

**MENA**  
Rights  
Group



# ANNUAL REPORT 2022

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

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# Foreword

Since our inception in 2018, 1,115 individuals have mandated us to defend their rights.

Dear friends and supporters,

I am pleased to introduce MENA Rights Group's 2022 annual report, which sets out how we have continued to support victims of gross human rights violations to claim their universally recognised rights and freedoms, while advocating for systemic structural change in the Middle East and North Africa.

We are first and foremost grateful to victims and their families who have continued to place their trust in us, despite facing the most egregious abuses and oftentimes, risking reprisals for speaking out. Since our inception in 2018, 1,115 individuals have mandated us to defend their rights: they are the *raison d'être* of MENA Rights Group and our team has and will remain committed to supporting them while upholding the highest standards of legal ethics, professionalism, and empathy. We were pleased to see the impact of our action when several individuals we assisted regained their freedom, had abusive Interpol red notices lifted, or whose plight gained visibility and the attention of relevant stakeholders.

Meanwhile, we continued to complement our litigation work with advocacy for human rights-based legal and policy reforms. This includes calls for amending laws to align with international human rights standards and incorporating civil society perspectives during international mechanisms' reviews of MENA countries. In 2022, we had to devote significant resources to writing a total of 10 reports. This

situation is due to the resumption of reviews by UN treaty bodies after an interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also explored new strategies to foster accountability such as submitting requests for the imposition of Magnitsky sanctions against perpetrators of human rights abuses in the MENA, in the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union. While this work cannot be disclosed to protect victims whose testimonies we have collected, we wish to contribute to bringing justice for the abuses suffered. We were also pleased to provide our expertise and contribute to enforcing the principle of universal jurisdiction.

None of this would have been possible without the commitment and dedication of our passionate team members, as well as the human rights community we are honoured to be a part of. Together, we will continue to challenge injustice and make progress towards a Middle East and North Africa where people enjoy and are ensured the effective recognition and respect of their rights and freedoms.

I also wish to warmly thank each and every one of our partners, supporters, funders, and board members, without whom all of our achievements would not have been possible.

In solidarity,

Inès Osman,  
Co-founder and director.

# About us

## Our vision

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

## Our mission

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

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

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

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



# Our Tactics

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

## 1 Documentation and monitoring

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

## 2 Litigation

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

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

## 3 Analysis and reporting

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

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

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

## 4 Awareness raising

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

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

## 5 Capacity building

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

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

## 6 Assessing national human rights institutions

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

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

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

## Our Geographic and Thematic Focus

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

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

### As such, our thematic priorities include, but are not limited to:

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

# 2022 at a glance

We supported **134 victims** of human rights violations across 12 countries of the MENA region.

We monitored compliance with human rights standards of **5 countries** during and ahead of reviews of their record by international mechanisms.

We highlighted victims' stories by publicising and sharing **45 new profiles** on our website and social media platforms.



# Litigation

In 2022, we represented 105 individuals before international protection mechanisms while we followed up on over 29 previous cases of individuals we continue to assist.

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

In 2022, we were pleased that a number of people we defended regained their freedom:



**June 2**

In Egypt, Moka is released after 966 days of arbitrary detention.



**June 24**

In Saudi Arabia, Murtaja Qureiris is released after 2834 days of arbitrary detention.



**September 15**

In Egypt, Haitham Mohamadein is released after 1222 days of arbitrary detention.



**December 22**

In the UAE, Sherif Osman is released after 46 days of detention and no longer faces extradition to Egypt.

# Litigation areas

## Right to life

Throughout 2022, MENA Rights Group responded to several cases of violations of the right to life in the region, ranging from the excessive use of force to the absence of impartial investigation and prosecution of state agents responsible for grave human rights violations.

In **Lebanon**, we advocated for the referral of cases of human rights violations involving security forces to ordinary courts instead of military tribunals that lack independence and impartiality. The cases include the sinking of a migrant boat in April and the death of a Syrian refugee at the hands of the State Security in August.

On April 23, 2022, a boat transporting around 80 persons of different nationalities, including

Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians, sank off the coast of Tripoli, Lebanon. Survivors testified that a cruiser from the Lebanese navy attempted to stop the boat before it could reach international waters. Some of them accused the Lebanese navy of deliberately ramming the vessel while trying to force it back to shore. On April 26, 2022, the Lebanese army announced that the Intelligence Directorate would be responsible for conducting the investigation according to the request of the Military Public Prosecutor.

We documented the cases of 45 migrants who survived the shipwreck and raised this situation with several UN experts, including the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. In September, the latter sent a communication to the Lebanese authorities regarding the lack of an independent investigation into the causes and circumstances of the shipwreck. The Lebanese government responded affirming that the Army Command was “the official

Morocco–Spain border, by Melilla © Ongayo, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.



body responsible for conducting a transparent investigation into the circumstances of the sinking of the ship under the supervision of the competent judicial authorities.” At the time of writing, the military court’s investigation is at a standstill as the boat has yet to be salvaged.

Furthermore, we were deeply disturbed by the death under torture of Bashar Abed Al Saoud, a Syrian refugee residing in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camp, shortly after his arrest by State Security agents on August 30, 2022. In violation of Lebanon’s anti-torture law, the Public Prosecutor referred the case to the Military Prosecutor instead of the competent and ordinary criminal judge, the investigative judge in the south. In September, the Military Investigative Judge issued arrest warrants against the five agents allegedly implicated in Al Saoud’s death. When the latter were indicted on November 29, the military investigative judge reaffirmed the competence of the Military Court to handle the case. Stressing that Lebanese authorities should prosecute perpetrators before an ordinary criminal court, MENA Rights Group raised the case with several UN Special Procedures mandate holders, including the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, who, in turn, sent a letter to the Lebanese authorities on November 28, 2022.

MENA Rights Group received testimonies following the tragedy at the border between **Morocco** and the Spanish enclave of Melilla. Early in the morning of June 24, 2022, nearly 2,000 migrants attempted to cross the border. As they came closer to the high chain-link fences surrounding Melilla, Spanish and Moroccan security forces used excessive force to prevent them from crossing. According to the official death toll, 23 people died. However, non-governmental sources put the death toll between 27 and 37. At the time of writing, not

all bodies have been identified and dozens of migrants, mostly from Sudan, remain missing. After documenting the case of a survivor who was subjected to police violence while trying to cross the chain-link fence, MENA Rights Group sent a communication to the UN Special Rapporteurs on torture and on the human rights of migrants. In addition, as a number of individuals - 64 according to the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) in Nador - remain missing, we submitted the case of Mazen Dafallah Haroun Dafallah, whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown since the events, to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances. His case remains pending to date as Moroccan and Spanish authorities have yet to clarify it.

## Enforced disappearances

This year, MENA Rights Group treated a high volume of cases of enforced disappearances and filed 32 cases before the UN human rights mechanisms that have been reported in Djibouti, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE.

**Iraq** remains the country with the highest number of enforced disappearance cases worldwide, with estimates ranging from between 250,000 to one million missing persons. Authorities have consistently failed to end this practice, clarify cases of disappearances, or provide appropriate remedies to affected families. This year, cases continued to be reported to us; we filed 15 of them before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, bringing the total number of cases we brought before this organ for Iraq to 356. Together with End Impunity in Iraq, we requested the intervention of the Committee following the abduction of freelance journalist Basim Al Za’ak on October 24, 2021. That day, he





Wafa Ali Mustafa holding a photo of her missing father © Wafa Ali Mustafa's Twitter account.

was reporting live on Facebook on the protests happening on Al Hassanin square, when the live stream was cut short. Since then, his fate and whereabouts have remained unknown. Though his family filed a formal complaint and reported his disappearance to several state agencies, it did not yield any results. His abduction took place as Iraq still struggles to address the disappearances committed in the context of the October Protest Movement, known as the “Tishreen Movement”.

Meanwhile, in **Lebanon**, Syrian refugees in detention continued to be deprived of procedural safeguards, increasing the risk of abuse. The death under torture of Bashar Abed Al Saoud is a tragic illustration of the need to guarantee detainees’ rights irrespective of their status or accusations they face. On November 8, 2022, MENA Rights Group requested the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UN WGEID)

to call on the Lebanese government to put an end to the secret detention of Syrian refugee Akram al-Zein. Following his arrest by the General Security on October 28, 2022, on the grounds that he failed to renew his residency permit, al-Zein was secretly detained and completely cut off from the outside world until his release on November 12.

Enforced disappearances have unfortunately remained an all too familiar reality in **Saudi Arabia**, and we filed several cases before the UN WGEID. In April, Shaima al-Bugamy was forcibly disappeared after she escaped her family home in the province of Makkah and was reported to the State Security Presidency (SSP) by members of her family. In Riyadh, the fate and whereabouts of Abdullah al-Duraibi have remained unknown since he was summoned to the SSP headquarters in May 2022. We also called on the UN WGEID to urge Saudi authorities to clarify the fate of

Abdulwahab al-Dowaish, who disappeared in August 2021, likely in reprisal for enquiring about the disappearance of his father, Saudi cleric Sulaiman al-Dowaish, himself forcibly disappeared since April 2016.

We also continued to document cases of enforced disappearances in **Syria**. Among others, based on his daughter's testimony, we filed with the UN WGEID the case of Ali Mustafa, whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown since his arrest nine years ago, on July 2, 2013, in Damascus.

## Freedom of expression and attacks on the press

Throughout the year, the MENA region experienced continued repression against activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In September, MENA Rights Group received concerning information about the secret detention in **Djibouti** of youth activist Abdikader Idris Moussa, whose case we brought before the UN WGEID. A founding member of the Youth Action for Change, Moussa was arrested on September 15, without a warrant, at his home, by agents of the *Services de documentation et de sécurité* (SDS). His family then informed us that they feared he had been arrested for sharing a video showing the expensive lifestyle of relatives of Djibouti's President. Despite their attempts to locate him, the authorities refused to disclose his fate and whereabouts until his release on October 6, 2022.

Furthermore, we shed light on the situation of Arreh Souleiman Aouled, a Djiboutian national residing in **Somaliland**. On May 20, 2022, Aouled was arrested by the Somaliland



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police in Gabiley, where he was subsequently charged with defaming Djibouti's President and detained for over two months. This accusation is based on a short live video broadcasted on his Facebook page, in which he made comments on Djiboutian President Guelleh's politics. As this clearly constituted a reprisal for exercising his right to freedom of expression, on June 20, 2022, MENA Rights Group submitted an urgent appeal to the UN Special Rapporteurs on torture and on freedom of expression to alert them to Aouled's detention and risk of forcible return to Djibouti. Aouled was released on July 28, 2022, after being acquitted on appeal.

In **Egypt**, press freedom continued to be severely undermined, with the country being ranked 168 out of 180 by the Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2022 World Press Freedom Index, the worst rank recorded since the index was launched in 2002. We documented the case of 30-year-old journalist and freelance photographer Khaled Sahloob, who has been detained since 2014. On June 28, 2022, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in a mass trial. In June 2014, he had already been sentenced to seven years in prison in another case, which

was reduced to three years in 2015. Today, he remains detained arbitrarily in the Scorpion prison, a maximum security facility renowned for housing political prisoners.

In **Jordan**, MENA Rights Group documented continued reprisals against activist Kamil al-Zoubi and brought them to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression. Since 2014, al-Zoubi, who regularly participates in peaceful protests calling for reforms and accountability for corruption in his country, has been arrested six times in reprisals for exercising his right to freedom of expression, and subsequently detained for periods ranging from two weeks to nine months. He was last detained for a month in late 2022 and charged with “vilifying an official body and the Parliament Council”, “broadcasting false news” and “harming the reputation of the State” after having advocated for the release of political detainees and for having shared information, disclosed by the activists’ lawyers, about their situation.

Lastly, in countries of the Arab Gulf, we continued to document concerning cases of individuals prosecuted in reprisal for exercising their right to freedom of expression and brought them to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression. We received the testimony of student Salman al-Khaldy, who was sentenced in **Kuwait**, *in absentia*, to five years in prison for committing a “hostile act” against Saudi Arabia, by sharing posts on Twitter condemning the murder of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In **Oman**, journalist and human rights defender Mukhtar al-Hinai was placed under a travel ban and brought to trial for disclosing information on a corruption case involving members of the government. In July 2022, al-Hinai was acquitted of all charges and the travel ban was lifted.

## Reprisals against human rights defenders and lawyers in a context of shrinking civic space across the MENA

In 2022, human rights defenders and lawyers operating in the MENA region continued to be exposed to human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and prosecution.

In anticipation of the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) annual report on reprisals, we provided information on 11 individuals who were subjected to retaliation due to their cooperation with the UN human rights mechanisms in Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The UNSG report, published in September 2022, cited cases of reprisals in over 40 countries worldwide, including several in the MENA region, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the UAE, Palestine, and Yemen. Our team also met with the UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris following the presentation of the UNSG report to share our concerns on the increasing threats faced by human rights defenders in the MENA region who choose to engage with international human rights mechanisms.

This year, MENA Rights Group collected the testimony of Ali al-Bayati, former member of **Iraq’s** High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR), who has been subjected to acts of intimidation and reprisal. In February, he received a document from the Al Resafa Investigative Court in Baghdad informing him that he was being investigated in relation to a case filed by Iraq’s Council of Ministers. When he appeared in court three days later, he was told that the investigation concerned





# IN FOCUS

## Attacks against lawyers in Iraq and Morocco

Procès R. Vignal les avocats Rio © André Cros, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

This year, MENA Rights Group continued its work monitoring attacks on lawyers. In **Iraq**, we provided assistance to Mohammed Jumaa, a human rights lawyer most notably providing legal assistance to women victims of domestic violence, who was subjected to disciplinary proceedings after tweeting about women's rights. On August 21, 2022, the Iraqi Judicial Council sent to the Iraqi Bar Association (IBA) copies of the tweets posted by Jumaa, requesting the IBA to review the tweets and take the necessary disciplinary actions. Jumaa was subsequently referred to the IBA's Professional Conduct Committee. At the time of writing, his case was still pending.

On October 19, 2022, we raised his case with UN Special Procedures mandate holders. On October 30, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the independence of judges and lawyers and on human rights defenders sent a communication to the Iraqi authorities asking them to provide detailed information on legislative and other measures to ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference. Their communication was followed by a letter sent by the president of the American Bar Association to her Iraqi counterpart Ahlam Al-Lami on November 8, 2022.

In **Morocco**, attacks against high profile dissidents continued in 2022. On November 21, 2022, the authorities arrested human rights lawyer Mohammed Zian after the Rabat Court of Appeal upheld the three-year prison

sentence issued against him. In recent years, Zian has defended several political opponents and journalists and been increasingly critical of the Moroccan security services. After making critical statements about the head of the General Directorate of National Security and the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance, the Ministry of Interior pressed charges against him. During the investigation, the police questioned him about some of his media statements, including in relation to the vaccination campaign, and his legal counseling to one of his clients who had filed a complaint of sexual harassment against her superior. He was also questioned about statements he made on Youtube regarding the Opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention calling on the Moroccan government to release Moroccan journalist Toufik Bouachrine. He was further interrogated in relation to a complaint for sexual harassment filed by a former client in October 2021. On November 30, 2022, he was charged on 11 counts, some of which are directly linked his right to freedom of expression and his activities as lawyer while others refer to sexual offences such as "adultery" and "sexual harassment". Zian's case is the latest example of the increasing use by the Moroccan authorities of nonspeech criminal charges, such as money laundering, espionage, rape and sexual assault, and human trafficking to prosecute prominent critics. On December 21, 2022, MENA Rights Group and the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) sent a letter of allegation to several Special Procedures mandate holders, including the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

a defamation case based on statements he made on al-Ahad TV channel in December 2020. On that occasion, al-Bayati discussed the IHCHR's work documenting claims of torture by families of a group of detainees arrested under orders of the Anti-Corruption Committee. He also stated that the Committee had denied the IHCHR's request to the prisoners. In April 2022, members of the Iraqi security forces al-Bayati's home in Baghdad, raising fears that they were trying to arrest him. He was not present at the time. For fear of reprisals, he fled Iraq and sought asylum in a third country.

In **Saudi Arabia**, concerns for human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani grew as he was supposed to be released in November 2022 following the completion of his prison sentence. However, since October 23, he has been forcibly disappeared as his family has received no news from him since. Al-Qahtani, a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), was serving a 10-year sentence on various charges relating to his human rights work. On November 3, 2022 we requested the urgent intervention of the UN WGEID, urging them to intervene with Saudi authorities to clarify his fate and whereabouts.

## Arbitrary detention

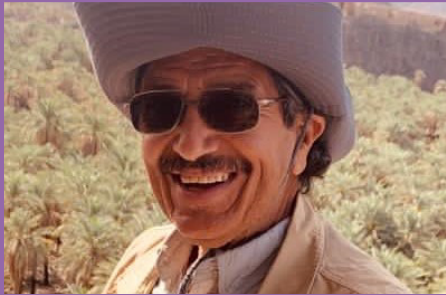
In 2022, MENA Rights Group received numerous testimonies of individuals arbitrarily detained following grossly unfair trials and individuals who remained in detention despite the completion of their sentence.

During its 93rd session held in March-April, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN WGAD) issued three Opinions on cases filed by MENA Rights Group.

These include the case of Abdullah al-Taei, who has been detained in **Iraq** since 2017 and was sentenced to death under the Anti-Terrorism Law. In its Opinion, the UN WGAD maintained that his arrest and detention lack a legal basis and that "the violations of the right to a fair trial [...] [were] of such gravity as to give his detention an arbitrary character". Finally, the Working Group recalled that a sentence based on confessions allegedly extracted under torture was a particularly grave miscarriage of justice and would constitute a violation of the right to life.

The UN WGAD also called on **Morocco** to release journalist Soulaimane Raissouni, who is serving a five-year prison sentence, following a joint submission by AMDH and MENA Rights Group. In their Opinion, the UN experts found that the authorities had not established the legal basis for his detention, and that it was related to his work as a journalist and the exercise of his right to freedom of expression. The UN experts also concluded that the violations of his right to a fair trial were of such gravity as to render his detention arbitrary.

Lastly, the UN WGAD concluded that the detention of humanitarian aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan in **Saudi Arabia** is arbitrary. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison for tweets, and has been forcibly disappeared since his appeal hearing on October 5, 2021. In the Opinion, the UN WGAD found that his arrest and detention lacked a legal basis, including due to the lack of legal clarity of the Anti-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws on the basis of which he was convicted. In addition, the experts stated that his detention stems from the exercise of his right to freedom of expression, for online comments expressing his views, and that he was deprived of his liberty "on discriminatory



Salma al-Shehab (top left), Abdullah Jelani (top right), Ibrahim Almadi (bottom left), Mohammed al-Rabiah (bottom right).

# IN FOCUS

## Alarming trend of exceptionally long prison sentences handed over in Saudi Arabia

2022 was marked by an alarming trend in **Saudi Arabia** whereby the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal issued several exceptionally long prison sentences, ranging from 15 to 50 years, for acts protected under the right to freedom of expression. In August 2022 for example, Salma al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani were sentenced to 34 years and 45 years in prison, respectively. We referred both cases to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, urging it to adopt an Opinion as to the arbitrariness of their detention.

Al-Shehab, a Saudi PhD student at the University of Leeds in the UK, was visiting her family in Saudi Arabia when she was called in for questioning by the State Security Presidency in Dammam on January 15, 2021. She was then arbitrarily arrested, detained and held in pre-trial detention for a period of 285 days before being brought to court. She was held in solitary confinement for 13 days and faced threats and harassment, as investigating state security officers threatened her with violence, insulted her family members and verbally harassed her because of her belonging to Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority. She was also denied access to her family and legal counsel. Al-Qahtani, on the other hand, was arrested on July 4, 2021, after she published posts on Twitter, which were deemed to be critical of the authorities. Both al-Shehab and al-Qahtani were sentenced to unprecedented lengthy prison sentences based on vague charges under the 2007 Cybercrime Law and the 2017 Counter-Terrorism Law, both of which criminalise acts falling under the right to freedom of expression.

In another worrying development, we were informed that, in November 2022, Abdullah Jelani,

who was arrested and subsequently forcibly disappeared by the State Security Presidency in May 2021, was sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court to a lengthy prison term of 10 years, in addition to a 10-year travel ban. Jelani was originally arrested in response to posts he shared from an anonymous Twitter account in which he called for the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to these three individuals, the Specialised Criminal Court sentenced U.S. citizen Saad Almadi to 16 years in prison, in addition to a 16-year travel ban. He was also charged under the Cybercrime and Counter-Terrorism Laws with, among other charges, "challenging the symbols of the state", and "seeking to destabilise the social fabric and national cohesion and disturb public order". The evidence provided against al-Madi included copies of 14 tweets, including some in which he criticised corruption and policy decisions of the authorities as well as one referring to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In November, we and Human Rights Foundation (HRF) sent an urgent appeal to the UN Special Procedures, requesting that they call on Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Almadi.

Lastly, in December 2022, we followed up on the case of Saudi human rights defender Mohammed al-Rabiah, who was sentenced to 17 years in prison following a retrial. Initially arrested in May 2018 and subjected to acts of torture, in 2021, he was sentenced to six years in prison for his human rights work.

grounds, because of his political opinion.” Finally, the Working Group also found a number of grave violations of his right to a fair trial.

In addition, this year, MENA Rights Group and the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center (EDAC) documented the cases of several members of the UAE94 who, despite the completion of their prison sentences remain detained under the *Munasaha*, or counselling/rehabilitation regime. They were arrested in 2013 and prosecuted in a mass trial for signing a petition calling for democratic reforms in the **UAE**. In September 2022, we requested the UN WGAD to issue an Opinion on the arbitrary nature of the detention of 11 members of the UAE94, namely Mohammed al-Roken, Fouad al-Hmadi, Ibrahim al-Yasi, Khalifa al-Nuaimi, Sultan bin Kayed al-Qasimi, Hussein al-Jabri, Ahmed al-Zaabi, Abdullah al-Hajeri, Abdulsalam Derwish al-Marzooqi, Mohammed al-Sidiq, and Omran al-Harhi.

## Extraditions and deportations in violation of the *non-refoulement* principle

In 2022, MENA Rights Group continued to provide assistance to several individuals facing deportation or extradition to a country where they would be in danger of being subjected to torture.

After receiving information about the detention **in Lebanon** of a Kenyan domestic worker and asylum seeker and her possible deportation to her country of origin, MENA Rights Group, together with the Anti-Racism Movement submitted an urgent appeal to several UN Special Procedures mandate-holders. NM was a vocal advocate for the

labour rights of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. In early 2022, she took an active role in the protests that were held in front of the Kenyan honorary consulate in Beirut, where serious wrongdoings have been reported. In April 2022, she was arrested by the General Security Office, which, in early August 2022, tried to forcibly return NM to her country of origin, despite the fact that she requested asylum in Lebanon. She was released in October 2022.

In **Saudi Arabia**, we documented the cases of two men belonging to the Uyghur ethnicity, Nurmemet Rozi and Hemdullah Abduweli, who remain forcibly disappeared following their arrest in 2020 and risk being forcibly returned to China. In March 2022, after Rozi’s former wife was arrested in Saudi Arabia together with her 13-year-old daughter, she was informed that she would be deported to China. All communication with her ceased after that. This is particularly concerning considering the human rights situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where there are reports of systematic and massive violations against the Muslim population. We raised the cases of all four individuals before the UN Special Procedures, after which four UN experts sent an allegation letter to Saudi Arabia, based on our submission, expressing their concern over the detention of Abduweli and Rozi and urging authorities to undertake an independent risk assessment before considering their extradition to China.

Furthermore, in November 2022, MENA Rights Group monitored the situation of Algerian human rights activist Zakaria (“Zaki”) Hannache, who risked being forcibly returned from **Tunisia** to Algeria. Hannache has been facing charges in Algeria of “praising terrorism” and “undermining national unity”, in reprisal for his work documenting and publishing



information on prisoners of conscience. After being detained for several weeks and released on bail in March 2022, he continued to be subject to acts of intimidation and pressure. As a result, he travelled to Tunisia where he obtained refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. However, in mid-November, he was informed that the Tunisian police came looking for him, raising fears that they were trying to arrest him. Because of the dangerous precedent set by the kidnapping and refoulement of Algerian refugee Slimane Bouhafs on August 25, 2021, about which no investigation has been conducted to date in Tunisia, MENA Rights Group submitted a request for interim measures before the UN Committee against Torture on November 28, 2022. We were pleased that on December 5, 2022, in order to prevent irreparable harm to Hannache, the Committee called on Tunisia to take interim measures to prevent the forced return of Hannache to Algeria.

Lastly, in the **UAE**, MENA Rights Group provided assistance to two individuals. In January 2022, we learned of the enforced disappearance of Pakistani national Abdul Hafeez Muhammad Ramzan following his arrest by State Security forces, and subsequently filed his case with the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. He was deported on February 2, despite the risk of torture he was facing in his country of origin. In fact, Ramzan had fled Balochistan, Pakistan, following the torture and killing of two of his relatives by Pakistani intelligence services. He is currently detained at the Central Prison in Karachi and faces trial before the Anti-Terrorist Court. Since Ramzan was his family's only sponsor in the UAE, his deportation means that his family is now also at risk of being deported to Pakistan, where they too face a high risk of torture and other forms of persecution.

In November, MENA Rights Group was informed of the arrest of U.S.-Egyptian political commentator Sherif Osman in Dubai, where he had been travelling to visit his family. Though he was initially informed that his arrest was based on a red notice issued by INTERPOL at Egypt's request, it was later clarified that the warrant was circulated through the Arab Interior Ministers Council, an institution of the Arab League. His arrest is likely due to a video he had posted on his YouTube channel in which he called for a peaceful protest during the visit of the U.S. President to Egypt to attend COP27. On November 21, MENA Rights Group requested the intervention of the Special Rapporteur against torture, asking her to intervene urgently with the Emirati authorities, which she did on December 7, 2022. We requested that she urge them not to extradite Osman to Egypt and to release him immediately, as an extradition would constitute a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* enshrined under article 3 of the Convention against Torture, to which the UAE is a party. Osman was released on December 22, and allowed to go back safely to the U.S.

The Balkan Route © Sandor Csudai, licenced under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.





# IN FOCUS

## #FreeldrisHasan: Uyghur activist Idris Hasan remains at risk of extradition from Morocco to China

In 2022, MENA Rights Group continued to advocate for the release and protection of Uyghur activist Yidiresi Aishan (also known as Idris Hasan), who remains detained in **Morocco** and is still at risk of extradition to China. On July 19, 2022, MENA Rights Group initiated a joint letter, supported by 44 other NGOs, calling on the Moroccan authorities to cancel the extradition proceedings against Aishan and release him from his year-long detention.

Aishan was arrested on July 19, 2021 on the basis of a red notice issued by Interpol at China's request "for belonging to a terrorist organisation". On December 15, 2021, the Court of Cassation in Rabat issued a favourable opinion on the extradition request,

prompting the UN Committee against Torture to send a request for interim measures to the Moroccan authorities on December 20, 2021. Even if the Moroccan authorities have, at the time of writing, respected the Committee's request, Aishan remains detained in Tiflet 2 prison. His ongoing detention is not subjected to periodic and automatic reviews to ensure that it remains necessary, proportionate, lawful and not arbitrary. For this reason, one year after the Court of Cassation ruled in favour of China's extradition request, Human Rights Foundation (HRF), MENA Rights Group and Safeguard Defenders, seized the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, asking the UN experts to issue an Opinion as to the arbitrary nature of Aishan's detention.



We produced 3 analyses of legislations incompatible with international human rights standards and advocated for legal and policy reform.

We assessed compliance of 5 countries with their international obligations.

We engaged in a variety of contemporary international law issues, including supporting the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, human rights and counterterrorism, and universal jurisdiction.

# Legal advocacy

We conducted in-depth research and identified law and policy developments pertaining to digital rights, freedom of speech and civic space.

## Aligning domestic legal frameworks with international standards

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

### Digital rights, freedom of speech and shrinking civic space

In 2022, we produced three analyses of legislations incompatible with international human rights standards in **Algeria** and the **United Arab Emirates**.

In March, the **Algerian** government reviewed a draft law on associations, which, if adopted, would have a detrimental effect on civic space. MENA Rights Group produced an analysis of the text, and shared it with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association ahead of his country visit to Algeria, scheduled for September 2022 and cancelled five days before its start. Our

analysis shows that the text fails to remedy the shortcomings contained in the 2012 Law on Associations currently in force.

In fact, the draft contains restrictive provisions subjecting the object and purpose of associations to loose general principles, such as “respect for national constants and symbols of the state”. In addition, cooperation with foreign organisations and the receipt of funds from abroad are subject to prior clearance by the authorities. Most importantly, although the draft law aims to introduce a declaratory regime in line with the 2020 Constitution and Algeria’s international human rights obligations, the text does not break with the current authorisation regime. Unless the text is significantly amended, the practice of refusing to issue a deposit receipt when a new association’s



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registration documents are submitted will likely persist. By the end of 2022, the bill had still not been discussed in parliament.

Furthermore, this year, we continued to partner with the International Center for Non-For-Profit Law (ICNL) and monitored legal and policy developments in Algeria affecting civic space. Our research was used to update ICNL's Civic Freedom Monitor on Algeria.

In the **UAE**, we analysed the Emirates' new Law on Combating Rumours and Cybercrime, which severely threatens and unduly restricts the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association. The new law, adopted by Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2021, went into effect on January 2, 2022, replacing the Emirates' former Federal Law No. 5 of 2012 on Combating Cybercrime. However, the new text does not address the problematic provisions of the former text and, on the contrary, further restricts civic space and free speech within the country and maintains the criminalisation of acts that are protected under international law. MENA

Rights Group's analysis highlighted its use of overbroad and vague terminology that provide the authorities with excessive discretion to criminalise and impose lengthy prison sentences on individuals exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. We also highlighted the ways in which the law enables the criminalisation of the work of journalists, whistleblowers, activists and peaceful critics. In a statement supported by 14 other organisations, we called on the Emirati authorities to repeal the law or to significantly amend it so that it aligns with international human rights standards.

Furthermore, the UAE also adopted a new Penal Code, which came into force in January 2022. MENA Rights Group conducted an analysis of this text, which we then publicised and shared with the UN Special Procedures. In our analysis, we argued that the new Penal Code is incompatible with multiple articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This especially concerns article 11, prescribing the principle of legal certainty, article 19, establishing the right



to freedom of expression and to receive information, and article 20, which prescribes the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. In fact, several provisions of the new Penal Code, particularly those related

to the internal security of the state, contain broad, vague and imprecise wording, which allows for them to be interpreted in a manner that effectively enables the silencing of all dissenting voices in the country.

## Assessing states' compliance with human rights standards

**Based on thorough research and monitoring, we produced country reports and brought a civil society perspective in the assessment of the compliance of states – specifically Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Lebanon, and the UAE – with their human rights obligations by UN mechanisms.**

### Universal Periodic Review

In November 2022, we followed the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of **Algeria** and **Morocco**, ahead of which we had submitted reports to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and briefed several UN Member States on our key concerns. In 2023, we will closely follow both countries' responses to recommendations made by other UN Member States.

In March 2022, MENA Rights Group submitted a report in the context of **Algeria's** fourth UPR, shedding light on the setback of civil and political rights over the past few years. In particular, we highlighted the recent adoption of a repressive legal framework which has been accompanied by increasing arbitrary arrests of individuals exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms. We also expressed concern over the increasing

United Nations Office, Geneva.



reliance on terrorism charges, which suffer from an overly broad and vague definition, to prosecute peaceful dissidents.

Our team had the opportunity to present the report's main findings during a pre-session briefing organised by *UPR Info* on August 31, 2022. In this context, through a joint project, MENA Rights Group and the Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY) supported and assisted the advocacy work of three Algerian civil society representatives so that they could discuss the human rights situation in their country with permanent missions in Geneva. Their expertise on issues ranging from women's rights to access to justice helped the missions to issue recommendations addressed to the Algerian government during the November UPR. They were also able to meet with the teams of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

Similarly, in March, MENA Rights Group submitted a report ahead of **Morocco's** fourth UPR. The report sheds light on the deterioration of human rights in the country since the last UPR cycle, especially with regards to the right to freedom of expression. Symptomatic of this decline is the use of the Pegasus spyware to infiltrate the smartphones of, among others, journalists, human rights defenders and peaceful critics. The report also documents the increasing use of nonspeech criminal charges, such as money laundering, espionage, rape and sexual assault, and human trafficking, to prosecute prominent critics. Ahead of the review which took place on November 8, the United States submitted an advance question asking the Moroccan government to clarify its response to the recommendations issued by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in its Opinion on the detention of Moroccan

journalist Soulaimane Raissouni, which had been requested by AMDH and MENA Rights Group.

Lastly, in September, MENA Rights Group also submitted a report to the HRC ahead of the UPR of the UAE, which will take place in May 2023. In our submission, we highlighted various concerning developments on the human rights situation in the country. These include enhanced restrictions on freedom of speech, a surge in documented cases of arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearance, particularly against government critics, political opposition figures and human rights defenders. The report also sheds light on the judiciary's lack of independence, given the control exercised by the executive branch over the appointment of judges, as well as the use of counter-terrorism legislation to stifle and prosecute peaceful forms of dissent.

## Human Rights Committee

On January 31, 2022, MENA Rights Group and the Global Detention Project submitted a joint follow-up report to the UN Human Rights Committee, focusing on the erosion of the *non-refoulement* principle in **Lebanon**. The report examines the lack of implementation of the Committee's recommendations issued in 2018 pertaining to the situation of refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, the Committee had then urged Lebanon to ensure that the *non-refoulement* principle is strictly adhered to in practice, that all asylum seekers are protected against pushbacks at the border and that they have access to refugee status determination procedures. Lebanon was also recommended to bring its legislation and practices relating to the detention of asylum seekers and refugees into compliance with

international standards and to provide appeal procedures against decisions regarding detention and deportation. On the basis of our submission, the Committee later found that the steps taken by the Lebanese government to implement the said recommendations were mostly “not satisfactory”.

On March 7-8, 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee carried **Iraq**’s sixth periodic review, assessing the level of implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Iraq ratified in 1971. Ahead of the review, we submitted and presented before the Committee’s members a shadow report. Echoing our concerns, following the interactive dialogue, the Committee adopted Concluding Observations in which the UN experts raised, among others, the issues of enforced disappearance and torture, accountability efforts for ISIL’s crimes, the use of the death penalty and attacks on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. In addition, the review provided an opportunity to comprehensively examine violations committed in the context of the repression of the October protest movement.

## Committee against Torture

Ahead of the second periodic review of **Iraq** by the UN Committee against Torture (CAT), MENA Rights Group briefed the group of experts and submitted a 40-page report evaluating the country’s efforts to implement the United Nations Convention against Torture and shedding light on numerous documented cases of torture. The objective of the report was also to trigger the opening of a confidential inquiry under article 20 of the Convention against Torture. Although the Committee decided not to open such an inquiry, our findings were echoed in their

Concluding Observations adopted following the interactive dialogue. In particular, the UN experts deplored the lack of progress made since the country’s last review in 2015, as well as the weak legal framework for combatting torture and the lack of observance of existing legal safeguards. In addition, the experts expressed concerns over allegations of widespread torture or ill-treatment and the lack of accountability for such acts. The CAT also addressed the treatment of death row inmates and the violations that took place in the context of the 2019-2020 protests. To remedy these shortcomings, MENA Rights Group initiated a joint letter to the Iraqi authorities to implement without delay the recommendations issued by the Committee.

Furthermore, in July 2022, MENA Rights Group contributed to the CAT’s first ever review of the UAE since the country ratified the Convention against torture a decade ago. Ahead of the interactive dialogue, MENA Rights Group and the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center (EDAC) submitted a report to the Committee highlighting the practice of torture in the country. In the report, we argued that the UAE’s legal framework offers insufficient guarantees against torture, causing it to be widespread, with its perpetrators remaining unpunished. The report further refers to cases documented by both organisations, which point to a widespread pattern of gross human rights violations. These are not limited to the practice of torture, but also include enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, most notably against government critics, political opposition figures and human rights defenders. Most of these violations are committed by the State Security Apparatus, which often operates by arresting people without a warrant and taking them to an undisclosed location, where they are detained *incommunicado* for prolonged periods.





Screenshot taken during the review of Iraq by the UN Committee against Torture © UN Web TV.

Following the issuance of the Committee's Concluding Observations, we initiated a joint letter, in which we and 13 other rights-based organisations called on the Emirati authorities to quickly develop and implement a national plan to combat torture and to fully implement all the recommendations issued by the UN experts.

## UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

In August 2022, MENA Rights Group submitted a general allegation to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UN WGEID), highlighting obstacles to the implementation of the 1992 Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance in the **UAE**. In our submission, we argued that existing laws in the UAE do not provide sufficient protection

against the crime of enforced disappearance. We further maintained that the concentration of power within the State Security Apparatus has contributed to a culture of impunity for violations of human rights. In addition, we expressed concern over domestic legislation's failure to guarantee the right of detainees to contact the outside world, as it prescribes different situations in which this right may be restricted. Equally concerning is the 2003 State Security Law, which foresees its own detention periods, trumping the application of the Code of Criminal Procedure and enabling State Security forces to hold individuals *incommunicado* for up to 60 days, which can be renewed for another 30 days, before they are brought before the Public Prosecution. Lastly, we issued recommendations to UAE authorities to prevent the perpetration of enforced disappearances by State officials. The UN WGEID acted on our submission and sent a general allegation to the UAE authorities following its September 2022 session.

# Engaging in key international law issues

**This year, our legal team engaged in a variety of international law issues, which included supporting the African Commission, human rights and counterterrorism, and universal jurisdiction, among others.**

## African Commission

On October 25, 2022, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights officially launched the Guidelines on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in Africa during its 73rd Ordinary Session. This document is the result of several expert workshops and events, in which many regional and international experts participated. MENA Rights Group contributed to several preparatory consultations in the context of the Enforced Disappearances in Africa Project run by the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, MENA Rights Group, Lawyers for Justice in Libya, REDRESS, and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. The goal of these Guidelines is to provide guidance and

support to Member States of the African Union on the effective implementation of their commitments and contributions to eradicate enforced disappearances throughout the African continent. In the absence of a regional binding document preventing and combating the crime of enforced disappearance, we hope that civil society organisations will seize upon this important document to hold States Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights accountable.

## Human rights and counterterrorism

As MENA Rights Group is a member of the "CSO Coalition on Human Rights and

73<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights © Courtesy of Alejandra Vincente.



Counter-terrorism”, in July 2022, our Legal Advisor Alexis Thiry attended a Strategic Retreat held by the Coalition in New York. The Coalition, composed of over 80 NGOs from all over the world, advocates to counter harmful trends in global counterterrorism policies and norms. The Coalition seeks to challenge the misuse of counterterrorism legislations, to transform the transnational counterterrorism architecture to be more transparent, participatory and accountable, and to protect civic space, human rights and fundamental freedoms from attack under the guise of counterterrorism. At the end of the retreat, the coalition had separate meetings with the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. In 2023, we will continue to engage as active members of the Coalition.

## Universal jurisdiction

In late 2022, MENA Rights Group, in collaboration with Democracy for the Arab World Now ([DAWN](#)) and the [Freedom Initiative](#), wrote an expert opinion supporting a complaint filed in Belgium in December 2021 by the Open Society Justice Initiative against Saudi Arabia for crimes against humanity. The admissibility of the complaint will be decided on in 2023. Although the Belgian Federal Prosecutor requested that the Brussels Court of Appeal dismiss the case on procedural grounds in June 2022, we believe that the court should open an investigation in light of the “systemic and generalised violations of human rights committed against individuals who have peacefully criticised authorities or their policies”. Such a pattern of violations amounts to crimes against humanity, as defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.



MENA Rights Group carried out several advocacy activities, including at the UN level.

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

Our team members have been interviewed and quoted in several publications.

# Awareness raising

MENA Rights Group supported 59 joint civil society actions, raising awareness on pressing human rights issues across the region.

## 1 Joint advocacy actions

To support our legal work, MENA Rights Group carried out a variety of advocacy initiatives to help raise public awareness on pressing human rights issues across the region. Most initiatives took the form of joint NGO advocacy actions; we joined 59 of these actions throughout 2022. A number of them were country-focused, covering **Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia**, the **UAE**, while others were thematic. For example, we endorsed the Geneva Declaration on Targeted Surveillance and Human Rights, which condemns the increasing use of surveillance technologies to target and harass those exercising their rights, and calls on governments to implement a moratorium on the export, sale, transfer, servicing and use of targeted digital surveillance technologies, until rigorous human rights safeguards are put in place.

Moreover, MENA Rights Group carried out several advocacy activities at the UN level. For example, during the 49th session of the Human Rights Council in March, we supported a joint oral intervention led by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, condemning the



Human Rights Council. © UN Geneva, licenced under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

**Algerian** authorities' mounting repression of peaceful opposition and independent civil society. In September, during the Council's 51st session, we supported another oral statement denouncing the systematic practice of arbitrary detention of human rights defenders and peaceful dissidents in **Saudi Arabia**.

In some instances, together with partners, we also engaged with businesses accused of "sportswashing" or facilitating human rights abuses, be it Formula 1 ahead of the Gulf Air Grand Prix in **Bahrain**, or RoyalJet, a **UAE**-based charter operator involved in the wrongful extradition of Bahraini dissident Ahmed Jaafar Mohamed Ali from Serbia to Bahrain, where he faces torture.

## 2 Public events

In 2022, MENA Rights Group organised and participated in a number of events.

In July, ahead of the UN Committee against Torture's review of the **UAE**, MENA Rights Group organised a press conference at the Geneva Press Club to shed light on the practice of torture in the country and share key findings from our report to the Committee. Several torture survivors spoke out, including Dr. Matthew Hedges, Ali Ahmed and Naji Hamdan from the Association of Victims of Torture in the UAE (AVT-UAE). Jenan al-Marzooqi, the daughter of Emirati prisoner of conscience Abdulsalam al-Marzooqi and Hamad al-Shamsi of the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center (EDAC) also contributed to the discussion. The event was moderated by our Legal Consultant Júlia Zomignani Barboza.

In addition, we co-sponsored and participated in a number of Human Rights Council side

events in July and September 2022 to raise awareness on specific country situations. In July, we co-sponsored an online side-event organised by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, which discussed the alarming regression of human rights in **Algeria**, ahead of the country's Universal Periodic Review. In September, MENA Rights Group participated to a side-event addressing the challenges of launching effective investigations into allegations of torture in the **UAE** and alternative channels for pursuing justice, including mechanisms such as universal jurisdiction.

Our staff also spoke at webinars and conferences organised by NGO partners. For example, in December, our Executive Director Inès Osman spoke at ALQST's annual conference, to discuss the geopolitical climate impacting the rights landscape in the Gulf region, and the challenging advocacy environment.

Press conference held at the Geneva Press Club on July 11, 2022.

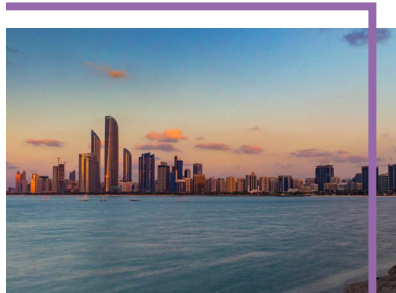






**THE SAUDI PRESIDENCY OF STATE SECURITY:**  
An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince's Kingdom

June  
2022



**THE UAE STATE SECURITY APPARATUS**  
A tool of repression against dissenting voices

December  
2022

# IN FOCUS

## Arms of repression: The role of the Saudi and Emirati State Security agencies

In 2022, MENA Rights Group produced two public reports highlighting, respectively, the role of the Saudi and Emirati State Security agencies in the repression of dissenting voices in both countries.

In June, marking five years since the ascension of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to power in 2017, MENA Rights Group issued a report titled [“The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom”](#). The report highlights the role of the State Security Presidency (SSP) in perpetrating widespread and systematic human rights violations across Saudi Arabia, with complete impunity. It delves into the history, structure and legal framework of the SSP, situating it within Saudi Arabia’s larger security apparatus. The report examines the ways in which the joint efforts of the Public Prosecution Office and the Specialised Criminal Court, both of which are neither impartial nor independent from the executive branch, have systematically charged, convicted and detained individuals for exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms. The report also outlines the pattern of human rights violations committed by the SSP – which includes the systematic use of enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detention – often against peaceful critics, human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience, more generally.

The report was launched during a [live panel discussion](#) featuring Abdullah Alaoudh from Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), Lina Alhathloul from ALQST for Human Rights, and Bethany Alhaidari from [the Freedom Initiative](#), moderated by our Legal and Policy Officer Ramzi Kaiss.

In December, MENA Rights Group issued a report titled [“The UAE State Security Apparatus: A Tool of Repression Against Dissenting Voices”](#). The report sheds light on the role of the State Security Apparatus (SSA) in perpetrating widespread patterns of human rights violations in the UAE. The report first examines the history and legal framework that enabled the overarching powers afforded to the SSA. In fact, the SSA, which has had its powers and responsibilities greatly expanded since its establishment in 1974, has become the highest authority on security matters in the UAE, operating without any oversight, and falling under the direct control of the UAE President. It further delves into the role of the Emirati judiciary, in particular the State Security Prosecution, as well as the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal, and the State Security Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court, all of which lack independence from the executive, in supporting and enabling the SSA’s abuses. Lastly, it maps out the SSA’s systematic use of enforced disappearance, torture, and arbitrary detention against peaceful critics, human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience more generally, exemplified through cases documented by MENA Rights Group.

The report was launched during a [live panel discussion](#) featuring our Executive Director Inès Osman, who presented its findings, Dr. Matthew Hedges, torture survivor and academic, as well as Emirati human rights defender Jenan al-Marzooqi, moderated by our Legal and Policy Officer Ramzi Kaiss.

### 3 Campaigns

In 2022, we continued to highlight victims' stories by publicising and sharing their cases on our website and social media platforms, to raise awareness on their plight with the general public within and outside the MENA region. Furthermore, we participated in social media campaigns to raise awareness on human rights issues in certain countries or on certain thematic issues.

For example, in May 2022, we and 37 other local, regional and international organisations launched the #NotACrime online campaign, which aimed at drawing attention to the ways in which the authorities have increasingly attempted to stifle dissenting voices and independent civil society in **Algeria**. In June, we marked the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture by urging the Lebanese authorities to enforce **Lebanon's** Anti-Torture

Law, by effectively protecting its population from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment as well as investigating allegations of torture and holding perpetrators to account. In November, during COP27 which was held in **Egypt**, we joined other civil society organisations in calling on the authorities to ease their grip on civic space and uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly to enable a successful climate summit. In addition, as a member of the Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-terrorism, we denounced Egypt's use of counterterrorism accusations against civil society. Lastly, in light of the enforced disappearance of Saudi human rights defender Mohammed al-Qahtani since October 24, 2022, we joined other NGOs in delivering letters to several Saudi embassies, urging them to convey to their government the calls to disclose his whereabouts and to release him immediately and unconditionally.

Lina Alhathloul and Ramzi Kaiss in front of the UN in Geneva.



# IN FOCUS

## “Justice For the Disappeared”: The fight for justice by families of the disappeared in Algeria



This year, we launched the “[Justice for the Disappeared](#)” website, an online portal pushing for the implementation of UN Human Rights Committee (HR Committee) decisions related to cases of enforced disappearances committed during the civil war that ravaged **Algeria** in the 1990s. The platform compiles victims’ stories and their fight for justice at the UN level: for years, families of the disappeared have advocated for the Algerian authorities to implement HR Committee decisions, to no avail. “Justice for the Disappeared” was built by MENA Rights Group’s team in the context of the “Enforced Disappearances in Africa Project” by the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, Lawyers for Justice in Libya, REDRESS and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights.

The website, which is available in both English and Arabic, indexes all the [cases](#) addressed by the HR Committee. It features cases of

victims of enforced disappearances, the steps taken by their families to clarify their fate and whereabouts as well as details on the communication issued by the HR Committee on their behalf, including the violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights found, the recommendations, as well as whether they have been implemented by the State party.

It further provides [contacts](#) of organisations that have filed these cases before the HR Committee, as well as two other organisations, which were founded by families of victims, that advocate on the issue of enforced disappearances in Algeria. It also provides [resources](#) for readers and stakeholders to learn more about the issue of enforced disappearances in Algeria and highlights the work and research conducted by Algerian and international NGOs working on the issue of enforced disappearances.



## 4 Digital engagement

### 2022 in numbers



**45**

new profiles of victims  
published on our website



**13.5%**

increase of Twitter followers,  
with over **1,098,500**  
tweet impressions



**33%**

increase of website users,  
with a total of **146,736**  
users



**17%**

increase of  
Facebook followers



**215,265**

pages viewed on  
our website



**196%**

increase of LinkedIn  
followers

Throughout the year, MENA Rights Group team members have been interviewed and quoted in several publications including English-speaking AP News, The Guardian, Middle East Eye and the New Arab ; German-speaking DW; French-speaking La Croix and L'Orient-Le-Jour; and Spanish television RTVE. In addition, we were cited in Arabic-speaking

Aljazeera, Arabi21, Beirut-Today, Jaridat Elfajr, Al Hadf, and Annahar.

In June, our Legal and Policy Officer Ramzi Kaiss also published an op-ed in *The New Arab* titled: "5 years of MBS: The transformation of Saudi's state security".



# List of publications

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## Country reports

Joint report on the erosion of the non-refoulement principle in Lebanon since 2018, January 2022.

Report on Iraq's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights since 2015, January 2022.

Algeria's Universal Periodic Review: hope for change meets setback of civil and political rights, March 2022.

Morocco's Universal Periodic Review: how human rights have declined over the past five years, March 2022.

Alternative report submitted in the context of the review of Iraq's second periodic report by the UN Committee against Torture, March 2022.

The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince's Kingdom, June 2022.

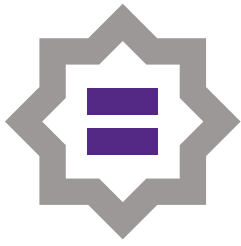
Joint report by MENA Rights Group and EDAC on the UAE's implementation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, June 2022.

Continued restrictions on civil and political rights ahead of the UAE's Universal Periodic Review, October 2022.

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