sexual and domestic violence. Under Article 53 of the Penal Code, "a husband's discipline of his wife" is "considered an exercise of rights", language that can be read as official sanction of spousal abuse.

MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Migrant workers remained tied to employers under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, making them vulnerable to labour abuses and exploitation. In a positive development, the authorities removed the job title criteria for sponsorship, allowing more residents to sponsor family members to live in the UAE.

The UAE maintained its no-minimum wage policy. This had a particularly negative impact on migrant workers, who comprised more than 90% of the country's workforce. Unlike UAE nationals, migrant workers did not receive government allowances for housing, subsidized health care or other services and were therefore dependent on their wages in order to access essential services. Migrants' wages were typically

low relative to the cost of living in the UAE, posing a risk to their right to just and favourable conditions of work, and their right to an adequate standard of living.

Late or non-payment of wages was common, leaving hundreds of low-paid migrant workers stranded in poor living conditions. Mercury MENA, an engineering company, failed to pay many of its workers for more than two years. The workers' situation remained unresolved at the end of 2019. Reports continued of migrant workers being fined for overstaying their visas and other immigration violations. Because migrants were unable to pay such fines, which were often too high for them to afford, many were held indefinitely in detention.

STATELESSNESS

The UAE continued to deny nationality to at least 15,000 individuals who were born within its borders and had no other nationality. This effectively rendered them stateless and deprived them of a range of state services, such as free education and health care.

DEATH PENALTY

While no new executions were reported, courts continued to issue new death sentences, primarily against foreign nationals for violent crimes.

Ulfat Mohammed al-Naseri in a tent where she lives with her family in a camp for internally displaced people in Sabr, Lahj governorate, Yemen, on 12 June 2019. She has had limited mobility since the early days of the war in Yemen after being hit by a stray bullet in her hometown in Ta'iz. She described to Amnesty International the exhausting journey she had to undertake to escape the violence back home. © Amnesty International

YEMEN

Republic of Yemen
Head of state: **Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi**
Head of government: **Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed (replaced Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr in October)**

All parties to the conflict in Yemen committed serious violations of international humanitarian law. Huthi forces, which controlled large parts of the country, indiscriminately shelled residential neighbourhoods in Yemen and launched missiles indiscriminately into Saudi Arabia. The coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which supported the internationally recognized Yemeni government, continued to bomb civilian infrastructure and carry out indiscriminate attacks, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians. All parties to the conflict suppressed freedom of expression, using arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture and other ill-treatment. Those targeted included journalists, human rights defenders and members of the Baha'i community. Children were sexually assaulted with impunity. The conflict continued to have a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities. The protracted conflict continued to exacerbate discrimination against women and girls. Dozens of death sentences were handed down and several executions carried out.

BACKGROUND

The conflict in Yemen continued with new or renewed front lines forming in Aden, Dhale', Hajjah, Sa'da and Ta'iz, governorates stretching from the south to the north of the country.

The internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, while generally supported by the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, witnessed challenges to its authority in southern parts of Yemen from the secessionist, UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) and its military wing, the Security Belt, which effectively assumed control of swathes of the governorates of Aden, Abyan and Shabwa in August. Clashes

lasting a few days between forces aligned to President Hadi and the Security Belt were triggered when shooting broke out near the presidential palace in Aden on 7 August. At the time, thousands of people were attending the funerals of soldiers killed in a missile strike by the Huthis, the armed group that controls the capital, Sana'a, and much of northern Yemen, on a military graduation parade in the southern city of Aden.

In October, the UAE announced that it had withdrawn armed forces from Aden. It stated that they had accomplished their "role in liberating and stabilizing Aden", but would maintain a presence in several governorates as part of their fight against "terrorist organizations". Saudi Arabia assumed control of all coalition forces in southern Yemen and military operations in western Yemen.

The STC and the government of President Hadi signed a political deal brokered by Saudi Arabia on 5 November committing them to a 90-day deadline by which all the terms outlined in the agreement had to be completed, including the formation within 30 days of a new cabinet equally representative of the north and south; the return of the Yemeni government to Aden, with a view to it resuming its work; and the integration of all security and military forces under the ministries of interior and defence respectively.

On 16 September, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen publicly decried the lack of progress towards the exchange of prisoners between the Huthis and the Hadi government that had been agreed in UN-led talks in Sweden in December 2018. Three days later, in an unexpected announcement, the head of the Sana'a-based Supreme Political Council, the executive body set up by the Huthis, announced that the Huthis were willing to start "serious negotiations" with the Hadi government to commence the prisoner exchange process. Weekly prisoner exchanges then began.

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Huthi and anti-Huthi forces continued to commit with impunity serious violations of international humanitarian law. They carried out indiscriminate attacks, shelling residential neighbourhoods in Aden, Dhale', Hajjah and Ta'iz. The Huthis launched missiles indiscriminately into Saudi Arabia.

In mid-May, the Huthis began a new cross-border campaign, targeting military, economic and transport infrastructure, including civilian airports, in Saudi Arabia. On several occasions, the attacks led to civilian casualties. An attack on the car park of Abha airport in south-western Saudi Arabia on 23 June resulted in 22 civilian casualties, including one death. In September, a drone attack on Aramco's oil processing facilities in Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, for which the Huthis claimed responsibility, forced their shutdown for several weeks and cut the country's oil production by about half during that period.

During the battle for Aden in August, civilians were caught in the fighting between forces aligned to President Hadi and the Security Belt, both of which employed tactics that appeared to violate the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks. They indiscriminately fired explosive munitions with wide-area effects, including mortars, into residential areas controlled or contested by opposing forces, killing and injuring civilians. In one attack in August in Dar Saad, a district of Aden governorate, a three-year-old boy was injured when a mortar landed in his family home; as a result his arm had to be amputated.

Renewed fighting between Huthi and anti-Huthi forces in the southern governorate of Dhale' led to thousands of people being displaced and scores killed. In an attack in October, a mortar that struck a camp for internally displaced persons in Dhale' caused civilian casualties.

Coalition aircraft bombed areas controlled or contested by Huthi forces and their allies, sometimes in retaliation for Huthi-launched cross-border attacks. The bombings killed and injured hundreds of civilians. On 28 June, a precision-guided munition made in the USA was used in a coalition air strike on a residential home in the governorate of Ta'iz, killing six civilians. Among those killed were three children.[1] On 1 September, an air strike on a Huthi-controlled detention facility in the south-western city of Dhamar killed 130 detainees and injured 40 others.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

Huthi forces, the government of President Hadi, the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and UAE-backed Yemeni forces continued to resort to arbitrary detention to suppress freedom of expression and association.

In areas they controlled, Huthi forces continued to arbitrarily detain critics and opponents as well as journalists, human rights defenders and members of the Baha'i community, subjecting scores to incommunicado detention, unfair trials and enforced disappearance. The majority of those targeted were members or supporters of the political party al-Islah.

The cases of 10 journalists who had been formally charged in December 2018, more than three years into their detention, were referred from the Political Security Organization, an internal security and intelligence force, to the Sana'a-based, Huthi-run Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), which was intended to be used for terrorism-related cases. The journalists were charged with offences that included spying – a capital offence – and helping the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. During their detention, the men were subjected to periods of enforced disappearance, intermittent incommunicado detention and alleged torture and other ill-treatment, including by being denied access to medical care. In one incident, on 19 April, a prison warden reportedly entered their cell at night, stripped them

and beat them severely. From that day, they were separated and held in solitary confinement.

In July, the SCC sentenced to death 30 academics and political figures on trumped-up charges, including espionage for the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, following an unfair trial.[2] Before trial they had faced, among other things, enforced disappearance, excessive pre-trial detention, incommunicado detention, alleged torture and other ill-treatment, including by being denied medical care, and lack of access to legal counsel. Among them was Youssef al-Bawab, a linguistics professor and political figure who was arbitrarily arrested in late 2016 and charged in April 2019.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The protracted conflict and the breakdown of state institutions and protection mechanisms exacerbated the vulnerability of children, leaving them with less protection against sexual and other violence.

In a series of incidents starting in the city of Ta'iz in mid-2018, three boys were raped and a fourth survived an attempted sexual assault. Among them was a boy aged eight. A pattern of impunity, reprisals and other obstacles discouraged the families from reporting the incidents. However, the four cases were reported to the Criminal Investigations Department in Ta'iz, which directed one of the city's main hospitals to examine the three boys who had been raped and issue medical reports. The hospital implemented the instructions in two of the cases, but failed to do so in the third, despite repeated requests by the victim's family. Moreover, the hospital asked for money to produce the report, which the family was unable to afford.

Activists and relatives of victims said that they were aware of additional cases of sexual violence, but had not reported them because of the fear of reprisal by local militias. Some affected families had to relocate in search of safety. No one was held to account for such abuses.

DISCRIMINATION – PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities faced immense challenges, exacerbated at times by an intersection of factors such as gender, age and descent.[3] The challenges included barriers to equal access to quality health services, education and employment opportunities. Those displaced by the conflict faced additional challenges, including difficulties in fleeing violence and accessing aid, and inadequate living conditions, which undermined their dignity.

Displaced people with disabilities described to Amnesty International arduous and repeated journeys in pursuit of safety and better livelihood opportunities. The vast majority of those with limited mobility travelled without assistive devices such as wheelchairs or crutches, relying on others to carry them. Sometimes the journey exacerbated the disability or led to a disability. Displacement sites lacked appropriate housing and dedicated latrines.

The weakening of state institutions, economic collapse and widespread lawlessness associated with the ongoing conflict further disrupted funding to enable realization of the rights of people with disabilities. The mother of a 14-year-old boy with cerebral palsy told Amnesty International that the disruption in assistance they used to receive meant that he had to discontinue physiotherapy, which led to a regression in his marked physical improvement after these sessions.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The protracted conflict continued to exacerbate discrimination against women and girls and left them with less protection from sexual and other gender-based violence, including forced marriage.

DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty remained in force for many crimes. Courts handed down dozens of death sentences. Several executions were carried out.

There was a marked increase of trials before the Sana'a-based SCC of individuals being prosecuted on charges carrying the death penalty. The Huthis' prosecution authorities appeared to have brought the charges as a means to persecute political opponents, journalists, academics and religious minorities.

1. Amnesty International, *Yemen: US-made bomb used in deadly air strike on civilians* (Press release, 26 September 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/yemen-us-made-bomb-used-in-deadly-air-strike-on-civilians/

2. Amnesty International, *Yemen: Huthi-run court sentences 30 political opposition figures to death following sham trial* (Press release, 9 July 2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/yemen-huthi-run-court-sentences-30-political-opposition-figures-to-death-following-sham-trial/

3. Amnesty International, *Excluded: Living with disabilities in Yemen's armed conflict* (Index: MDE 31/1383/2019), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE31/1383/2019/en/

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

REVIEW OF 2019

This report documents the state of human rights in the Middle East and North Africa during 2019. It is composed of a regional overview and 19 country entries, subdivided by key human rights themes.

Mass protests shook the region and authorities responded with excessive – sometimes lethal – force and arbitrary detentions. Governments heavily restricted freedom of expression and detained hundreds of human rights defenders. In general, security forces enjoyed impunity for violations like torture and enforced disappearances, but a truth commission in Tunisia referred cases of past abuses to trial and made recommendations relevant for governments across the region.

War crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law were committed in armed conflicts, fuelled by illicit arms transfers. Hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced by military offensives and other fighting. Thousands of refugees from Syria were deported there.

Reforms were announced in several countries to improve protection for migrant workers, but they continued to face exploitation and abuse. Like the two previous years, 2019 saw a few welcome developments with respect to women's rights and violence against women. Authorities across the region arrested scores of individuals because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

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