



**“IF WE HAD MONEY AND A
LAWYER, MAYBE MY BROTHER
WOULD BE ALIVE”**

SAUDI ARABIA'S EXECUTION CRISIS

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GLOSSARY

WORD	DESCRIPTION
COUNCIL OF MINISTERS (MAJLIS ALWUZARA)	The cabinet of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is led by the King and the Prime Minister, i.e., the Crown Prince.
HADD	Hadd (plural: hudud) are divinely ordained crimes that have fixed punishments under sharia. The death penalty is prescribed as a punishment for several hadd offences under sharia, such as banditry and apostasy. Flogging is also prescribed as a punishment for hadd offences such as adultery.
QISAS	A crime whose punishment is equivalent to the crime, or retribution in kind. It includes murder and certain types of bodily injury. In cases of murder, relatives of the victim can authorize the death penalty or pardon the offender and accept financial compensation, known as “blood money” (diyah).
SHARIA	Sharia is a set of rules and guidelines that make up Islamic Law, which is derived from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources for sharia are the Qur’an (the sacred scripture of Islam) and Sunnah (the traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad). The secondary sources are various interpretations of the Qur’an and Islamic jurisprudence.
SHRC	Saudi Human Rights Commission, a governmental organization established by a decision of the Council of Ministers. Among the Commission’s basic functions are visits to prisons and places of detention at any time and without requiring permission from the authorities concerned; submitting reports to the King; and receiving and investigating human rights concerns.
SUPREME JUDICIAL COUNCIL	An 11-member body headed by the Minister of Justice. Members are appointed by the King for renewable four-year terms. The body supervises the courts and judiciary, reviews all legal decisions that the Ministry of Justice refers to it, and provides legal opinions on judicial questions.
TA’ZIR	Ta’zir crimes have no fixed punishments in sharia, nor do they have clear definitions under other laws in the country. Therefore, judges have discretion to determine sentences for offences that have no fixed punishments, including the death penalty, without being bound by judicial precedent.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We were devastated, especially that there is no body to mourn. No funeral ceremony... Back in Amman my family sat in silence in their living room when they heard the news and started screaming like mad people. It’s an image that broke my heart.”

— Zainab Abo al-Kheir, sister of Hussein, a 57-year-old man and father of eight who was executed in Saudi Arabia in March 2023.¹

Saudi Arabia has long been one of the countries with a high number of executions, maintaining the death penalty for a wide range of offences. In recent years, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, executions have reached record-high numbers. This has included putting to death hundreds of people for solely drug-related offences, on charges ranging from trafficking to possession.

There is a growing global consensus towards the abolition of the death penalty. Many countries that retain the death penalty in law have discontinued executions, with a handful of states known to have executed people for drug-related offences. International human rights law and standards prohibit the use of the death penalty for anything other than intentional killing, and therefore the death penalty may not be used to punish drug-related offences.

Of the 1,816 people Saudi Arabia executed over the past ten years, according to official announcements, 32.8% (597 individuals) were executed for solely drug-related offences.

Over the past five years, in response to international scrutiny over their human rights record, the Saudi authorities have repeatedly announced reforms to their use of the death penalty, including promising to limit executions for drug-related offences. The Saudi authorities have either backtracked or failed to implement reforms in line with international standards.

In January 2021, as part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s wider package of criminal justice reforms, Saudi Arabia’s Human Rights Commission (SHRC) announced a moratorium on drug-related executions. The moratorium remained in place for 33 months, between February 2020 and November 2022. During this time, Saudi Arabia stopped executing people for drug-related offences, providing a welcome but brief respite for those on death row awaiting execution. In November 2022, the moratorium was abruptly lifted, followed by a spike in drug-related executions. Since lifting the moratorium, Saudi Arabia has executed more than 262 people for drug-related offences.

The highest number of executions Amnesty International ever recorded in a single year in Saudi Arabia was in 2024, when 345 people were executed. An analysis of official announcements indicates that 122 people (around 35% of all those executed) were executed for solely drug-related offences. This is the highest annual total of executions for drug-related offences since Amnesty International began monitoring and recording

¹ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, Hussein Abo al-Kheir’s sister, 15 April 2025.

executions in Saudi Arabia in 1990. That year, Saudi Arabia was one of only four countries worldwide where reports of executions for drug-related offences were recorded.

Nine months before the moratorium for drug-related executions was abruptly lifted, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told The Atlantic in a media interview that Saudi Arabia had limited the use of the death penalty for offences, known as ta'zir, that do not mandate the death penalty under the country's interpretation of Islamic law (sharia). Ta'zir (discretionary) sentencing for offences not subject to fixed Islamic punishments allows judges the discretion to impose punishments based on their interpretations of the law.

Yet, despite the Crown Prince's claim to the Atlantic, ta'zir (discretionary) executions have continued in Saudi Arabia. In 2024, for example, Amnesty International's analysis shows that all of the 122 solely drug-related executions carried out that year were ta'zir (discretionary) executions. This was almost twice the number recorded in 2015.

Both Saudi Arabia's anti-narcotics law and counterterror law stipulate that the death penalty can be – but need not be – imposed as a punishment in a number of provisions. Rather than using their discretion to restrict the use of the death penalty, however, judges have regularly and repeatedly used their discretion to impose death sentences, even in cases where it is prohibited to do so under international human rights law and standards.

Since 2018, Saudi authorities have introduced other legal reforms to limit the use of the death penalty, namely the adoption of the juvenile law and a royal order that limited the use of the death penalty in most cases in which people were children, i.e. younger than 18 years of age, at the time of their alleged offences. However, seven young men, some as young as 12 at the time of their alleged offences, remain at risk of execution in Saudi Arabia at time of writing. Four of the young men were recently retried for offences they committed as children and once again sentenced to death. The imposition of the death penalty for any offence against those younger than 18 years of age is absolutely prohibited under international human rights law, including by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Saudi Arabia has ratified.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF EXECUTION DATA OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS

Amnesty International monitored, collated and analysed official information on 1,816 executions reported in announcements by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Interior and published by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) between January 2014 and June 2025. This report only draws statistical conclusions based on the information on executions that the Saudi authorities have published through their press agency. The actual number of executions in any given year is likely to be higher than the figures reported by SPA.

Of the 1,816 people reported executed by SPA between January 2014 and June 2025, 597 people were executed for solely drug-related offences. Nearly 75% of those executed for solely drug-related offences were foreign nationals. Those affected were primarily from African, Arab and Asian, including Southeast Asian, nationalities. Within the ten-year period under review, Saudi Arabia put to death 155 Pakistani nationals, 66 Syrian nationals, 50 Jordanian nationals, 39 Yemeni nationals, 33 Egyptian nationals, 32 Nigerian nationals, 22 Somali nationals and 13 Ethiopian nationals for solely drug-related offences.

The number of foreign nationals executed for solely drug-related offences is startlingly high relative to the total population of foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia (roughly 44%). Foreign nationals face additional challenges to receiving a fair trial in Saudi Arabia, a country that is not their own and which has an inherently opaque criminal justice system. Amnesty International has previously reported on the ways in which race, national origin and class impacts foreign nationals' enjoyment of rights in Saudi Arabia, particularly migrant workers from Africa and Asia.

In addition to imposing the death penalty for solely drug-related offences, Amnesty International has repeatedly documented judges in Saudi Arabia imposing the death penalty on the basis of vague or overly broad provisions in the country's counterterror laws, which treat peaceful dissent, the protection of human rights, and advocacy of political reform as offences against the state or acts of "terrorism".

Between January 2014 and June 2025, Saudi Arabia executed 286 people for "terrorism"-related offences, for a broad range of acts ranging from alleged association with political groups or armed groups, carrying out violent attacks, as well as peaceful political dissent and participation in anti-government protests. 120 of these 268 people were members of the Shia community. Saudi Arabia's Shia minority are estimated to make up 10-12% of the population, yet they made up around 42% of total executions for terrorism-related offences, reflecting the political repression against this minority group who have long faced discrimination in education, the justice system, religious freedoms, and employment. According to Amnesty International's quantitative analysis, 73 of the 120 (60.8%) members of the Shia minority executed for "terrorism"-related

offences over the past ten years were on the basis of *ta'zir*. Of the remaining 47, one person was executed on the basis of *hadd* and 46 people were executed without a known sharia categorization.

IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF CASES OF 25 FOREIGN NATIONALS ON DEATH ROW OR EXECUTED FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES

Saudi Arabia has increasingly wielded the death penalty in its approach to drug control, with devastating implications for people from most disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds.

Amnesty International, in collaboration with the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights and Justice Project Pakistan, conducted an in-depth examination of the cases of 25 foreign nationals from Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Somalia who are currently on death row or have been executed for drug-related offences. Due to security risks and potential reprisals against people residing in Saudi Arabia, primary information regarding cases of foreign nationals was predominantly sourced through interviews with people's families in their countries of origin or through their court documents.

Foreign nationals deprived of their liberty and facing the death sentence for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia face unique and intersecting disadvantages. Many of the family members of people now on death row said that their loved ones had been seeking to travel abroad to seek income to support themselves and their families. This precarity increases the risk of being coerced, deceived or cajoled by deceptive migration recruitment agents or experienced drug traffickers.

Foreign nationals face additional challenges to receiving a fair trial and securing an effective defence in Saudi Arabia. In all 25 of the cases reviewed, the foreign nationals on death row in Saudi Arabia were not familiar with the legal system, or their rights, and had limited to no support from legal representatives, consular services or family members during their legal proceedings. In 14 cases, defendants had no familiarity with the Arabic language, and some said that interpretation provided during the trial was not effective.

Each of the 25 people had to navigate opaque judicial processes without effective legal assistance. Most people did not have access to legal representation until after their conviction, if at all, and some have spent up to five years on death row without being provided any of their court documents. In at least four of the cases documented in this report, people told the judge or their families that they were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment during their pretrial detention to extract "confessions".

Several families reported that their relatives in detention were never visited by consular officials until several years after their detention and sentencing. The lack of consular engagement further deepened the isolation of foreign nationals caught in a criminal justice system they did not understand with no meaningful recourse to justice and given paperwork or court documents to sign or read in a language many did not speak, and with limited access to interpretation.

In two cases, family members told Amnesty International that their relatives had been coerced to transport prohibited drugs across borders into Saudi Arabia. Yet, court documents analysed by Amnesty International show that the authorities did not investigate the circumstances of their involvement in the alleged offences or consider indicators of trafficking and exploitation.

Human trafficking is a grave human rights violation, and states are obligated under international human rights law and international criminal law to ensure that it is recognized as a criminal offence. Saudi Arabia has ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol).

Family members consistently told Amnesty International of the immense psychological toll on them and on their loved ones, marked by agonizing uncertainty. In many instances, family members of those on death row did not know whether their convictions and death sentences had been upheld or their appeals for pardon were rejected.

A number of people told their families how fellow detainees in their ward were taken from their cells in the middle of the night for execution without prior warning. For some of the prisoners on death row, prison officials informed them the day before their execution that their turn had come. In other cases, family members found out about the execution through calls from other detainees or through the media, after the Ministry of Interior reported the execution on the official press agency. In two cases, family members said that this trauma was compounded by the Saudi authorities' withholding of people's bodies, denying families their right to mourn in accordance with their cultural and religious traditions and seek closure.

UN bodies and experts have repeatedly condemned the lack of notification of imminent execution in several countries as a form of ill-treatment that violates the absolute prohibition on torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By virtue of its membership in the United Nations, Saudi Arabia is obligated to uphold the universal human rights standards set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights many of which are also reflected in customary international law.

The desirability of the abolition of the death penalty has long been recognized under international human rights law and standards.

Under international law and standards, use of the death penalty must be restricted to the most serious crimes, meaning intentional killing.

International law and standards also protect with regard to the right to a fair trial against the arbitrary deprivation of life, which is, together with torture and other ill-treatment and punishment, absolutely prohibited under customary international law. As a State party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Saudi Arabia is required to take effective measures to prevent torture and ensure that all statements and confessions obtained under torture and other ill-treatment are excluded from trial proceedings; and that claims of torture or other ill-treatment are duly investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.

UN bodies have repeatedly made clear that the death penalty may not be used to punish drug-related offences.

The application of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is in clear violation of Saudi Arabia's obligations under international human rights law. Saudi Arabia has applied the death penalty at startling high rates against foreign nationals from African, Arab and Asian, including South Asian, countries for solely drug-related offences and against members of the historically marginalized Shia minority for "terrorism"-related offences. Saudi Arabia should immediately undertake an independent transparent investigation into potential discrimination in the application of the death penalty.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally, in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime, the guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual, or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. The organization has long held that the death penalty violates the right to life, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

We urge the King and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to fully abolish the death penalty.

Until that time, we call upon the authorities in Saudi Arabia to:

- Establish a moratorium on executions and commute all death sentences, with a view to abolish the death penalty for all crimes;
- Quash all convictions and death sentences issued following unfair trials;
- Retry all those whose detentions are rendered arbitrary on account of severe non-observance of fair trial rights, in particular those involving reliance on "confessions" extracted under torture and other ill-treatment. If charged with internationally recognizable offences, people must be retried in proceedings that meet the most rigorous international fair trial standards, excluding "confessions" obtained under torture and other ill-treatment, and without recourse to the death penalty;
- Amend national laws that allow for the use of the death penalty, such as the Law of Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Law on Combating Terrorism Crimes and Its Financing, to bring them in line with international law and standards, including by removing from the scope of the death penalty any offences other than intentional killing, and by repealing any provisions that include mandatory death sentences.

2. METHODOLOGY

This report examines the use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia over a period of ten years, with a focus on the imposition and application of the death penalty against foreign nationals convicted of drug-related offences. This report builds on Amnesty International's extensive documentation of the Saudi authorities' use of the death penalty for a wide range of offences since 1990.²

For this report, Amnesty International researchers conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of data and information gathered from a variety of sources.

Amnesty International conducted a quantitative analysis of the application of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia between January 2014 and June 2025. Amnesty International monitored, collated and analysed official information on 1,816 executions reported in announcements by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Interior and published by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the official press agency. Execution announcements by the SPA typically include the full name of the person executed, their sex, date of execution, nationality, the geographical location (city or province) where the execution was carried out, the offence, and the legal classification of the offence under Islamic law (sharia) (*qisas*, *hadd* or *ta'zir*) for which the death penalty was imposed. Over the years, Amnesty International researchers systematically coded the information provided in the announcements into a database.³

This report focuses on executions for drug-related offences of foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia for three reasons: First, Amnesty International documented a sharp spike in the number of executions for drug-related offences, particularly of foreign nationals, since July 2024. This trend was reinforced by the quantitative analysis conducted by Amnesty International.

Second, while Saudi nationals have also been sentenced to death and executed for drug-related offences, as well as sentenced to death and executed for a range of offences following unfair proceedings, it is extremely difficult to conduct interviews and collect information from people inside Saudi Arabia, including those on death row or whom have family members on death row, due to security risks and potential reprisals. For this report, primary information regarding cases of foreign nationals on death row for drug-related offences was predominantly sourced through interviews with people with connections to the cases or their families in their countries of origin.

Third, foreign nationals face additional challenges to receiving a fair trial in Saudi Arabia, a country that is not their own and which has an inherently opaque criminal justice system.

In addition to the focus on foreign nationals, Amnesty International also analysed the Saudi authorities use of the death penalty for terrorism-related offences, with a particular focus on how the death penalty has been applied against the country's historically marginalized Shia minority.

² Amnesty International, *The death penalty: No solution to illicit drugs* (Index ACT 51/002/1995), 2 October 1995, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act51/002/1995/en/>; Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Death Penalty: Defying World trends* (Index: MDE 23/009/2000), 11 June 2000, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/009/2000/en/>; Amnesty International, *Affront to Justice: Death Penalty in Saudi Arabia* (Index MDE 23/027/2008), 14 October 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/027/2008/en/>; Amnesty International, *'Killing in the name of Justice': The death penalty in Saudi Arabia*, (MDE 23/2092/2015), 24 August 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/2092/2015/en/>; Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Families fear imminent execution of loved ones amid surge in drug-related executions", 24 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/saudi-arabia-families-fear-imminent-execution-of-loved-ones-amid-surge-in-drug-related-executions/>

³ An inter-coder reliability analysis of a random sample of executions (N=101) reviewed 6% of the observations in each year. This review did not identify any errors in the data fields relevant to the quantitative analysis, including the date, location, sex, legal classification, nationality, and offence listed for each execution in the random sample.

Amnesty International's quantitative analysis is paired with an in-depth examination of individual cases of people sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia.

Amnesty International, with the support of two partner organizations, the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) and Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), examined the cases of 25 foreign nationals from Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Somalia convicted of drug-related offences who are currently on death row or have been executed since the beginning of 2025. In addition to interviews conducted by ESOHR and JPP with family members of ten people on death row, Amnesty International also reviewed court documents in 15 cases of foreign nationals sentenced to death for drug-related offences. Amnesty International also conducted eight interviews with people with significant knowledge of the 25 cases or the Saudi legal system.

Three people, Abuzar Muhammad, Mohammad Kamel and Muslim Alyan, whose cases are featured in this report, were put to death between April and June 2025, when research was being finalized.

This report significantly benefited from ESOHR's support. ESOHR researchers conducted remote interviews with seven family members of seven people on death row for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia. For the contextual information on executions for terrorism-related offences, ESOHR identified members of the religious Shia community executed for offences that mentioned terrorism based on their names and/or surnames and the specific nature of offence, particularly those related to anti-government protests, dissent or treason in the Eastern Province, which is predominantly inhabited by the Shia community. ESOHR then verified that these cases involved people from the Shia community with lawyers and community members.⁴ The report also benefited from ESOHR's long-standing monitoring and documentation of the Saudi authorities' imposition and application of the death penalty for a wide range of offences.

The chapter on the imposition and application of the death penalty against members of the Shia community for terrorism-related offences also builds on cases previously documented by Amnesty International, which have been updated for this report with the support of ESOHR.

JPP, which represents Pakistani nationals facing the death penalty in Pakistan and abroad, conducted three remote and in-person interviews with family members of three Pakistani men on death row in Saudi Arabia for drug-related offences.

Amnesty International also reviewed reports from UN treaty bodies and Special Procedures and the International Organization of Migration.

This report draws statistical conclusions based on monitoring, collating and analysing reports of executions that the Saudi authorities have published through their official press agency. The actual number of executions in any given year could be higher. For example, in one instance that underscores observational limitations, the SPA published details of 148 people executed in 2022 (147 men and one woman), while the Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC), a government-aligned body, communicated a higher figure of 196 people executed that year in response to a request for information from Amnesty International, a gap of 48 people.

Amnesty International writes to the Saudi authorities each year seeking information on its imposition and application of the death penalty. The SHRC has in some instances responded but has not consistently provided detailed information regarding executions.⁵ As such, it is difficult to ascertain the extent of potential under-reporting from the SPA.

For this report, Amnesty International wrote to the Saudi authorities on 3 June 2025, sharing its preliminary findings and seeking additional information, including data on the imposition and application of the death penalty between January 2014 and April 2025. Amnesty International did not receive a response.

Amnesty International would like to thank all families of those on death row who spoke to researchers, as well as the teams at ESOHR and JPP for their critical work on behalf of people facing the death penalty. Without them, this report would not have been possible.

⁴ Interview through secure messaging with Saudi lawyer Taha al-Hajji, 19 May 2025; Amnesty International, Log of people executed from the Shia minority, on file with Amnesty International.

⁵ Saudi Human Rights Commission, response letter to Amnesty International, 11 May 2023, on file with Amnesty International.

3. THE DEATH PENALTY IN SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia has consistently been one of the countries with the highest number of recorded executions.⁶

Saudi Arabia retains the death penalty for a wide range of offences, such as murder and murder combined with offences like armed robbery, kidnapping and rape, as well as for other offences that do not meet the threshold of “most serious crimes” under international law.

The threshold of “most serious crimes” has most recently been interpreted as intentional killing,⁷ but Saudi Arabia retains the death penalty for a wide range of drug-related offences, including trafficking, possession, distribution and consumption, as well as other offences such as treason, rape, kidnapping, witchcraft and sorcery, (armed) robbery, torture, and attempted murder.

Saudi Arabia also imposes the death penalty in “terrorism”-related cases that do not involve intentional killing, using overly vague definitions of “terrorism”, a “terrorist crime” and a “terrorist entity” to punish and silence dissent.⁸

By 2019, Saudi Arabia was firmly under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman and the process of consolidation of control over the security apparatus and judicial authorities in the country was firmly underway.⁹ After a record number of reported executions in 2019, in 2020 and 2021, far fewer executions were reported, likely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the moratorium on drug-related executions then in place. Executions gradually increased again in 2021 and hit record-high numbers in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 1 below).

In 2024, the number of reported executions again climbed higher, reaching the highest point over the last decade. The number of reported executions in 2024 was more than two times higher than the number of executions carried out in 2018, the year after Mohamed bin Salman became Crown Prince, when 149 people were executed, and more than 3.5 times higher than the 90 executions carried out in 2014, a decade ago.¹⁰ According to announcements by the Ministry of Interior published on SPA, 137 out of the 345 people executed in 2024 (almost 40%) were foreign nationals from 15 countries and 122 out of the 345 people (over 35%) were executed for drug-related offences. Saudi Arabia was one of four countries known to have carried out executions for drug-related offences that year.¹¹

⁶ Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions 2019* (Index: ACT 50/1847/2020), 20 April 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/1847/2020/en/>; Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions 2022* (Index: ACT 50/6548/2023), 16 May 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/6548/2023/en/>; Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions in 2023* (Index: ACT 50/7952/2024), 29 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7952/2024/en/>; Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions in 2024* (Index: ACT 50/8976/2025), 8 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>

⁷ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36: The Right to Life (Article 6), 3 September 2019, UN Doc. CCPR/C/ GC/36, para.35.

⁸ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Death penalty, if retained, only permissible for ‘most serious crimes’ – UN rapporteur on arbitrary executions”, 25 October 2012, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2012/10/death-penalty-if-retained-only-permissible-most-serious-crimes-un-rapporteur>

⁹ Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC), “Fact Sheet – Captured Courts: Mohammed bin Salman’s Judicial Takeover in Saudi Arabia”, 25 February 2025, <https://mideastdc.org/publication/fact-sheet-captured-courts-mohammed-bin-salmans-judicial-takeover-in-saudi-arabia/>

¹⁰ Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia Execution logs, on file with Amnesty International.

¹¹ The three other countries are China, Iran and Singapore. Amnesty International, “Global: Recorded executions hit their highest figure since 2015”, 8 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/global-recorded-executions-hit-their-highest-figure-since-2015/#h-global-executions>

Between January and June 2025 alone, Saudi authorities executed 180 people. If the authorities continue executions at this pace, the figure for 2025 is likely to be comparable to the record number of executions carried out in 2024.

FIGURE 1: EXECUTIONS IN SAUDI ARABIA BY CATEGORY OF OFFENCE: JANUARY 2014 TO JUNE 2025

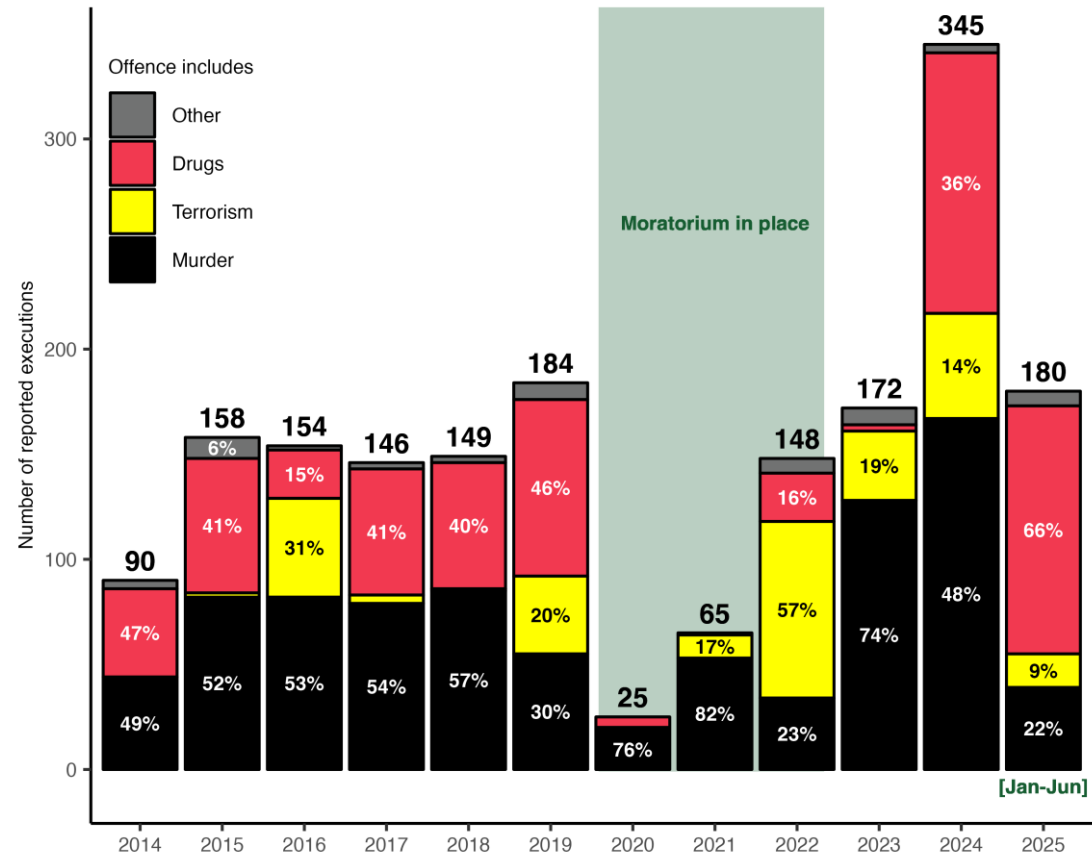


Figure 1: This bar graph illustrates the total number of executions reported by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) each year and collated by Amnesty International. The total number of executions that were carried out is higher. The number on the top of each bar indicates the total number of people reported as executed that year. The 2025 bar only represents the first half of the year, from January to June 2025. The green shading indicates the 33-month period during which a moratorium on drug-related executions was in place. Bar segments are coloured according to Amnesty International's classification of the offences that SPA reported as the basis for the execution: "murder" (black), "terrorism" (yellow), "drugs" (red) or other offences (grey). Bar segments are annotated with the percentage of each type of offence of the total executions reported in a given year. For each execution, a combination of a variety of offence types may have been listed. To summarize offences into four select types, all SPA execution announcements that mentioned murder among the offences were counted as "murder". If an execution mentioned terrorism or treason, it was counted as "terrorism."¹² If an execution mentioned drug-related offences, but not murder or terrorism, it was counted as "drugs." All remaining executions were counted as "other," such as "rape" or "kidnapping," "witchcraft" or "sorcery".

¹² Executions that mentioned terrorism or treason were always coded by Amnesty International as terrorism even if the acts in question resulted in the death of other people. These cases were never coded as murder.

3.1 THE DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The top judicial body in Saudi Arabia is the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), an 11-member body headed by the Minister of Justice. The SJC's members are appointed by the King for renewable, four-year terms.¹³ According to the 2007 Law of the Judiciary, promulgated by a Royal Decree, the SJC supervises the courts, judges and their work and issues rules specifying the selection process of judges.¹⁴ The Law of the Judiciary also sets out the responsibilities of the Supreme Court, which reviews "death, amputation, stoning or qisas (in cases of criminal homicide or lesser injuries)" sentences issued by the courts.¹⁵

The Law of the Judiciary sets out the rules governing judges, including the processes for their recruitment, inspection, promotion and discipline. It proclaims the independence of judges but effectively leaves judges under the control of the executive branch.¹⁶ Judges are appointed by royal order.¹⁷ While neither the Basic Law of Governance nor the Law of the Judiciary specifically state that a judge must be a man, all judges in Saudi Arabia are men.

The country's Law of Criminal Procedure (LCP), issued by Royal Decree in November 2013, outlines various due process protections intended to ensure fair trials.¹⁸ The LCP stipulates the right to legal assistance during both investigation and trial,¹⁹ prohibits torture and other ill-treatment,²⁰ sets time limits for pretrial detention, requiring judicial review for extended periods, and lays out the right to appeal court judgements, including death sentences.

In practice, however, Saudi authorities have consistently failed to uphold international fair trial standards and safeguards, including for people facing the death penalty. Over the years, Amnesty International has documented dozens of cases of people on death row that show a catalogue of violations of the right to a fair trial and other international safeguards that must be observed in all death penalty cases.²¹ Amnesty International has documented authorities imposing the death penalty following grossly unfair trials that fell short of international standards and relying on forced "confessions" extracted through torture and other ill-treatment as evidence to convict. In many of the capital cases documented by Amnesty International, people were held in prolonged incommunicado pretrial detention or faced court proceedings and the judge without access to adequate legal representation or throughout detention, interrogation and trial proceedings.²²

The implementation of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is based on a combination of codified laws, some of which include the death penalty, the interpretation of sharia, and jurisprudence by judges to determine what constitutes a crime and the appropriate punishment.²³

The legislative system of Saudi Arabia is rooted in sharia. Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance states that the ultimate sources of reference for any laws in the country are the Qur'an and Sunnah, or tradition – the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, sayings and practices, which constitute sharia.²⁴

Saudi Arabia does not currently have a codified penal code, but the authorities announced, in February 2021, a forthcoming code as part of a package of legislative reforms. Amnesty International analysed a

¹³ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of the Judiciary, 1 October 2007, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/ea1765a3-dec3-41a0-a32f-a9a700f26d58/2>, Article 10(2).

¹⁴ This role was formerly undertaken by the Ministry of Justice, whose functions have been significantly reduced under the 2007 Law of the Judiciary to financial and administrative management of the courts. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of the Judiciary (previously cited), Articles 6-8.

¹⁵ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of the Judiciary (previously cited), Article 11.

¹⁶ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of the Judiciary (previously cited), Article 1.

¹⁷ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of the Judiciary (previously cited), Article 31. To be appointed as a judge, a candidate must be of Saudi nationality and must not have been convicted of a crime or subject to disciplinary action dismissing him from public office. A judge must also hold a degree in sharia from a religious college or pass an examination prepared by the Supreme Judicial Council.

¹⁸ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure, 25 November 2013, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/8f1b7079-a5f0-425d-b5e0-a9a700f26b2d/2>

¹⁹ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure (previously cited), Article 4.

²⁰ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure (previously cited), Article 2. The article states that "a person under arrest may not be subjected to any bodily or moral harm, nor torture or degrading treatment."

²¹ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Muzzling critical voices: politicized trials before Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court* (Index: MDE 23/1633/2020), 6 February 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/1633/2020/en/>

²² Court documents in capital cases reviewed by Amnesty International over the past decade frequently detail torture allegations by defendants in order to extract "confessions". The torture claims in these cases have been routinely ignored and never impartially investigated. Instead of ordering retrials that respect due process rights, judges often handed down discretionary death sentences despite the doubts raised about the validity of the defendants' "confessions." See: Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Mass execution of 81 men shows urgent need to abolish the death penalty", 15 March 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/saudi-arabia-mass-execution-of-81-men-shows-urgent-need-to-abolish-the-death-penalty/>

²³ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Manifesto for Repression: Saudi Arabia's Forthcoming Penal Code Must Uphold Human Rights in Line with International Law and Standards* (Index: MDE 23/7783/2024), 19 March 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/7783/2024/en/>

²⁴ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Basic Law of Governance, 1 March 1992, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/16b97fcb-4833-4f66-8531-a9a700f161b6/2>, Article 1.

leaked draft of Saudi Arabia's forthcoming Penal Code for Discretionary Sentences, which would codify use of the death penalty as one of the possible punishments for a range of offences. According to the leaked draft, judges would be able to sentence people accused of murder, rape, "blasphemy" and "apostasy" to death. The imposition of the death penalty would not be limited to the most extreme circumstances to punish crimes involving intentional killing.²⁵ The draft penal code also would permit the execution of people who were children, i.e. younger than 18 years of age, when alleged to have committed a crime, if they were convicted of a crime for which the fixed (mandatory) punishment under sharia is death.

Currently, several codified laws in Saudi Arabia, such as the 2017 Law of Combating Terrorist Crimes and its Financing (counterterrorism law) and the 2005 Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (anti-narcotics law), include the death penalty. The counterterror law has been used to convict and sentence people to death for overly broad offences that include "endangering national unity" or "destabilizing public order and the security of the community".²⁶ The anti-narcotics law stipulates that the death penalty is a primary punishment for several drug-related offences.

For offences that have no set punishments in codified laws, judges turn to sharia. Under sharia as practised in Saudi Arabia, judges primarily base their interpretation on the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence for criminal cases. In Saudi Arabia, the death penalty can be imposed for a wide range of offences under all three categories of crimes in sharia (**hadd**, **qisas** and **ta'zir**).²⁷ Some categories of offences have fixed punishments (**hadd** and **qisas**), which include the death penalty. For the last category of offence (**ta'zir**), the punishment is based on a judge's discretion.

3.1.1 CONTINUING EXECUTIONS NOT MANDATED UNDER SHARIA

Since 2018, the authorities of Saudi Arabia have repeatedly promised to reform their use of the death penalty and then have either backtracked or failed to implement reforms that are in line with international standards.

Saudi authorities have, for example, claimed that the country would limit the use of the death penalty to offences for which the death penalty is mandated under Saudi Arabia's interpretation of sharia. On 3 March 2022, in an interview with the Atlantic, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that:

"We got rid of all of it [the use of the death penalty], except for one category, and this one is written in the Qur'an, and we cannot do anything about it, even if we wished to do something, because it is clear teaching in the Qur'an".²⁸

The Crown Prince appeared to be referring to offences that have the death penalty as a fixed punishment under Saudi Arabia's interpretation of sharia and indicating that Saudi Arabia was no longer imposing the death penalty on the basis of *ta'zir*. Yet, according to the government's official press agency, executions for *ta'zir* offences continued.

Amnesty International's analysis shows that the authorities carried out 122 *ta'zir* executions in 2024 that were exclusively related to drug offences – and unlawful under international law and standards. This was almost twice the number of executions solely for drug-related offences recorded in 2015.

²⁵ For example, the draft penal code stipulates that premeditated murder is punishable by between seven and 15 years in prison. However, it leaves large legal loopholes that allow judges to continue imposing the death penalty for this crime. Further, under the draft Penal Code, rape is punishable by life imprisonment. However, as with murder, the draft code allows judges to impose the death penalty for this crime. The draft code conflates apostasy and blasphemy, referring to both as hadd crimes, allowing judges to sentence people to death in either case. See: Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Manifesto for Repression: Saudi Arabia's Forthcoming Penal Code Must Uphold Human Rights in Line with International Law and Standards* (previously cited).

²⁶ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, 1 November 2017, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/Boelaws/Laws/LawDetails/57694209-3eed-46c7-a5d8-a9ed012761d4/1>, Article 1.

²⁷ **Hadd** offences (plural: hudud) are considered to be offences against God and have divinely ordained and fixed punishments, including the death penalty in some cases, including adultery, apostasy, and highway robbery when it results in loss of life. For a crime to be considered a hadd crime, however, very high evidentiary thresholds must be met. If the evidentiary requirements as dictated by sharia are not met, the crime is not considered a hadd crime, so the fixed punishment does not apply and the crime is instead prosecuted as a *ta'zir*, or discretionary, crime.

Qisas are offences against an individual or family. Punishments are equivalent to the crime committed (retribution-in-kind), including the death penalty for murder. For example, "If a person willfully cuts off the hand of another, his hand is to be cut off in retaliation, and if a person strikes out the tooth of another, he is also liable to retaliation." See: Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law: A Fresh Interpretation*, online edition, 18 July 2019.

²⁸ Al Arabiya, "Mohammed bin Salman on Iran, Israel, US and future of Saudi Arabia: Full transcript", 3 March 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/03/03/Mohammed-bin-Salman-on-Iran-Israel-US-and-future-of-Saudi-Arabia-Full-transcript>

Between January and June 2025, Saudi authorities carried out 118 *ta'zir* executions for solely drug-related offences. This amounts to around one execution for drug-related offences, on average, every other day.

Executions on the basis of *ta'zir* have made up a significant percentage of all reported executions in Saudi Arabia over the last ten years. Amnesty International's quantitative analysis of reported executions between January 2014 and June 2025 shows an overwhelming prevalence of *ta'zir* as the legal basis for reported executions (862 executions, making up 47.5% of all reported executions) in Saudi Arabia.²⁹

As can be seen in Figure 2 below from 2014 until 2018, the legal basis for executions was distributed in a similar way, with about half on the basis of *hadd* or *qisas*, and about the other half on the basis of *ta'zir*. In 2019, the percentage of *ta'zir* executions soared, with almost 71% of all executions *ta'zir*-based. SPA announced the executions of 130 people sentenced to death for offences under *ta'zir* in 2019, 84 of which were executed for solely drug-related offences. In 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, a smaller percentage of reported executions were carried out on the basis of *ta'zir*, which can likely be attributed, in part, to the implementation of a moratorium on executions for drug-related offences. In 2024, however, 40.9% of executions were carried out on the basis of *ta'zir*, with another 11.3% unknown.

²⁹ For *hadd* offences (209 executions), the vast majority of reported executions between January 2014 and June 2025 were carried out for offences that involved murder (170 executions), followed by "terrorism"-related offences (18 executions). Other offences included kidnapping, rape or attempted murder, combined with other offences. For *qisas* offences, almost all reported executions were for murder, often combined with other offences (613 executions for murder and 1 for kidnapping).

FIGURE 2: EXECUTIONS IN SAUDI ARABIA BY ISLAMIC LAW CLASSIFICATION: JANUARY 2014 TO JUNE 2025

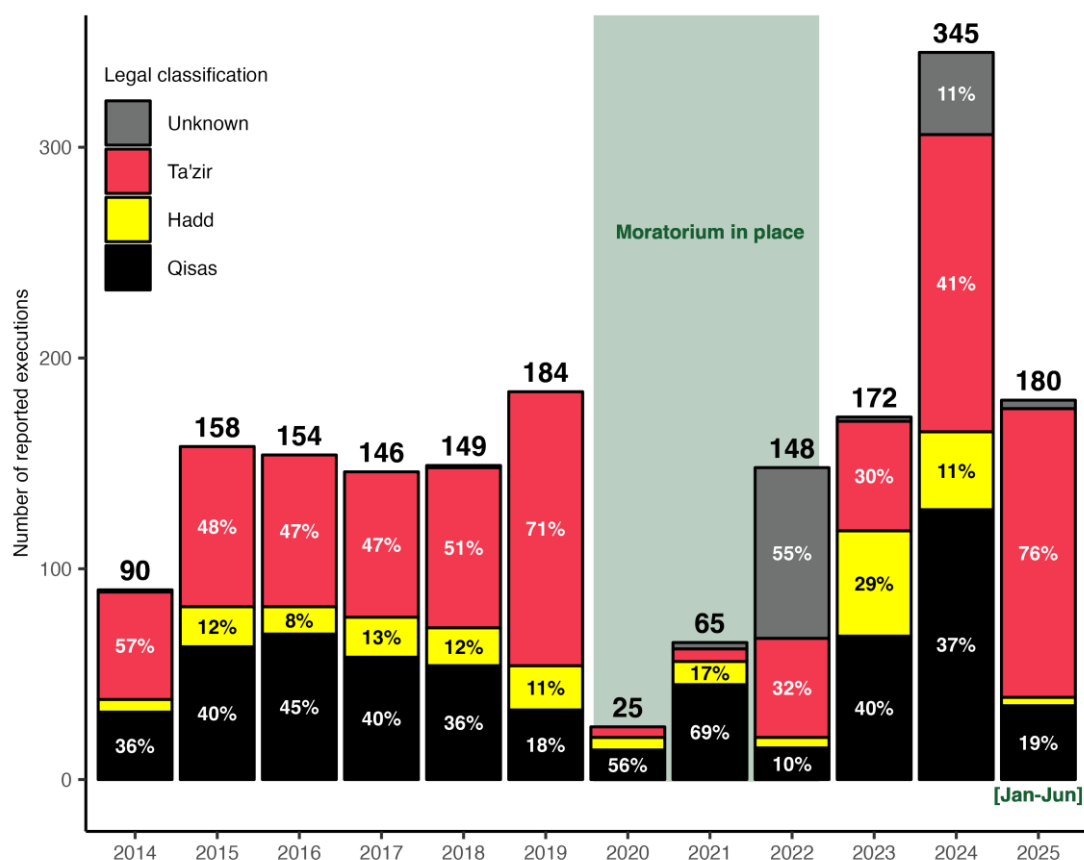


Figure 2: This bar graph shows the legal classification of the offence under Islamic law (sharia) that was reported by SPA for executions each year and collated by Amnesty International. The total number of executions that were carried out is higher. The number on the top of each bar indicates the total number of people reported as executed that year. The 2025 bar only represents the first half of the year, from January to June 2025. The green shading indicates the 33-month period during which a moratorium on drug-related executions was in place. Bar segments are coloured according to the legal classification of the offence under sharia cited by SPA for each execution: “ta’zir” (red), “hadd” (yellow) and “qisas” (black). Amnesty International classified all executions for which SPA did not include such information as: “unknown” (grey). Bar segments are annotated with the percentage of each type of legal classification in Islamic law of the total executions reported each year.

In its announcements of executions, SPA typically, but not always, includes the category of alleged offence under sharia. After 2021, Amnesty International recorded a notable rise in executions reported on SPA that did not include this information. For two non-consecutive years, the data from SPA shows a significant number of executions carried out with an “unknown” categorization; in 2022, a startling 54.7% of executions were reported without a legal categorization and in 2024, 11.3%.

This reduction in transparency, in two years when a record number of people were executed, raises questions, including why this information was not reported, as it had been in years past and was for other executions during these years, and whether these executions were carried out under the discretionary powers of judges. Over the last decade, the vast majority of reported ta’zir-based executions have been for solely drug-related offences (597 executions, 69.3%) and solely “terrorism”-related offences (135 executions, 15.7%).³⁰ Of the 129 executions reported by SPA between 2021 and June 2025 that did not

³⁰ Amnesty International’s quantitative analysis of executions announced by the SPA between January 2014 and June 2025 indicates that ta’zir executions other than drug-related and terrorism-related offences include: murder (68 executions, 7.9%), kidnapping and rape (13 executions, 1.5%) and rape (11 executions, 1.3%). Others were convicted of other and typically a combination of two or more offences such as: “rape, robbery and drug consumption”; “terrorism-related and drug trafficking”; “murder and drug-related” amongst others.

include information on the legal categorization under sharia, the majority were carried out for “terrorism”-related offences.³¹

The mandatory imposition of the death penalty violates international law and standards, and all efforts must be made to allow judges discretion at sentencing to limit the use of the death penalty, pending full abolition. This discretion is meant to allow judges to consider individual circumstances and mitigating factors, even when a person is convicted of a crime for which the death penalty may be imposed.

In Saudi Arabia, however, Amnesty International has documented repeated instances where judicial discretion has been used to increase the severity of punishment, including by imposing the death penalty. The counterterrorism law and anti-narcotics law stipulate that the death penalty is a possible punishment in a number of provisions. Using their discretion, judges have used these provisions to impose death sentences in cases that do not meet the threshold of “most serious crimes” under international human rights law. Under the counterterror law, judges have used vague or overly broad provisions of law that treat peaceful dissent, the protection of human rights and advocacy of political reform as crimes against the state or acts of “terrorism” to sentence people to death.³²

Furthermore, extensive judicial discretion, compounded with the lack of independence in the justice system, has enabled the Saudi authorities to manipulate the judiciary to settle political scores and retaliate against those who question the government's political and economic policies.³³ In practice, this manipulation has occurred through a combination of opaque legal proceedings, the use of vaguely worded provisions, and the lack of independence of the Public Prosecution and State Security forces, both of which report directly to the King and Crown Prince. According to Saudi researcher Abdullah Alaoudh, “He [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman] has methodically transformed the judicial system into a direct instrument of his control by transferring prosecutorial powers to the Royal Court, eliminating potential rivals for judicial influence, and installing loyalists throughout the courts.”³⁴

³¹ The breakdown of executions without specifying a legal basis is as follows: In 2021, Saudi Arabia carried out three executions for treason. In 2022, 81 executions for terrorism-related offences. In 2023, two executions for treason. In 2024, 39 executions for terrorism-related offences. Between January and June 2025, four executions for terrorism-related offences.

³² Prosecuting people under such charges violates not only their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, but also the fundamental principle of legality, which requires states to define criminal offences with precision. This lack of clarity in defining crimes and their corresponding punishments leaves people uncertain about what constitutes illegal behaviour, which is a clear violation of international human rights law. People must be able to clearly understand from legal provisions which actions or omissions could lead to criminal liability. See: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia Appeals Chamber, Prosecutor v. Zlatko Aleksovski (IT-95-14/1-A), 24 March 2000, paras 126-127; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary International Humanitarian Law (IHL), Rule 101.

³³ Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Drop ‘ludicrous’ conviction and death sentence against man convicted over social media posts”, 31 August 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/saudi-arabia-drop-ludicrous-conviction-and-death-sentence-against-man-convicted-over-social-media-posts/>

³⁴ Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC), “Fact Sheet – Captured Courts: Mohammed bin Salman's Judicial Takeover in Saudi Arabia” (previously cited).

3.2 THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The desirability of the abolition of the death penalty has long been recognized under international human rights law and standards. While Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) allows for the use of capital punishment under certain circumstances, its paragraph 6 clearly states that the same Article should not be used to “prevent or delay the abolition of the death penalty”.

In its most recent General Comment on Article 6 of the ICCPR, the Human Rights Committee – the UN body tasked with the interpretation of this treaty –stated that:

“Article 6, paragraph 6 reaffirms the position that States parties that are not yet totally abolitionist should be on an irrevocable path towards complete eradication of the death penalty, de facto and de jure, in the foreseeable future. The death penalty cannot be reconciled with full respect for the right to life, and abolition of the death penalty is both desirable and necessary for the enhancement of human dignity and progressive development of human rights”.³⁵

In December 2024, two-thirds of all UN member states voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution calling on states that still retain the death penalty to establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolition of this punishment.³⁶

Pending full abolition, international human rights law and standards set out several safeguards and restrictions aimed at regulating the use of the death penalty and protecting the rights of those facing this cruel and irrevocable punishment.³⁷ Violating these restrictions renders the use of the death penalty unlawful under international law and standards.

Among other restrictions, the death penalty may only be imposed for “the most serious crimes”, a term interpreted by the Human Rights Committee as referring to “crimes of extreme gravity involving intentional killing”.³⁸ Drug-related offences, as well as attempted murder, sexual offences and armed robbery, offences for which Saudi Arabia has extensively used the death penalty, can never serve as the basis for the imposition of the death penalty.

The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that, “Crimes not resulting directly and intentionally in death, such as [...] drug and sexual offences, although serious in nature, can never serve as the basis, within the framework of article 6, for the imposition of the death penalty”.³⁹ The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has stated that, “The death penalty may not be imposed for drug-related offences unless they meet this requirement”.⁴⁰ Further, the International Narcotics Control Board has encouraged all States that retain the death penalty for drug-related offences to commute death sentences that have already been handed down and to consider the abolition of the death penalty for drug-related offences.⁴¹

International law and standards also prohibit the imposition of the death penalty against certain groups. The use of the death penalty for offences committed by children, i.e. people younger than 18, is prohibited under customary international law and as a peremptory norm of general international law (*jus cogens*). Article 37(a) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that “Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age”.⁴²

The death penalty must not be used against people who face special barriers in defending themselves on an equal basis with others, such as those whose psycho-social (mental) or intellectual disabilities impede their

³⁵ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.50.

³⁶ UN General Assembly (UNGA), Resolution 79/179, adopted on 17 December 2024, UN Doc. A/RES/79/179.

³⁷ See also the UN Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty, adopted through UN Economic and Social Council resolution 1984/50 without a vote.

³⁸ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.35.

³⁹ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.35.

⁴⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*, 9 August 2012, UN Doc. A/67/275, para.122.

⁴¹ International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2019: Chapter IV – Recommendations to Governments, the United Nations and Other Relevant International and Regional Organizations*, January 2020, https://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2019/Annual_Report_Chapters/AR2019_Chapter_IV.pdf, Recommendation 6, p.113.

⁴² Amnesty International, *The Exclusion of Child Offenders from the Death Penalty under General International Law* (Index: ACT 50/004/2003), 17 July 2003, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT50/004/2003/en>

effective defence.⁴³ The discriminatory imposition of the death penalty, including its disproportionate imposition on particular ethnic or racial groups, constitutes an arbitrary deprivation of the right to life.⁴⁴

International law and standards also protect with regard to the right to a fair trial against the arbitrary deprivation of life, which is, together with torture and other ill-treatment and punishment, absolutely prohibited under customary international law.⁴⁵ The person's right to seek pardon, commutation of sentence (substitution of a lighter penalty) or clemency from state authorities must be ensured, since it is an obligation under international law.⁴⁶ The imposition of the death penalty in violation of the most stringent fair trial guarantees renders the sentence arbitrary in nature.⁴⁷

International law and standards prohibit the imposition of the mandatory death penalty, i.e. when the death penalty is the only possible punishment prescribed in law for an offence and judges cannot consider the particular circumstances of the offence or the background of the convicted person.⁴⁸

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally, in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime, the guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the person, or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. The organization has long held that the death penalty violates the right to life, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.⁴⁹

⁴³ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.49.

⁴⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*, 9 August 2012, UN Doc. A/67/275, para.14; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Concluding Observations: USA, 8 May 2008, UN Doc. CERD/C/USA/CO/6, para.23;

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Report, 15 January 2008, UN Doc. A/HRC/7/3, para.40; UN Secretary General, Moratoriums on the use of the death penalty, 11 August 2010, UN Doc. A/65/280, para.72.

⁴⁵ UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General Comment 24: Issues Relating to Reservations Made upon Ratification or Accession to the Covenant or the Optional Protocols thereto, or in Relation to Declarations under Article 41 of the Covenant, 4 November 1994, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.6, paras 8 and 10.

⁴⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 6(4); UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Report, 7 October 1996, UN Doc. A/51/4571, paras 115–116.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.41.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.37.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International, "Declaration of Stockholm. Conference on the Abolition of the Death Penalty" (Index: ACT 50/001/1977), 11 December 1977, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/001/1977/en>

4. EXECUTIONS OF FOREIGN NATIONALS FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES

4.1 SAUDI ARABIA'S "WAR ON DRUGS"

Saudi Arabia has long had and enforced strict drug control laws. Saudi Arabia has been imposing the death penalty for drug-related offences for decades, executing many hundreds of people, and violating its international human rights obligations.

Saudi authorities have cited deterrence and the need to preserve its "community welfare and moral integrity"⁵⁰ to justify this strict approach.⁵¹ Yet, in Saudi Arabia and beyond, "zero tolerance", "tough on crime" and other highly punitive approaches to the prohibition and criminalization of drugs have regularly and repeatedly failed in achieving their stated objectives and had devastating implications for human rights, particularly for those from the poorest and most marginalized sectors of society.⁵²

UN bodies have made clear that the death penalty may not be used to punish drug-related offences. International human rights treaties and standards exclude drug-related offences from the permissible scope of the death penalty. The UN Drug Conventions – the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) and the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) – do not make reference to the death penalty. The UN Common Position on Drugs has reiterated in unequivocal terms that the application of the death penalty for drug-related offences does not respect the spirit of the international drug control conventions and has the potential to become an obstacle to effective cross-border and international cooperation against drug trafficking.⁵³ The International Narcotics Control Board has noted that the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences is in breach of the UN Drug Conventions and a violation of international human rights law,

⁵⁰ Mariana Dussin, "Cultural and religious influences in Saudi Arabia's state law: A case study on countering drug trafficking", 4 February 2025, Religion and Global Society, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2025/02/cultural-and-religious-influences-in-saudi-arabias-state-law-a-case-study-on-countering-drug-trafficking/>

⁵¹ On 18 February 1987 the Council of Senior 'Ulama (Religious Scholars), the highest religious body in Saudi Arabia entrusted with interpreting Islamic law, issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) No. 138 which provides for a mandatory death penalty for trafficking or receiving drugs from abroad and an optional death penalty for repeat offenders in relation to distribution of drugs. See: Amnesty International, *The Death Penalty: No Solution to Illicit Drugs* (Index: ACT 51/002/1995), 2 October 1995, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act51/002/1995/en>

⁵² Amnesty International, Drug policy reform, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/drug-policy-reform/> (accessed on 26 June 2025).

⁵³ UN Chief Executives Board, "What we have learned over the last ten years: A summary of knowledge acquired and produced by the UN system on drug-related matters", UN Doc. E/CN.7/2019/CRP.10.

and has called on States that still retain this punishment for drug-related offences to consider abolishing it for such offences and commuting death sentences that have already been handed down.⁵⁴

While Saudi authorities do not publish or share figures of people on death row for drug-related offences, arrests for such offences are routinely reported in state-aligned media. Amnesty International's monitoring of Saudi news sites in recent months shows seizures of tens of millions of illicit pills, mainly Captagon, an addictive amphetamine, and hundreds of kilograms of other drugs, such as hashish, and dozens of arrests at land borders, airports and seaports by the Saudi authorities and by authorities in neighbouring countries such as Jordan.⁵⁵

In recent years, drug trafficking routes have shifted in the Middle East,⁵⁶ with the trade in Captagon regularly grabbing headlines. According to data collected by the New Lines Institute on counter-Captagon operations from 2015 to 2023, Captagon trafficking experienced significant growth from 2018 to 2022, with seizures peaking in 2021, possibly indicating both increased trafficking activity and intensified enforcement.⁵⁷

Saudi Arabia is a significant destination country and consumer market for drugs.⁵⁸ In the past decade, Saudi authorities seized over 700 million narcotic pills, in addition to more than 100,000 kg of other drugs, such as methamphetamine, heroin and cocaine, among other narcotic substances, according to a government official quoted by state-aligned newspaper Arab News.⁵⁹ Arab News described Saudi Arabia as the “number-one market” for Captagon. In 2023, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared a “war” against corruption and drugs.⁶⁰

Saudi Arabia has continued to wield the death penalty in its approach to drug control, with devastating implications, including for some of the poorest and most marginalized people.⁶¹ In its 2021 report, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention reported, “Courts in Saudi Arabia have imposed the maximum sentence for drug-related offences in many cases ... from 2017 until the end of 2019, of the 202 people executed for drug-related offences, 154 (76 per cent) were migrant workers.”⁶²

⁵⁴ International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), *Report for 2021*, UN Doc. E/INCB/2021/1, para.90.

⁵⁵ For example, see: Arab News, “Saudi authorities foil attempt to smuggle \$35m worth of captagon pills”, 24 January 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2587662/saudi-arabia>;

Arab News, “Saudi authorities seize 12 million amphetamine pills at Jeddah port”, 13 November 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2579179/saudi-arabia>;

Arab News, “6.5m Captagon tablets seized on Saudi border”, 31 May 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2520751/saudi-arabia>;

Arab News, “Saudi authorities seize multi-million dollar haul of narcotics”, 28 May 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2518611/saudi-arabia>;

Arab News, “Saudi authorities foil attempted smuggling of \$2m worth of Captagon pills”, 17 November 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2579668/saudi-arabia>;

Arab News, “Jordan makes biggest drugs bust in years at border crossing with Saudi Arabia”, 5 June 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2524151/middle-east>

⁵⁶ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Drug Trafficking Dynamics across Iraq and the Middle East (2019–2023): Trends and Responses*, July 2024, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/iraq/iraq_regional_dynamics_report_2024.pdf

⁵⁷ Karam Shaar and Caroline Rose, *From 2015–2023: The Captagon Trade's Trends, Trajectory, and Policy Implications*, New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 30 May 2024, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20240519-Intelligence-Briefing-Captagon-NLISAP-1.pdf>

⁵⁸ Karam Shaar and Caroline Rose, *From 2015–2023: The Captagon Trade's Trends, Trajectory, and Policy Implications* (previously cited).

⁵⁹ Arab News, “The Kingdom vs Captagon”, 2 February 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/KingdomVsCaptagon>

⁶⁰ Middle East Monitor, “Saudi Arabia: Bin Salman declares war against corruption and drugs”, 18 September 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230918-saudi-arabia-bin-salman-declares-war-against-corruption-and-drugs/>

⁶¹ See section 4.3 for further information on more than two dozen foreign nationals sentenced to death or executed for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia. Those that acknowledged taking any part in a drug-related offence appeared to be on the very bottom of the drug trade hierarchy.

⁶² UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), Report: *Arbitrary Detention Relating to Drug Policies – Study of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention*, 18 May 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/40, paras 37 and 55.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

ARBITRARY DETENTION AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE “WAR ON DRUGS”



The foundations for the global “war on drugs” were set in the early 1970s in the United States.⁶³ Since then, countries, including Saudi Arabia, have adopted extremely punitive approaches to the prohibition and criminalization of drugs. Drawing on international human rights standards regarding detention and drug policies, in its 2021 report, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention explained that, across the globe:

“The so-called war on drugs has resulted in a large and disproportionate increase in detention and imprisonment for drug-related offences. Some States have gone well beyond what is required by the international drug control treaties in terms of criminalization and associated penalties, while others have demonstrated excessive zeal in applying the criminalization provisions of those treaties. These disproportionate actions have frequently resulted in widespread human rights violations leading to increased arbitrary detention...”

The war on drugs may be understood to a significant extent as a war on people. Its impact is often greatest on those who are poor, but also frequently overlaps with discrimination in law enforcement directed at vulnerable groups. This has been referred to as the intersectionality of different forms of discrimination, which reinforces disadvantage.

The Working Group has observed that criminalization of drug use facilitates the deployment of the criminal justice system against drug users in a discriminatory way, with law enforcement officers often targeting members of vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as minorities, people of African descent, indigenous peoples, women, persons with disabilities, persons with AIDS and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. Homeless persons, sex workers, migrants, juveniles, the unemployed and ex-convicts may also be vulnerable.

The Working Group has encouraged States to take measures to prohibit discriminatory practices of arrest and detention of members of vulnerable and marginalized groups in their drug-control efforts.”⁶⁴

4.1.1 THE ANTI-NARCOTICS LAW

The law governing offences and punishments for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia is the Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (anti-narcotics law), promulgated in 2005. The anti-narcotics law defines drug offences, sets corresponding punishments, and regulates the production and distribution of medical substances containing narcotics or psychotropic components.⁶⁵

Article 37 (1) of the anti-narcotics law stipulates that the death penalty is a punishment for several drug-related offences, including: “trafficking”; “receiving”; “importing”, “exporting” or “manufacturing with the intent of distribution” narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. People accused of “distributing” drugs for the first time face imprisonment, flogging, financial fines or all of the above, but repeat offenders of “distributing” drugs, or first-time offenders of “promoting” drugs who have previously been prosecuted for offences such as “receiving” or “bringing in” drugs, also face the death penalty.⁶⁶

Article 37 (2) of the anti-narcotics law provides the court discretionary powers (meaning at the discretion or decision of the judge) to commute a death sentence to no less than 15 years in prison, up to 50 lashes and a fine of not less than SAR 100,000 (around USD 26,600).⁶⁷

⁶³ Vera Institute of Justice, “Fifty Years Ago Today, President Nixon Declared the War on Drugs”, 17 June 2021, <https://www.vera.org/news/fifty-years-ago-today-president-nixon-declared-the-war-on-drugs>

⁶⁴ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), Report: *Arbitrary Detention Relating to Drug Policies – Study of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention* (previously cited), paras 8 and 51.

⁶⁵ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances, 13 August 2005, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/221b3286-a3c6-4ea4-97c7-a9a700f18273/2>

⁶⁶ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (previously cited), Article 37 (1).

⁶⁷ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (previously cited), Article 37 (2).

4.1.2 A BRIEF RESPITE FOR PEOPLE ON DEATH ROW FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES

In 2020, the SHRC announced a moratorium on drug-related executions in Saudi Arabia. The moratorium offered people on death row for drug-related offences a brief respite. Saudi Arabia did not modify its anti-narcotics law nor establish any formal procedures for the moratorium.⁶⁸

The moratorium remained in place for 33 months, between February 2020 and November 2022, until it was abruptly lifted. In November and December 2022, the authorities announced the execution of 20 people for drug-related offences.⁶⁹ In a letter to Amnesty International in March 2023, the SHRC said that 57 people had been executed for drug-related offences in 2022 (out of a total of 196 people executed that year)⁷⁰ and that these marked the first executions for such offences after the moratorium was lifted. The SHRC did not explain why the moratorium had been ended, nor have other Saudi authorities.

In a statement issued in November 2022, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), noted that the use of capital punishment for drug-related offences was “incompatible with international norms and standards”. OHCHR called Saudi Arabia’s resumption of executions for drug-related offences “a deeply regrettable step, all the more so coming just days after a wide majority of States in the UN General Assembly called for a moratorium on the death penalty worldwide”.⁷¹

In its March 2023 letter to Amnesty International, the SHRC said: “Despite the international trend of not considering drug offences as among the most serious offences, the issue of determining what constitutes a serious crime is relative and subject to the values, public laws, and criminal policies of societies.”⁷²

4.1.3 SPIKE IN EXECUTIONS

In late 2022, after the nearly three-year lull in executions due to the moratorium, Saudi Arabia resumed executing people for solely drug-related offences. In 2024, Saudi Arabia executed a record-high number of people for solely drug-related offences, in a year in which all executions hit a record high. In 2024, the authorities announced the execution of 122 people for solely drug-related offences out of a total of 345 executions.⁷³

Over the past ten years, Saudi Arabia has executed hundreds of people for solely drug-related offences. Between January 2014 and June 2025, Saudi authorities carried out 597 executions for solely drug-related offences, according to Amnesty International’s analysis. Amnesty International’s analysis only includes cases as drug-related where the official press agency statement noted only drug-related offences in the announcement of the execution.⁷⁴

Executions for solely drug-related offences make up a significant portion of Saudi Arabia’s overall executions, as can be seen in Figure 3 below. In six years over the past decade (2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2024), more than a third of all executions were for solely drug-related offences. The only years for which this was not the case were 2016, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. For three of these five years, the moratorium on drug-related executions was in place.⁷⁵

Since lifting the moratorium, Saudi Arabia has executed 262 people for drug-related offences.

Executions for drug-related offences continue to make up a significant proportion of overall executions. Between January and June 2025, 118 out of 180 people were executed for drug-related offences. If current trends continue, the percentage of drug-related executions in 2025 is set to be the highest on record, with 65.6% of all executions so far carried out between January and June 2025 for drug-related offences.

⁶⁸ Saudi Human Rights Commission, HRC International, X post: “#Saudi Arabia Drastically Decreases Application of Death Penalty in 2020”, 18 January 2021, https://x.com/HRCSaudi_EN/status/1351087958565281793

⁶⁹ Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia Execution logs (previously cited).

⁷⁰ Saudi Human Rights Commission, response letter to Amnesty International, 24 March 2023, on file with Amnesty International.

⁷¹ Saudi Arabia: Resumption of executions for drug-related offences | OHCHR

⁷² Saudi Human Rights Commission, response letter to Amnesty International, 11 May 2023 (previously cited).

⁷³ Saudi Human Rights Commission, HRC International, X post: “#Saudi Arabia Drastically Decreases Application of Death Penalty in 2020” (previously cited).

⁷⁴ For example: In some cases, the Saudi Press Agency announcements stated that people were executed for rape and drug-related offences or for murder and drug-related offences. Such cases have been excluded from Amnesty International’s count of executions for solely drug-related offences. For more information, please see Chapter 2: Methodology.

⁷⁵ In 2022, while the number of executions reported by the Saudi Press Agency, and thus included in Amnesty International’s analysis, was 20 executions for drug-related offences, the SHRC reported 37 additional executions in a response letter to Amnesty International, raising the total number of executions carried out for drug-related offences to 57 executions that year.

FIGURE 3: PROPORTION OF EXECUTIONS CARRIED OUT FOR SOLELY DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES IN SAUDI ARABIA: JANUARY 2014 TO JUNE 2025

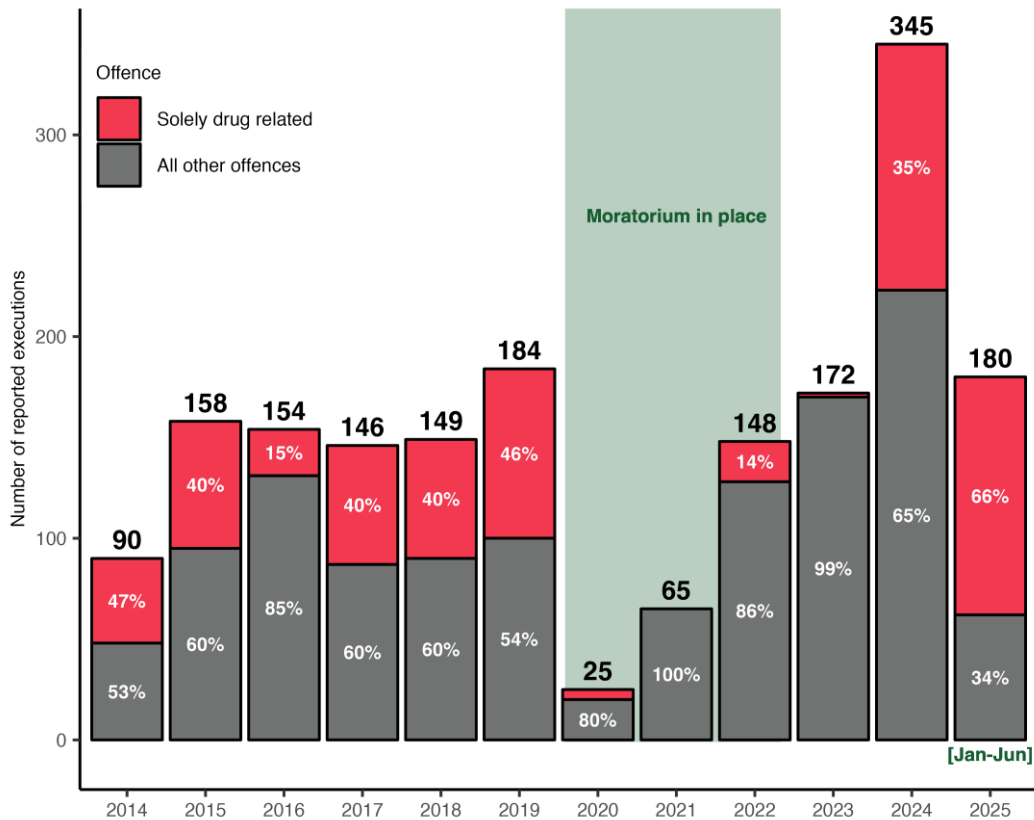


Figure 3: This bar graph shows the proportion of solely drug-related executions among all executions reported by SPA each year and collated by Amnesty International. The total number of executions that were carried out is higher. The number on the top of each bar indicates the total number of people reported as executed that year. The 2025 bar only represents the first half of the year, from January to June 2025. The green shading indicates the 33-month period during which a moratorium on drug-related executions was in place. Bar segments are coloured according to whether SPA reported the basis for the execution as one or more solely drug-related offences (red) versus executions on the basis of all other offences (grey). Bar segments are annotated with the percentage of total executions each year that were reported as solely drug related, and the percentage of total executions each year that were on the basis of all other offences.

4.2 MOST PEOPLE EXECUTED FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES ARE FOREIGN NATIONALS

“Since they [prison authorities] moved them [the Egyptian nationals] to one ward, they took two and carried out their executions in November. Three others are awaiting execution any moment now, and the rest are all waiting for their death.”

- *Relative of a person on death row*⁷⁶

In December 2024, UN human rights experts voiced serious concerns about the imminent execution of three Egyptian nationals in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁷ The men, who were executed on 3 December 2024, were part of a larger group of at least 40 Egyptian nationals on death row in Tabuk prison. The three men, along with a number of others from Arab, African and Asian, including South Asian, nationalities, had been moved to an execution ward in November 2024, where they witnessed their fellow inmates being taken away to be executed one by one, leaving the remaining detainees in fear of their impending executions. Since 2024, 23 of them have been executed, leaving 19 people from the Egyptian community at risk of execution.

Most people put to death in Saudi Arabia for solely drug-related offences over the last ten years have been foreign nationals.

Quantitative analysis of the nationalities of 597 people executed for solely drug-related offences between January 2014 and June 2025 reveals that foreign nationals (Figure 4) are being put to death at a startling rate. Foreign nationals make up approximately 44% of the population in Saudi Arabia. Yet, out of the total 597 executions for solely drug-related offences carried out between January 2014 and June 2025, foreign nationals made up nearly 75%.

Foreign nationals continue to be rapidly put to death for solely drug-related offences. Out of a total of 122 executions for drug-related offences in 2024, for example, a staggering 75.4% (92 people) were foreign nationals. Between January and June 2025, 118 people were executed for drug-related offences, 88 of whom (74.6%) were foreign nationals from various Arab, sub-Saharan African, and Asian, including South Asian, countries.

According to the General Authority for Statistics, the total population of Saudi Arabia in 2024 was estimated at 35.3 million people,⁷⁸ including about 19.6 million Saudi citizens (55.6% of the total population) and about 15.7 foreign nationals (44.4% of the total population).⁷⁹ The top five countries where foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia came from are Bangladesh (2.1 million people, 15.6% of the population), India (around 1.8 million people, 14%), Pakistan (1.8 million people, 14%), Yemen (around 1.8 million people, 13.5% of the population) and Egypt (around 1.4 million people, 11%).

Some nationalities have been particularly affected by Saudi Arabia's imposition of the death penalty for solely drug-related offences. Over the last decade, in addition to 150 Saudi nationals, Saudi Arabia has put to death 155 Pakistani nationals, 66 Syrian nationals, 50 Jordanian nationals, 39 Yemeni nationals, 33 Egyptian nationals, 32 Nigerian nationals, 22 Somali nationals and 13 Ethiopian nationals for solely drug-

⁷⁶ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of the person on death row, December 2024.

⁷⁷ OHCHR, “Saudi Arabia: UN Experts Voice Alarm at Executions of Foreign Nationals”, 4 December 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/12/saudi-arabia-un-experts-voice-alarm-executions-foreign-nationals>

⁷⁸ According to the 2022 census, which provides a breakdown of foreign nationals by nationality, there were 13.4 million non-Saudi citizens residing in Saudi Arabia, showing an increase in the number of foreign nationals between 2022 and 2024. General Authority for Statistics (Saudi Arabia), *Population Estimates Publication 2024*, May 2024, <https://www.stats.gov.sa/documents/20117/2435273/Population+Estimates+Publication+2024+EN.pdf/7d123c57-1626-7d2f-ba7f-8a719f928f28>

⁷⁹ General Authority for Statistics (Saudi Arabia), *Nationality Statistics*, <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/w/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-2?category=127396&tab=436327> (accessed 27 June 2025).

related offences. Saudi Arabia has also executed Iranian, Afghan, Chadian, Bahraini, Lebanese, Sudanese, Turkish, Indian and Palestinian nationals for solely drug-related offences. While Pakistani nationals comprise 14% of Saudi Arabia's population, they accounted for 26% (155 executions) of drug-related executions over the last decade. Nigerians constituted less than 1% (0.6%) of the population but 5% of executions (32 executions); Jordanians made up almost 2% of the population but 8% of executions (50 executions); and Syrians, representing 4% of the population, accounted for almost 11% of executions (66 executions).⁸⁰

As noted in the methodology, this report only draws conclusions based on the executions that the Saudi authorities have published through the official press agency between January 2014 and June 2025, which Amnesty International monitored, collated and quantitatively analysed. The number of actual executions is higher. Executions reflect the cumulative outcome of the policing, arrest, investigation, prosecution and sentencing processes, and the data does not capture potential disparities at each stage of the legal process or underlying crime rates. Amnesty International does not have access to official statistics on incidents of reported crime, reported arrests, reported charges, or reported sentencing of people alleged to have committed offences, including solely drug-related offences, in Saudi Arabia.

As discussed in the next section, foreign nationals face additional challenges to receiving a fair trial in Saudi Arabia, a country that is not their own and which has an inherently opaque criminal justice system. Amnesty International has also previously reported on the ways in which race, national origin and class impact foreign nationals' enjoyment of rights in Saudi Arabia, particularly migrant workers from Africa and Asia.⁸¹

⁸⁰ This is a non-exhaustive analysis of some of the nationalities disproportionately represented in the executions for drug-related offences based on Saudi Press Agency announcements.

⁸¹ Amnesty International, *Locked in, Left Out: The Hidden Lives of Kenyan Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia* (Index: MDE 23/9222/2025), 12 May 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/9222/2025/en/>

FIGURE 4: FOREIGN NATIONALS AND SAUDI CITIZENS EXECUTED FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES: JANUARY 2014 TO JUNE 2025

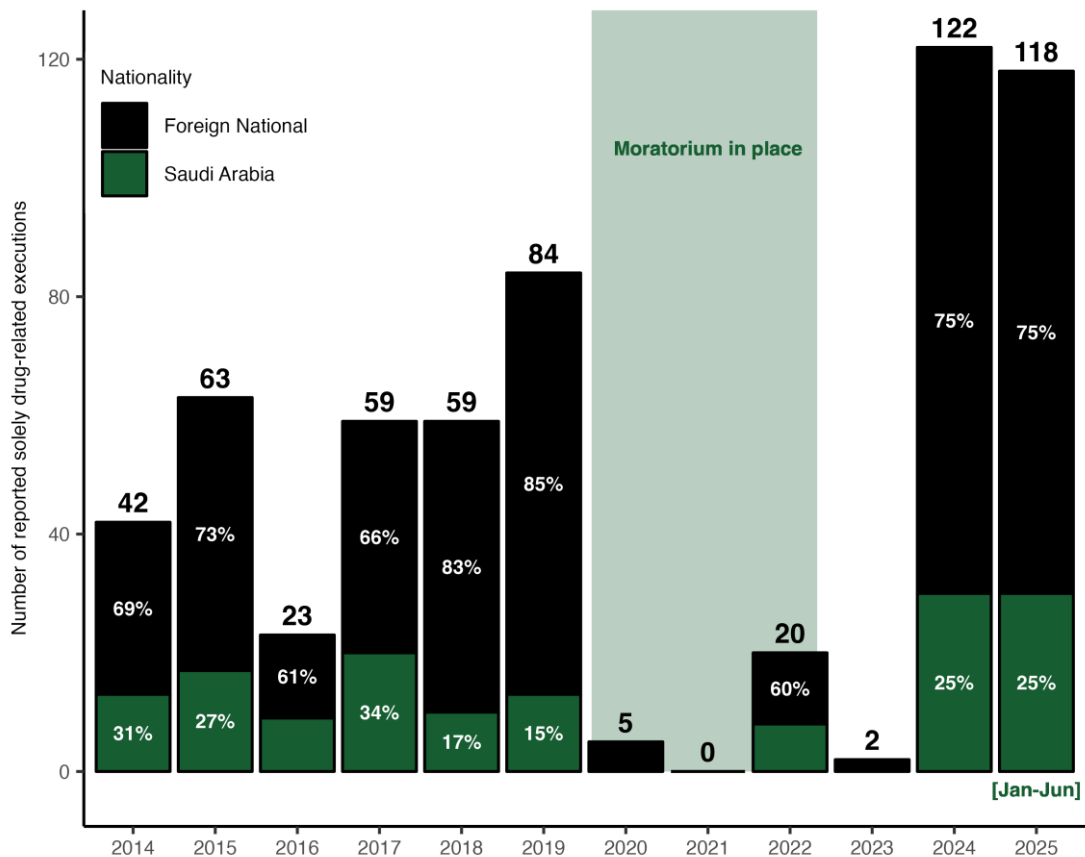


Figure 4: This bar graph shows the proportion of foreign nationals versus Saudi citizens reported executed by SPA each year for solely drug-related offences and collated by Amnesty International. The total number of executions that were carried out is higher. The number on the top of each bar indicates the total number of people reported as executed for solely drug-related offences that year. The 2025 bar only represents the first half of the year, from January to June 2025. The green shading indicates the 33-month period during which a moratorium on drug-related executions was in place. Bar segments are coloured according to whether the executed person was a foreign national (black) or a citizen of Saudi Arabia (green). Bar segments are annotated with the percentage of total solely drug-related executions that were of foreign nationals or Saudi citizens for a given year.

4.3 ADDITIONAL RISKS FOR FOREIGN NATIONALS

To better understand the experience of foreign nationals sentenced to death for solely drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia, Amnesty International, with the help of partner organizations ESOHR and JPP, documented the cases of 25 foreign nationals from Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Somalia convicted of solely drug-related offences who are currently on death row or have been executed.

Amnesty International assessed how these people on death row in Saudi Arabia and their families in their home countries navigated Saudi Arabia's judicial system from the point of arrest through sentencing and, for some, following execution.

A vast number of foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia are migrant workers, constituting approximately 76.7% of the total workforce in Saudi Arabia.⁸² Migrant workers face serious disadvantages that start in their home countries, through abusive recruitment practices, and continue in Saudi Arabia, through their experience of navigating the kafala sponsorship system, a restrictive and exploitative immigration system that has created a labour structure disproportionately impacting racialized migrant workers from African and Asian countries.⁸³

Migrant workers travelling to Saudi Arabia may be particularly susceptible to human trafficking.⁸⁴ According to IOM's guidance on trafficking in persons, trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means such as threat, use of force, coercion, or deception, for the purpose of exploitation. This exploitation can include forced labour or services and the commission of unlawful acts. When people are compelled to carry drugs under such conditions, their situation aligns with this definition of human trafficking.⁸⁵

The IOM has identified key factors that increase the risk of migrant workers to being subjected to human trafficking. These include situations where state and societal protections are lacking, such as irregular migration, work in sectors that are out of sight, like domestic work, work at sea and work in informal sectors with limited or no labour protections. Specific profiles of risk include, amongst other factors, those on tied visas or subject to undue control by employers or recruiters, restrictive migration systems, situations involving corruption in recruitment, reliance on third-party recruiters and gaps in protection mechanisms by the state.⁸⁶

Amnesty International has previously documented how migrant workers in Saudi Arabia were deceived by recruitment agents and subjected to excessive working hours and wage theft, which in some cases likely amounted to human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.⁸⁷ Human trafficking for labour exploitation involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to compel someone into undertaking labour with the aim of exploiting them for profit, which is prohibited under both international law and Saudi Arabia's domestic law.⁸⁸

International human rights experts have identified that foreign nationals are disproportionately affected by the death penalty.⁸⁹ UN Experts have called for an end to the disproportionate impact of the death penalty on people from socio-economic disadvantaged communities, including due to their frequent inability to secure an effective defence at trial and during the appeal process. These disadvantages often intersect and are magnified for racialized groups, including migrant workers, who face discrimination based on factors like gender, ethnicity or migration status.⁹⁰

Based on in-depth interviews with families of 13 people from Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Somalia and Pakistan, as well as four community members and a consulate official for this report, Amnesty International concluded

⁸² General Authority for Statistics (Saudi Arabia), *Nationality Statistics* (previously cited).

⁸³ Amnesty International, *Locked in, Left Out: The Hidden Lives of Kenyan Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia* (previously cited).

⁸⁴ Reprieve, "Migrant Workers, the Death Penalty and Human Trafficking", 24 July 2018, <https://reprieve.org/uk/2018/07/24/migrant-workers-the-death-penalty-and-human-trafficking/>

⁸⁵ IOM, *Trafficking in Persons and Associated Forms of Exploitation and Abuse*, EMM2.0 Handbook, <https://emm.iom.int/handbooks/trafficking-persons-and-associated-forms-exploitation-and-abuse> (accessed 27 June 2025).

⁸⁶ IOM, *Migrants and Their Vulnerability to Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour*, 2019, <https://publications.iom.int/books/migrants-and-their-vulnerability-human-trafficking-modern-slavery-and-forced-labour>

⁸⁷ Amnesty International, "I Would Fear Going to Work": Labour Exploitation at Carrefour Sites in Saudi Arabia (Index: MDE 23/8586/2024), 21 October 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/8586/2024/en/>

⁸⁸ UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol).

⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, *Capital Punishment and the Implementation of the Safeguards Guaranteeing Protection of the Rights of Those Facing the Death Penalty*, 22 August 2017, UN Doc. A/HRC/36/26, paras 22–28; UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*, 20 August 2019, UN Doc. A/74/137; UN General Assembly, *Application of the Death Penalty to Foreign Nationals and the Provision of Consular Assistance by the Home State*, UN Doc. A/74/318, para.20.

⁹⁰ OHCHR, "Death Penalty Disproportionately Affects the Poor, UN Rights Experts Warn", 6 October 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/10/death-penalty-disproportionately-affects-poor-un-rights-experts-warn>

that, in these cases, the limited education and socio-economic means of these foreign nationals on death row and their families had a compounding negative impact both in relation to their heightened risk of exploitation in their migration process and on their ability to access legal representation and in most cases consular assistance, and therefore to effectively exercise their right to a fair trial in Saudi Arabia once in conflict with the law.

In addition to interviews about the 13 cases, Amnesty International also reviewed court documents for 15 foreign nationals sentenced to death or executed for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia. Information about their experience, gleaned from these court documents, is incorporated into the analysis below.

4.3.1 DECEPTION IN MIGRATION PROCESS

The precarious financial situation of many foreign national migrant workers travelling to or living in Saudi Arabia is evident from their reasons for seeking jobs abroad to support their families, often living in difficult economic conditions back home. All 13 foreign nationals whose families were interviewed for this report come from precarious socio-economic backgrounds, including people with lower levels of education and extremely limited access to economic opportunities. Some of these people were desperately seeking to travel abroad to seek income to support themselves and their families. This precarity has put people at greater risk of exploitation, increasing their risk of being coerced, deceived or cajoled by deceptive migration recruitment agents or experienced drug traffickers.

In countries that have had dozens of their nationals executed in Saudi Arabia, like Pakistan, research by Equidem and Justice Project Pakistan indicates that people often rely on informal and personal networks to migrate, which creates a dependency that allows people to take advantage of people from and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who may be subjected to trafficking.

Low-wage migrant workers caught in Saudi Arabia's "war on drugs" possess little capital to prevent their exploitation at the hands of experienced, fraudulent agents or to afford legal representation that would effectively defend their rights once in Saudi Arabia and facing the death penalty.⁹¹

In some of the cases analysed by Amnesty International, foreign nationals sentenced to death for drug-related offences appeared to be at the very bottom of the drug trade hierarchy. For example, one court document analysed by Amnesty International detailed eight Ethiopian and Somali men sentenced to death after agreeing to carry prohibited drugs from Yemen to the Saudi-Yemen border. They were offered a negligible fraction of the drug's market cost. Cases such as these appear to be examples of a state shifting the harms of enforcement of harsh drug laws onto the exploited migrant, who then faces criminalization in an inherently flawed, and alien, justice system.

At least eleven of the 13 men currently on death row or executed whose families were interviewed for this report worked in invisible or informal sectors prior to their arrest, such as truck drivers, labourers, farmers or fishermen, earning a meagre daily or monthly wage. Eleven out of the 13 men did not finish their schooling. In the majority of these cases, the men's families said that the reason that the men did not continue their education was because they had to work from a young age to provide for their families.

Saudi Arabia has sentenced to death foreign nationals who said they were lured into drug trafficking with the promised of a job and agreed to carry hashish into Saudi Arabia, while travelling along an extremely precarious migration route in search of work.

In the mass trial of ten Ethiopian, Somali and Yemeni men, eight of whom are at imminent risk of execution,⁹² one of the men, an Ethiopian national, told the judge:

"[The] companions who were arrested with me in this case were in Saada [north-west governorate in Yemen, bordering Saudi Arabia] looking for work and a Yemeni man came to us and said I have a job for you. He said come with me to the mountain and I will tell you. Then we went with him to the mountain, and there we met ... [another Yemeni man] who was arrested with us and they said to us we will give you hashish and you will bring it into Saudi Arabia at the border only and then you will return and we will give you SAR 1,000 (around USD 267) for each kilogram, so we agreed to that. They handed me a load containing 17 pieces of hashish and they handed over the rest of the quantity to my companions and we infiltrated the Saudi border

⁹¹ Justice Project Pakistan, *Through the Cracks: The Exploitation of Pakistani Migrant Workers in the Gulf Recruitment Regime*, 23 April 2019, <https://data.jpp.org.pk/api/files/15722450651400x13lyqk98.pdf>

⁹² Upon appeal, the Court of Appeal in Najran commuted the initial death sentence of two out of the ten men to 15 years in prison. The court upheld the death sentence of the eight remaining men.

and ... [the Yemeni men] were with us clearing the way for us. We were arrested while we were crossing the border. The reason I trafficked [drugs] was to get money, and I do not know who is receiving the quantity.”⁹³

The testimonies of the other seven men are consistent with Hassan’s testimony, describing how they were not told who would receive the drugs, had no role in planning the trafficking, and took the job for money.⁹⁴

The eight men, **Jamal Abdo Hasan Youssef (Ethiopian national)**, **Abdullah Ibrahim Saad Mustafa (Somali national)**, **Hasan Jamal Hamza Abdullah (Ethiopian national)**, **Walatu Nqus Tasfhi Haili (Ethiopian national)**, **Tedros Ali Warkana (Ethiopian national)**, **Kasa Alraku Sisi Jamara (Ethiopian national)**, **Maqous Khasai Naqs Almu (Ethiopian national)** and **Abdulrahman Abdullah Nur (Ethiopian national)**, were seeking employment. They now face execution.

The men were accused of “trafficking 153 kilograms of hashish”.⁹⁵ According to calculations conducted by Amnesty International based on the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimation of the typical price of hashish in the Saudi market, the amount the men were accused of trafficking is estimated to be worth around USD 3.8 million.⁹⁶ Yet, according to the men’s testimony in their court documents, each of the non-Yemeni men were recruited with the promise of a meagre USD 267 per person (around USD 2,100 for all eight men on death row).

All eight men had no legal representation throughout their detention and trial proceedings. They have been on death row for over five years. According to their court document, the Court of Appeal in Najran upheld their death sentence on 16 June 2020.

Every year, tens of thousands of Ethiopian migrants, many of them young men from rural areas, undertake the perilous journey from Ethiopia to the Gulf of Aden and through Yemen toward Saudi Arabia to seek better economic opportunities. Many have travelled through the Eastern migration route, which involves taking a dangerous journey from Ethiopia to Yemen through Djibouti and Somalia and then crossing over into Saudi Arabia.⁹⁷ According to IOM, in 2024, “migrants in Yemen faced severe protection challenges, including captivity, extortion, and abuse by smugglers throughout the year”.⁹⁸ These dangers have persisted,⁹⁹ including the years when these eight men travelled from Ethiopia to the Saudi border.

⁹³ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

⁹⁴ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

⁹⁵ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

⁹⁶ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Prices and Purities of Drugs*, 2021, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2021/8.1_Prices_and_purities_of_Drugs.pdf

⁹⁷ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migration Along the Eastern Route: 2024 Yearly Report*, 6 March 2025, https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/2024_Yearly_Eastern_Route_Report.pdf

⁹⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migration Along the Eastern Route: 2024 Yearly Report* (previously cited).

⁹⁹ Ravenstone Consult, *Captive Commodities: “This Route Is Like a Fire” – Commodification, Exploitation and Missingness of Ethiopian Irregular Migrants on the Eastern Route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia*, March 2023, <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Captive-Commodities-Ethiopians-on-Eastern-migration-route.pdf>

COERCED TO TRAFFIC DRUGS

In two cases, family members told Amnesty International that the men were coerced to traffic drugs.



 ↑ Essam Ahmed © Private

In December 2021, Saudi authorities arrested **Essam Ahmed**, an Egyptian man, in the territorial waters between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. According to court documents analysed by Amnesty International, he had no previous criminal offences and was 25 when he was arrested. Essam was charged with trafficking around 300,000 amphetamine pills, 270 grams of opium, 180 grams of heroin, and consumption of prohibited pills and hashish. He was convicted and sentenced under Article 37 of the Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Control Law (1426 H). The judge imposed a death sentence on him (*ta'zir*).¹⁰⁰

Essam told his family about how he was coerced by a man wielding a gun to carry a package by sea from Egypt:

“I worked on a fishing boat of a man from Sinai. One evening, him [he] and other men asked me to deliver something for them. I refused, but they forced me into the sea from Sinai.”

Essam said that the men had a gun, which they fired in front of him.

“As soon as I went into the sea, I left the things [package] in the sea and found the Saudi border guards waiting for me while [I was] still in Egyptian waters ...”

According to Essam, Saudi border guards arrested him at sea and took him to a detention centre on the Saudi shore. He said:

“They [Saudi security officials] beat me for three continuous days to sign papers. When I read them, I saw that they stated that I was arrested on Saudi waters, when I wasn’t. I was taken from Egyptian waters. They also stated that I brought in drugs and that I concealed the identity of the receiver, but I don’t know who would have received the package... I was also forced to put my thumbprints on what they [security officials] wrote in my “confessions” .”

Essam said he told the judge that he was threatened at gunpoint in Egypt and that he had been coerced into carrying the package, but that his claims were not included in his court documents or raised during the appeal process.¹⁰¹

His “confession”, however, was included in his court documents. It stated: “He confessed to trafficking 334,000 pills of amphetamine pills ... and he stated that he transported the quantity from Nuweiba city [coastal town] through the sea, and that was after he connected with the financier and dropped him off near the Saudi maritime border, and he completed the route swimming until he was arrested. He does not know the quantity of material inside it, as they refused to tell him what was inside ... he mentioned that the owner of the smuggled quantity is called Abu Yusuf, and he communicated with him through a person called Abu Abdullah, he does not know the rest of his name, lives in the city of Hurghada, and he offered him a job. Upon his arrival to Nuweiba, they put him on the boat, and he met Abu Yusuf, who asked him to take the bag and deliver it to a Saudi person named Khalid, he does not know the rest of his name, in exchange for a sum of 150,000 thousand Egyptian pounds (around USD 3000)”.

Essam’s family said that he had no legal representation during his arrest nor investigation. While he was given a court-appointed lawyer when his trial began, it was difficult to get responses from the lawyer and the lawyer did not promptly share the charges against Essam or his court documents.

Describing the court-appointed lawyer, his family said:

¹⁰⁰ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁰¹ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Essam Ahmed, March 2025.

“We knew absolutely nothing because it's a foreign country and we don't know its laws and expected the lawyer to inform us. ... We were not informed about the possibility of clemency, he didn't tell us the appeal had to be filed within a month, and he didn't tell us the Supreme Court would issue its ruling after four months. I've never seen a lawyer appointed for us stand against us, serving the public prosecutor rather than us.”¹⁰²

His family ultimately decided to hire another lawyer, at great cost to themselves.

“I turned to relatives in Saudi Arabia, who helped us hire a Saudi lawyer for Essam. We paid him SAR 40,000 (around USD 10,600), and I was forced to sell my only apartment to provide this amount. But he deceived us...When I asked him to write the appeal, he asked for another SAR 20,000 (around USD 5,300). When I went to him to file a petition on behalf of my son's case, he asked for yet another 20,000 riyals. I have lost everything—my home and my son—because of this injustice and exploitation.”¹⁰³

During Essam's appeals process, the lawyer told the judge that his client

“is considered a victim of drug traffickers who have exploited his young age, poverty and financial need”.¹⁰⁴

The lawyer's claim of exploitation was not addressed by the judge during the appeal process, which could have served as part of Essam's defence and, potentially, to mitigate his sentence.¹⁰⁵ At time of writing, Essam remains on death row.

Since 2010, the Sinai Peninsula has increasingly served as a corridor for trafficking, including of human trafficking, as well as arms and drugs.¹⁰⁶ By the mid-2010s, Sinai became a maritime hub for drug trafficking facilitated by fishing boats and small boats to transport prohibited narcotics across the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea toward Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁷ This coincided with intensified Egyptian security operations in central and northern Sinai, and organized criminal networks expanding their operations, particularly in narcotics trafficking.¹⁰⁸ In parallel, Saudi Arabia ramped up its drug interdiction efforts, particularly after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared a “war against corruption” in 2017, which broadened to include a war on drugs.¹⁰⁹ Since then, state-aligned media have reported enforcement measures leading to maritime drug seizures along Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, many of which originated from Egyptian waters, including the Sinai coastline.¹¹⁰

Essam Ahmed's case reflects several of the elements identified by IOM on trafficking: Essam said that he was recruited under deceptive conditions; transported across maritime borders without full knowledge or informed consent; and, coerced under threat and forced into physical risk (swimming across a maritime border).

In another case, **Mohammad Khalid**, a Pakistani national, is a father of five. His youngest child is a two-month-old girl. Mohammad worked as a labourer in the UAE between 2010-2012 and 2015-2017. In August 2024, he travelled from his hometown for work. About a week after he left his home, he contacted his family and said that he was working at a garment factory in Shakargarh, a city in the north-east province of Punjab, Pakistan. After that call, the family lost contact with Mohammad for an entire month as his phone

¹⁰² Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Essam Ahmed, March 2025.

¹⁰³ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Essam Ahmed, March 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁰⁵ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch, “I Wanted to Lie Down and Die”: *Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt*, 11 February 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/11/i-wanted-to-lie-down-and-die/trafficking-and-torture-eritreans-sudan-and-egypt>; Assafir Al-Arabi, “The Eastern and Western Egyptian Borders: ‘All is Allowed! Anything Goes!’”, 12 June 2019, <https://assafirarabi.com/en/26003/2019/06/12/the-eastern-and-western-egyptian-borders-all-is-allowed-anything-goes/>

¹⁰⁷ Stable Seas, *The Risk of Maritime Radiological and Nuclear Trafficking by Small, Traditional, and Unregistered Vessels*, April 2022, https://safety4sea.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Stable-Seas-Risk-of-Maritime-Radiological-and-Nuclear-Trafficking-Report-2022_04.pdf; Asharq Al-Awsat, “إحباط محاولة تهريب 4.5 طن مخدرات بجنوب سيناء” [“Foiling of Attempt to Smuggle 4.5 Tons of Drugs in South Sinai”], 3 January 2016, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/534936/إحباط-محاولة-تهريب-45-طن-مخدرات-بجنوب-سيناء> (in Arabic).

¹⁰⁸ Arab Reform Initiative, *The Egyptian Army's Counterinsurgency: History, Past Operations, and the Sinai Campaign*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-egyptian-armys-counterinsurgency-history-past-operations-and-the-sinai-campaign/>; Al-Shorouk, “ضبط تشكيل عصابي تخصص في تهريب المخدرات بجنوب سيناء” [“Criminal Gang Specialized in Drug Smuggling Arrested in South Sinai”], 21 March 2025, <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=21032025&id=b27edcbb-a3f6-4ccf-aa2c-4da2183a253c> (in Arabic).

¹⁰⁹ Middle East Monitor, “Saudi Arabia: Bin Salman declares war against corruption and drugs” (previously cited).

¹¹⁰ Arab News, “Saudi Border Guards foil attempt to smuggle 745,000 Captagon tablets from Sinai”, 29 November 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1201396/saudi-arabia>; Al Arabiya, “Saudi Arabia Foils New Attempt to Smuggle Drugs via Red Sea,” 23 January 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/variety/2017/01/23/Saudi-Arabia-foils-new-attempt-to-smuggle-drugs-via-Red-Sea>; Al Arabiya, “1.8 Million Tablets of Captagon Seized by Saudi Border Guards,” 23 April 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2018/04/23/1-8-million-tablets-of-Captagon-seized-by-Saudi-border-guards>; Saudi Press Agency, “Border guards in Tabuk thwart attempt to smuggle narcotics”, 24 April 2017, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1619923>

remained switched off. When he finally called from Saudi Arabia, he informed his family that before flying out to Saudi Arabia, he had been held at an unknown location in Peshawar, north-west of the country, where he was forced to swallow capsules [illicit drugs].¹¹¹ His brother told Amnesty International: “Initially, they were given food, but later, he and others were forced to swallow capsules”. Saudi authorities arrested Mohammad at Jeddah Airport after authorities retrieved the drugs from his stomach.¹¹² Mohammad Khalid was sentenced to death and his conviction was subsequently upheld on appeals. He remains on death row at the time of writing.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

Human trafficking is a grave human rights violation and states are obligated under international human rights law and international criminal law to ensure that it is recognized as a criminal offence.

Saudi Arabia has ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in persons as:

“... the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation”.¹¹³

Recommended Principle 7 of the OHCHR Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking provides that: “Trafficked persons shall not be detained, charged or prosecuted for ... their involvement in unlawful activities to the extent that such involvement is a direct consequence of their situation as trafficked persons”.¹¹⁴

Saudi Arabia’s 2009 Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law defines trafficking in persons in line with the Palermo Protocol as the “use, recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or receipt of a person for the purpose of exploitation”¹¹⁵ and criminalizes any act of trafficking, including sexual assault and forced labour.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Essam Ahmed, March 2025.

¹¹² Interview by voice call with a relative of Mohammad Khalid, 22 April 2025.

¹¹³ UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, “Non-punishment and non-prosecution of victims of trafficking in persons: administrative and judicial approaches to offences committed in the process of such trafficking – Background paper prepared by the Secretariat”, 9 December 2009, UN Doc. CTOC/COP/WG.4/2010/4; UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, *Report to the UN Human Rights Council*, 6 June 2012, UN Doc. A/HRC/20/18, para.27.

¹¹⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking*, 2002, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Traffickingen.pdf>, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law, 23 July 2009, <https://laws.boe.gov.sa/BoeLaws/Laws/LawDetails/4e09c59d-f173-4971-8a38-a9a700f27025/2>, Article 1.

¹¹⁶ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law (previously cited), Article 2.

4.3.2 GROSSLY UNFAIR TRIALS

NO ACCESS TO COMPETENT AND EFFECTIVE LEGAL REPRESENTATION

Each of the 25 people whose cases Amnesty International analysed for this report had to navigate complex administrative and bureaucratic judicial processes in Saudi Arabia without effective legal assistance, while facing the threat of a death sentence. Saudi Arabia's Law of Criminal Procedure establishes the right to seek legal assistance during both the investigation and trial phases.¹¹⁷ The law explicitly prohibits investigators from removing a defendant's chosen legal counsel.¹¹⁸ For defendants in criminal courts who cannot afford legal counsel, the court can appoint one at the expense of the state, according to the Minister of Justice.¹¹⁹

According to the U.S State Department country report on human rights in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government provided lawyers to defendants who made a formal application to the Ministry of Justice to receive a court-appointed lawyer and proved their inability to pay for legal representation.¹²⁰ However, eleven out of the thirteen people whose families were interviewed for the report had no legal representation throughout their interrogation, detention and trial proceedings, according to their relatives. Twelve of these men, including five Egyptian nationals, one Ethiopian national, one Jordanian national, three Pakistani nationals and two Somali nationals, were unable to afford legal representation due to financial constraints and legal aid was not made available to them by the court, their relatives said. In two of these cases, while Amnesty International is aware that the relevant diplomatic representatives made efforts to support the person, the consulate itself and the family lacked the funds to hire lawyers for defendants on death row.¹²¹

FOUR EGYPTIAN MEN SENTENCED TO DEATH

Four Egyptian men, **Rami al-Najjar**, **Ahmad Zeinhum**, **Abdelfattah Kamal Abdelaziz** and **Hisham al-Tlees**, were convicted and sentenced to death in January 2019 on charges that varied greatly in severity - from trafficking over 180,000 amphetamine pills to bringing controlled drugs into Saudi Arabia to selling and possessing eight grams of hashish for personal consumption.

The criminal court in Tabuk sentenced all four men to death. They were all sentenced to death based on the discretion of the judge. Their sentence was upheld by the Appeals Court of Tabuk in November 2019, meaning the men could now be executed at any time.

According to court documents analysed by Amnesty International, the four men had no legal representation throughout their pretrial detention, interrogations and trial.

Following their conviction, the court stated the men had the right to a legal representative to submit appeal proceedings. However, the court only appointed a lawyer for one of the men, **Abdelfattah Kamal Abdelaziz**.¹²²

Rami al-Najjar, one of the co-defendants, said that during his appeal session, the judge said that he could not argue against his conviction **"because you don't have a lawyer"**.¹²³ He submitted an appeal himself to the Supreme Judicial Council but received no response.

Rami's family were finally able to appoint a lawyer in early 2025, but they said that, as of March 2025, the lawyer had not taken any action. They said:

¹¹⁷ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure (previously cited), Article 4; The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (previously cited), Article 10: Within a sufficient period of time to be decided upon by the investigatory body, any defendant accused of any crime cited in this law is entitled to hire a practicing lawyer to defend him/herself before the case is sent to court.; The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Combating Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (previously cited), Article 9: "The competent authorities in the Kingdom shall be obligated to provide mutual legal assistance in accordance with the regulations, rules, and agreements to which the Kingdom is a party, and shall also be obligated to the principle of reciprocity."

¹¹⁸ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure (previously cited), Article 70.

¹¹⁹ Arab News, "Saudi courts can appoint counsel for criminal case defendants", 20 February 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1249996/saudi-arabia>

¹²⁰ US Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Saudi Arabia*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/saudi-arabia/>

¹²¹ Interview through secure messaging with consulate official, 25 March 2024.

¹²² Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹²³ Interview by voice call with relatives of Rami al-Najjar, September 2024.

“The lawyer has not done anything because he is waiting for updates in the case to take action. I don’t understand what updates other than Rami’s imminent execution there need to be for the lawyer to reopen the case.”¹²⁴

Rami, Ahmad, Abdelfattah and Hisham are amongst 19 Egyptian men facing execution in Tabuk Prison. By mid-2025, all 19 men remain on death row, awaiting execution.

ETHIOPIAN AND SOMALI MEN ON DEATH ROW AND EXECUTED IN 2025

On 16 February 2025, the Saudi Ministry of Interior announced the execution of **Mohamed Nur Hussein, a Somali national, for “trafficking hashish” to Saudi Arabia**,¹²⁵ marking the first execution for drug-related offences of a Somali national in Saudi Arabia since 2014.¹²⁶

According to a trusted source at the Somali Consulate in Jeddah, by mid-2025, 24 men who are Somali nationals, were at imminent risk of execution in Najran Prison, south-west Saudi Arabia for drug-related offences.¹²⁷ None of the men have legal representation, and therefore none of them can access their court documents, which according to court officials, can only be retrieved by legal representatives. According to the consulate official, neither the consulate nor their families have the financial means to hire lawyers.¹²⁸

Between January and June 2025, at the time of writing of this report, 22 Somali men had been executed.

A relative of **Ahmad Ibrahim Ahmad**, one of the Somali nationals on death row in Najran prison since 2020 told Amnesty International:

“There are around 115 people in the ward which my husband is in, they are from Yemen, Ethiopia and Somalia. Most of the men from Somalia were all arrested as they were crossing the border irregularly from Yemen in 2020. None of them have their court documents. They were just informed in a sentencing hearing before the Najran Criminal Court that they have been sentenced to death.”¹²⁹

Thirty-seven Ethiopian men facing execution are also detained in Najran prison, according to community activists and family members of Ethiopian nationals.¹³⁰ None of the men have legal representation. A few men have seen their verdict because their case involves defendants from other nationalities who have legal representation or family in Saudi Arabia who have followed up on the case, accessed the court documents and shared them. The majority of the Ethiopian men cannot access their court documents, however, which according to court officials, can only be retrieved by legal representatives.

Between January and June 2025, at the time of writing this report, ten Ethiopian men had been executed.

Dr. Ebsa Ibrahim, the brother of Sherif Ibrahim, one of the Ethiopian nationals on death row said:

“We don’t know if they have their court document ... We can’t obtain any legal documents because we don’t have anyone inside the country supporting us with the case, like a legal representative. There is also a language barrier. My brother was arrested within a week from leaving Ethiopia while crossing the Yemen border. He knew nothing about what he would face at the Saudi border.”¹³¹

¹²⁴ Interview with family member on secure messaging app, March 2025.

¹²⁵ Saudi Press Agency (SPA), “تنفيذ حكم القتل تعزيراً بأحد الجناة في منطقة نجران” [“Execution by Discretionary Punishment of a Convicted Individual in Najran Region”], 16 February 2025, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/N2262636> (in Arabic); Hiiraan Online, “‘He Thought He’d Be Freed’: Family Mourns Somali Man Executed in Saudi Arabia,” 18 February 2025, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Feb/200307/_he_thought_he_d_be_freed_family_mourns_somali_man_executed_in_saudi_arabia.a.spx

¹²⁶ According to information collated by Amnesty International from the Saudi Press Agency, Saudi authorities executed a Somali national for murder in 2018 and another Somali national for murder in 2019.

¹²⁷ Interview by voice call with consulate official, 25 March 2025.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Interview by voice call with a relative of Ahmad Ibrahim Ahmad, 28 May 2025.

¹³⁰ Interview by voice call with Eskinder Gedlu and Dr. Kassaye Balkew, Ethiopian community members, 10 and 11 June 2025.

¹³¹ Interview by voice call with Dr. Ebsa Ibrahim, brother of Sherif Ibrahim, 11 June 2025.

IRFANULLAH KHAN, PAKISTANI MAN ON DEATH ROW SINCE 2022

Irfanullah Khan, a 26-year-old Pakistani national, is currently on death row in Saudi Arabia after the authorities found 35 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine concealed in a vehicle's engine that he was importing to Saudi Arabia.

Irfanullah worked as an Uber driver for about three months after he arrived in Saudi Arabia. While working there, he and his brother were approached by an acquaintance from their village who offered to send them a vehicle to Riyadh. In exchange, the acquaintance asked them to sell their land in Pakistan. The acquaintance promised that the car would be sent directly to Irfanullah, and to facilitate this, he took their contact details in Saudi Arabia.

Irfanullah was not provided with a lawyer at any stage following his arrest, trial and sentencing. While a translator was at times present, Irfanullah told his brother that **"the interpreter seemed ... biased in favour of the prosecution ... inclined to help the court get convictions [as he] did not properly tell Irfanullah's side of the story to the Qazi (judge) nor explain the proceedings accurately."**¹³²

Irfanullah's brother was subsequently arrested, tried and convicted to a 20-year prison sentence.¹³³ Irfanullah was sentenced to death 15 days after his arrest in 2022. Irfanullah remains on death row.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

Under international law, everyone charged with a criminal offence shall be entitled, in full equality, to competent and effective legal counsel from the start of a criminal investigation and as soon as they are deprived of their liberty;¹³⁴ and "to have adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defence and to communicate with counsel of his own choosing".¹³⁵ This also enables defendants to protect their rights and prepare their defence and serves as an important safeguard against torture and other ill-treatment, and against coerced "confessions" or other self-incriminating statements. This right extends to all stages of criminal proceedings, including the preliminary investigation, before and during the trial, and appeals.¹³⁶ If the defendant cannot afford to pay, a lawyer must be assigned to them free of charge. The state and the court have a particular obligation in death penalty cases to ensure that the appointed counsel is competent, has the requisite skills and experience commensurate with the gravity of the offence, and is effective.¹³⁷ The prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment is a norm of customary international law that applies to all people in all circumstances.¹³⁸

¹³² Interview in person with Abdullah Khan, brother of Irfanullah Khan, 24 April 2025.

¹³³ In early 2024, officials from the Pakistani Embassy visited Abdullah, Irfanullah's brother, in prison in Riyadh and asked whether he would be willing to return to Pakistan. He expressed his desire to be repatriated and was asked to provide his thumbprints on some documents in Arabic. He was not told what these documents were, nor was he provided with a copy. He heard nothing further for several months, until he was informed that he would be sent back to Pakistan along with other Pakistani nationals. He returned to be imprisoned in Pakistan on 27 March 2025.

¹³⁴ The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that the "assistance of counsel should be ensured, through legal aid as necessary, immediately on arrest and throughout all subsequent proceedings to persons accused of serious crimes, in particular in cases of offences carrying the death penalty".

See: Amnesty International, *Fair Trial Manual – Second Edition* (Index: POL 30/002/2014), April 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/pol300022014en.pdf>, Chapter 3.

UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations: Trinidad and Tobago*, 3 November 2000, UN Doc. CCPR/CO/70/TT0, para.7.

¹³⁵ Arab Charter on Human Rights, Article 16; ICCPR, Article 14; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 40(2); Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.41; Amnesty International, *Fair Trial Manual – Second Edition* (previously cited).

¹³⁶ UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, Principles 1 and 5.

¹³⁷ UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems, Guideline 13.

¹³⁸ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5; ICCPR, Article 7; Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention Against Torture), Article 2; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 37(a) and 19; International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Migrant Workers Convention), Article 10.

TORTURE-TAINTED “CONFESSIONS”

The lack of any, or in rare cases where available, competent and effective legal assistance following the arrest and throughout the detention, investigation and trial proceedings of foreign nationals accused of drug-related offences exposed men whose cases Amnesty International analysed to increased risk of torture or other ill-treatment to extract “confessions” of guilt.

In at least four of the cases documented in this report, people told the judge or their families that they were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment during their pretrial detention to extract “confessions”. In the past decade, Amnesty International has documented additional cases of dozens of people who were sentenced to death on the basis of “confessions” they told the judge were coerced.¹³⁹ In dozens of court documents analysed by Amnesty International, courts took no steps to investigate the allegations of torture nor ascertain the validity or admissibility of the self-incriminating statements as evidence to convict.¹⁴⁰

Mohamed Ahmed Saad and Omar Ahmad Ibrahim, both Egyptian nationals, were arrested in May 2017 and charged with trafficking the synthetic drug Captagon. They were detained incommunicado without any communication with their families for a year and a half after arrest. They have been on death row for almost eight years. Both men were denied access to legal representation and, according to court documents analysed by Amnesty International, “confessed” to the charge after being subjected to severe beatings.¹⁴¹ Despite this, the judge did not order an investigation into torture and the “confessions” were used as evidence. On October 9, 2019, the Court of Appeal upheld their death sentence.¹⁴² Both men remain on death row at the time of writing.

In another case of an Egyptian national facing execution, Mohammad Arafat was the sole breadwinner for his family. He was arrested on 27 March 2017. According to court documents analysed by Amnesty International, the Criminal Court in Tabuk convicted and sentenced Mohammad Arafat to death on 14 March 2018 for receiving prohibited drugs suspected to be Captagon and Tramadol.

Mohammad Arafat told the court he was tortured, and this torture was the reason he made a confession. He told the judge that **“based on the torture I endured, if I were asked to confess to murder, I would have.”** Despite his court documents including this allegation of torture before the court, the Court of Appeal in Tabuk upheld his sentence on 28 June 2020.¹⁴³

He was unable to afford legal representation. In describing the financial hardships that led to Mohammad and his family facing the criminal justice system on their own, his wife said:

“Mohammad was responsible for caring for his 75-year-old mother, who suffers from a brain stroke, and his two sisters who have hearing impairments and cannot hear or speak. He is the sole breadwinner for our family after my father and older brother’s death. We were unable to afford legal representation for him.”¹⁴⁴

Mohammad Arafat has been on death row for over seven years.

¹³⁹ Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Mass death sentences in ‘spy trial’ a travesty of justice”, 6 December 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/12/saudi-arabia-mass-death-sentences-in-spy-trial-a-travesty-of-justice/>; Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Further information: 14 Saudi Arabian men at imminent risk of execution” (Index: MDE 23/6783/2017), 23 July 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/6783/2017/en>.

¹⁴⁰ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Muzzling critical voices: politicized trials before Saudi Arabia’s Specialized Criminal Court* (previously cited).

¹⁴¹ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁴² Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁴³ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁴⁴ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Mohammad Arafat, March 2025.

HUSSEIN ABO AL-KHEIR
“BEATEN TO THE POINT THAT HE COULD NOT HOLD A PEN” THEN EXECUTED



Hussein Abo al-Kheir © Private

Hussein Abo al-Kheir, a Jordanian national and father of eight who was executed in March 2023, told his family that he “confessed” under torture to stay alive. He told his sister: **“When I went to the judge, I told him everything about the beatings, torture and slurs against me and my family.”**¹⁴⁵

According to his court documents, Hussein told the judge that he was suspended from his feet and subjected to beatings and insults.¹⁴⁶

Hussein retracted his “confession” before the Tabuk Criminal Court on 15 December 2014 and again on 6 July 2017. He said the authorities had tortured him into signing the self-incriminating statement with his fingerprint because he was beaten to the point that he could not hold a pen. However, the judge did not order an investigation into the torture claim and used the “confession” as evidence to convict him.

Hussein Abo al-Kheir had no financial means to hire a lawyer. When his family tried to seek the support of their community in Jordan to hire legal representation for him, they faced societal stigma and were refused support, due to the “taboo” around Hussein being detained on drug-related charges.¹⁴⁷ He had no access to legal representation or consular assistance during his pretrial detention and trial proceedings.

Hussein’s sister told Amnesty International:

“There was another Jordanian man detained with Hussein on very similar charges. His death sentence was commuted to a 20-year prison term after his family hired a private lawyer who fought for reopening his case. Money is power in cases like this. If we had money and a lawyer, maybe Hussein would have still been alive.”¹⁴⁸

After almost nine years in detention, Hussein was executed. His execution contravened an October 2022 decision by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which found that he was being arbitrarily detained without a legal basis because of his conviction after an unfair trial. In 2022, the UN Working Group had called for his death sentence to be quashed and for his ‘immediate and unconditional release.’¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, sister of Hussein Abo al-Kheir, 15 April 2025.

¹⁴⁶ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

¹⁴⁷ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, Hussein Abo al-Kheir’s sister, 15 April 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, Hussein Abo al-Kheir’s sister, 15 April 2025.

¹⁴⁹ OHCHR, “Saudi Arabia: UN experts call for immediate moratorium on executions for drug offences”, 1 December 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/saudi-arabia-un-experts-call-immediate-moratorium-executions-drug-offences>

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

The prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment is a norm of customary international law that applies to all people in all circumstances.¹⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia's Law of Criminal Procedure also states that "a person under arrest may not be subjected to any bodily or moral harm, nor torture or degrading treatment".¹⁵¹ However, the law does not define the terms "torture" or "degrading treatment", does not impose criminal sanctions on officials who commit these acts, does not mandate a criminal investigation into torture allegations, and does not provide that confessions obtained through torture or ill-treatment are inadmissible in court.

As a State party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention against Torture), Saudi Arabia is obligated to "take effective legislative, administrative, judicial or other measures to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction".¹⁵² Saudi Arabia is also obliged to initiate "a prompt and impartial investigation, wherever there is reasonable ground to believe that an act of torture has been committed."¹⁵³

The Convention against Torture also requires the government to "ensure that its competent authorities proceed to a prompt and impartial investigation, wherever there is reasonable ground to believe that an act of torture has been committed in any territory under its jurisdiction."

People who have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated must have accessible and effective remedies, including reparation, and those responsible must be brought to justice.¹⁵⁴

International law prohibits the use of statements obtained through torture, other ill-treatment or coercion as evidence against the victims at their trial.¹⁵⁵ Statements elicited as a result of torture, ill-treatment or other forms of coercion must be excluded as evidence in criminal proceedings, except those brought against suspected perpetrators of such abuse.¹⁵⁶

4.3.3 NO CONSULAR ASSISTANCE

Foreign nationals may find themselves at further disadvantage in court proceedings in Saudi Arabia depending on whether or not their home country provides consular assistance and the effectiveness of that consular assistance. The availability and quality of consular assistance depends on many factors, including the status of the death penalty in their country of nationality; the government's political agenda and willingness to intervene with a foreign government; and the resources available to the relevant foreign representation to assist and advocate for their nationals facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia.¹⁵⁷

In all 25 cases documented by Amnesty International, people have had to navigate an inherently opaque and unfamiliar criminal justice system on their own, without effective consular assistance.

According to a consulate official in Jeddah, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the consulate of arrests of their nationals. However, the Saudi authorities did not inform the consulate of the date of sentencing of their nationals or share any court documents or official documentation of their nationals' court proceedings with the consulate.¹⁵⁸

In the case of **Hussein Abo al-Kheir**, a Jordanian national, the consulate did not respond to repeated communications from his family abroad. His sister told Amnesty International:

"I repeatedly contacted the embassy in Riyadh, no one ever got back to me. I then asked people inside Saudi to also speak to them. They said that they can't interfere in cases like this. After Hussein's execution, all we wanted was his body. I was told they [the Saudi

¹⁵⁰ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5; ICCPR, Article 7; Convention Against Torture, Article 2; Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 37(a) and 19; International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Migrant Workers Convention), Article 10.

¹⁵¹ The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Law of Criminal Procedure (previously cited), Article 2.

¹⁵² Convention Against Torture, Article 2.

¹⁵³ Convention Against Torture, Article 12.

¹⁵⁴ Convention Against Torture, Article 12.

¹⁵⁵ Convention Against Torture, Article 15; Arab Charter on Human Rights, Article 16(6); ICCPR, Article 14(3)(g).

¹⁵⁶ Convention Against Torture, Article 15.

¹⁵⁷ Amnesty International, *Unlawful and Discriminatory: The Death Penalty for Drug-Related Offences* (Index: ACT 50/7213/2023), 10 October 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7213/2023/en>

¹⁵⁸ Interview through secure messaging with consulate official, 28 May 2025.

authorities] won't return his body. The Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't even demand for his body. I heard later that this might be possible on our expense."

For people on death row from Pakistan, JPP researchers told Amnesty International that in virtually all cases of people on death row that they have documented, Pakistani officials rarely answer helplines and prison visits are completely out of the question.¹⁵⁹

In Irfanullah Khan's case, his brother said that "When Irfan contacted the Pakistani Embassy for support during this time [his detention], they told him to hire a lawyer, which would cost around 250,000 to 300,000 Saudi Riyals (around USD 67,000 to 80,000)."

While legal fees for capital cases vary greatly, the cost quoted to Irfanullah is prohibitively expensive, making access to legal representation inaccessible to him or any of the people whose cases are documented in this report.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

As a signatory to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, Saudi Arabia is obligated to inform foreign nationals of their right to communicate with their consulate without delay; inform consulates of foreign nationals who are arrested or detained and allow consular officials to visit their nationals who are under arrest or in prison and to communicate with them.¹⁶⁰

Under international law, foreign nationals "shall be allowed reasonable facilities to communicate with the diplomatic and consular representatives of the State to which they belong."¹⁶¹

OHCHR has noted that countries should do more to protect their citizens facing the death penalty in other countries. This underscores the view that states have a responsibility to provide robust consular support in such circumstance to uphold the rights of nationals abroad.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Interview by voice call with researchers from Justice Project Pakistan, 24 April 2025.

¹⁶⁰ Vienna Convention on Consular Relations; UN General Assembly, Resolution 79/179, adopted on 17 December 2024, UN Doc. A/RES/79/179, para. 8(b).

¹⁶¹ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 38.

¹⁶² UN News, "More protection needed for foreign nationals facing death penalty", 30 October 2015, <https://news.un.org/en/audio/2015/10/606092>

4.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL ON PEOPLE ON DEATH ROW AND FAMILIES BACK HOME

“The prison population includes Syrians, Sudanese, Indians, and mostly Yemenis and Pakistanis ... Prison guards treat them very poorly and do not use the prisoners' names and instead call them names like "donkey" or "dog" in Arabic. When someone is about to be executed, they do not find out until the moment they are about to be taken for execution. A guard comes into the room and asks the prisoner to come out. At that moment, the prisoner does not know whether it is for execution or something else. Once outside the room, they are told that they have to go before the Sheikhs [religious clerics]. This is when they realize that their execution is about to take place. They are then blindfolded and taken for execution.”

— Abdullah, brother of Irfanullah, a Pakistani national on death row¹⁶³

The psychological toll on people on death row and families with loved ones on death row in Saudi Arabia is immense, marked by agonizing uncertainty and the burden of navigating an opaque judicial and pardon system.

Saudi laws do not contain explicit provisions mandating advance notification of executions to detainees or their families, nor does it guarantee the handover of the bodies of people executed.

In practice, families are often not informed of the scheduled execution, and at best, informed by their loved one on death row 24 hours before the execution, family members of people on death row said.

In many instances, defendants themselves did not know if and when their convictions and death sentences were upheld and if and when appeals for pardons were rejected. A number of people told their families how fellow detainees in their ward were taken from their cells in the middle of the night without prior warning for execution.¹⁶⁴

The practice of transferring groups of foreign nationals on death row convicted of similar offences, such as the Egyptian nationals in Tabuk or Ethiopian and Somali nationals in Najran, to a single, isolated ward is widely interpreted by detainees and their families as an ominous sign of impending executions.

UN bodies and experts have repeatedly condemned the lack of notification of imminent execution in several countries as a form of ill-treatment that violates the absolute prohibition on torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Interview in person with Abdullah Khan, brother of Irfanullah Khan, 24 April 2025.

¹⁶⁴ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of an Egyptian man on death row, 14 April 2025.

¹⁶⁵ Committee Against Torture, Concluding Observations: Japan, 2013, UN Doc. CAT/C/JPN/CO/2, para.15; Committee Against Torture, Concluding Observations: Yemen, 2009, UN Doc. CAT/C/YEM/CO/2, para.16;

For families whose loved ones have been on death row for years, the absence of transparent information regarding case progress and irregular communication with their loved ones, coupled with the constant fear of the death sentence being carried out, has created a state of perpetual anxiety and despair. This has been recognized by UN bodies and independent experts as amounting to ill-treatment.¹⁶⁶ This has been further aggravated by financial burdens, and the emotional distress of witnessing the deterioration of their family members' mental and physical health from a distance.

For some people, prison officials informed them the day before their execution that their turn has come. In other cases, family members found out about the execution through calls from other detainees or through the media, after the Ministry of Interior reported the execution on the official press agency.

In addition to this profound state of uncertainty, families of men on death row in Saudi Arabia described the economic and psychological impact of losing their primary provider following their arrest. **Mohamed Saad's** sister said:

“Since Mohamed’s arrest, my father lost his mind. He has had epilepsy seizures, runs out of the house and cries day and night for what happened to Mohamed. Since Mohamed’s arrest my father is unable to work. Mohamed and my father were the family’s breadwinners. We have had to take out loans due to the sudden loss of income, and my sisters and I now share the financial responsibilities, including our rent, my father’s medical expenses and our home’s everyday expenses ... I find out about updates on Mohamed’s case when he calls me from prison. I don’t know if he’s been to the appeals court. I have written appeals for Mohamed’s sentence myself and took the documents to the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the Ministry know nothing about his case, they find out about Mohamed’s case updates from me.”¹⁶⁷

Mohamed Saad has been detained since May 2017 for trafficking Captagon. His death sentence was upheld by the Court of Appeal in Tabuk in October 2019.¹⁶⁸ He remains on death row at the time of writing.

4.4.1 “NO BODY TO MOURN”: BODIES OF PEOPLE EXECUTED WITHHELD BY AUTHORITIES

For some families, this trauma has been compounded by the Saudi authorities' withholding of the person's body. Three of the 25 people whose cases Amnesty International documented for this report were executed between January and June 2025. In all cases, Saudi Arabia did not return the bodies of people executed to their families or inform the families where the bodies are buried, denying families their fundamental right to mourn in accordance with their cultural and religious traditions and seek closure.

In one case, a man from the Ethiopian community was executed in May 2025. A community member, whose brother is also on death row, told Amnesty International:

“He called his mother and told her ‘They will take me tomorrow morning, this is my last breath’. Since his execution, she’s been waiting for his body to be returned to the family. Weeks later, after the family didn’t receive the body, she developed extreme psychiatric manifestations, leading to her being admitted to the psychiatric ward of a hospital. They are not only killing our brothers, they are killing us too.”

Prior to his execution, during the period in which the moratorium on executions for drug-related offences was in place, **Hussein Abo al-Kheir** received conflicting information about the status of his case. According to his family, Hussein told them in June 2021 that prison officials told him that his death sentence had been

Committee Against Torture, Concluding Observations: Belarus, 2011, UN Doc. CAT/C/BLR/CO/4, para.27; Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations: Botswana, 2008, UN Doc. CCPR/C/BWA/CO/1, para.13; Human Rights Committee, Vladislav Kovalev et al. v. Belarus, Views, 2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/106/D/2120/2011, para.11.10; UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Report, 9 August 2012, UN Doc. A/67/279, paras 40, 52, 80(c) and (f).

¹⁶⁶ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited), para.5; UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Report, 9 August 2012, UN Doc. A/67/279, paras 40, 52, 80(c) and (f).

¹⁶⁷ Interview through secure messaging with a relative of Mohamed Saad, March 2025.

¹⁶⁸ Court document on file with Amnesty International.

suspended, and the sentence was being reviewed by the Ministry of Interior in light of a royal directive to implement pardons for some detainees held for drug offences.¹⁶⁹

Although some of his fellow defendants on death row were released at the time, Hussein remained in detention, uncertain about his status. His sister said,

“One day he hears of news that he would be out thanks to the moratorium [on drug-related offences] as some people around him had their sentences commuted and, on another day, he knew nothing about his fate... It was a shocking tragedy; I can't describe it to you in words. We were devastated, especially that there is no body to mourn. No funeral ceremony... Back in Amman [capital of Jordan, where Hussein is from] my family sat in silence in their living room when they heard the news and started screaming like mad people. It's an image that broke my heart.”¹⁷⁰

Hussein Abo al-Kheir was executed without prior notification in March 2023.

His sister said, **“He was executed after nine years of torture for him, his wife, children and us.”¹⁷¹**

Similarly, in one case of a Pakistani national on death row in Saudi Arabia, families learned of the execution days later through phone calls from others on death row, sometimes instructed by prison officials to convey the news.¹⁷² This lack of direct communication is compounded by limited contact opportunities due to geographical distance and infrequent phone calls, leaving families in prolonged uncertainty about the fate of their loved ones.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

The cumulative effect of the absence of transparent information on the status of people's cases and the constant fear of the death sentence being carried out creates an environment of extreme psychological distress for both people on death row and their families, violating multiple international human rights standards concerning the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, the right to a fair trial, and to observe their religious practices around burial.¹⁷³

The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture to include acts that intentionally inflict severe mental suffering for purposes such as punishment or intimidation.¹⁷⁴

Further, the lack of transparency in the implementation of the death penalty violates article 9 of the United Nations Safeguards Protecting the Rights of those facing the Death Penalty, which states that “where capital punishment occurs, it shall be carried out so as to inflict the minimum possible suffering”. These safeguards, endorsed by consensus by the Economic and Social Council, constitute customary international law that all retentionist states are obliged to follow.¹⁷⁵

The UN Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment No. 36 on the right to life, highlights the need to inform the convicted person and their family, as well as legal representatives, in advance about a pending execution, including its date, time, and location, to allow for a last visit.¹⁷⁶ Carrying out executions without prior notification has inflicted severe mental suffering on people and their families.

Furthermore, the treatment of people deprived of their liberty, including those on death row, is governed by international standards such as the Nelson Mandela Rules. These rules set out minimum requirements for the humane treatment of prisoners, prohibiting torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.¹⁷⁷

¹⁶⁹ In June 2021, King Salman issued a royal directive to the General Directorate of Prisons, ordering them to implement pardons procedures for some detainees held for drug offences. Although it was unclear whether this order would apply to those on death row, some detainees held within his facility were released.

¹⁷⁰ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, Hussein Abo al-Kheir's sister, 15 April 2025.

¹⁷¹ Interview by voice call with Zainab Abo al-Kheir, Hussein Abo al-Kheir's sister, 15 April 2025.

¹⁷² Interview by voice call with researchers from Justice Project Pakistan, 24 April 2025.

¹⁷³ Convention Against Torture, Articles 2 and 16; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 10 and 11; Committee Against Torture, Concluding Observations: Belarus, 2011, UN Doc. CAT/C/BLR/CO/4, para.27; Human Rights Committee, Kovaleva and Kozyar v. Belarus, Views, Communication No. 2120/2011, 29 October 2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/106/D/2120/2011, para. 11.10.

¹⁷⁴ Convention Against Torture, Article 1.

¹⁷⁵ UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), *Safeguards Guaranteeing Protection of the Rights of Those Facing the Death Penalty*, annex to Resolution 1984/50, 25 May 1984, Safeguard 9.

¹⁷⁶ Human Rights Committee, General Comment 36 (previously cited).

¹⁷⁷ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 1.

5. EXECUTIONS OF THE SHIA MINORITY FOR TERRORISM-RELATED OFFENCES

Members of Saudi Arabia's minority Shia community have long faced discrimination in education, the justice system, religious freedoms, and employment.¹⁷⁸ Repression, discrimination and marginalization has fuelled political dissent.

Instead of addressing these underlying grievances, Saudi authorities have responded by quashing protests and silencing and imprisoning members of the Shia minority who have expressed political opposition to the government to punish and deter further dissent. One of the most extreme forms of this repression has been Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty against members of the Shia community, including children, on the basis of vague and overly broad "terrorism"-related legal provisions over the last ten years.¹⁷⁹

Amnesty International's quantitative analysis of executions indicates that Saudi authorities have executed 120 members of the Shia community for "terrorism"-related offences over the last ten years.¹⁸⁰ This is a startling high number. Between January 2014 and June 2025, Saudi Arabia executed 286 people, in total, for "terrorism" -related offences. Out of the total, 120 were members of the Shia community. Saudi Arabia's Shia minority are estimated to make up 10 to 12% of the population,¹⁸¹ yet, over the last ten years, they made up 42% of the people Saudi authorities executed for "terrorism" -related offences.

¹⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Anti-Shia Bias Driving Saudi Arabia Unrest", 24 August 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/24/anti-shia-bias-driving-saudi-arabia-unrest>; Human Rights Watch, "Anti-Shia Bias Driving Saudi Arabia Unrest", 24 August 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/24/anti-shia-bias-driving-saudi-arabia-unrest>; Human Rights Watch, "They Are Not Our Brothers": Hate Speech by Saudi Officials, 26 September 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/26/they-are-not-our-brothers/hate-speech-saudi-officials>

¹⁷⁹ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Muzzling critical voices: politicized trials before Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court* (previously cited).

¹⁸⁰ Due to no official data on the sectarian affiliation of people executed in the Saudi Press Agency announcements, this report does not make a conclusion on whether this reflects a broader trend of disproportionality of executions against members of the Shia minority for all offences.

¹⁸¹ US Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia*, May 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>

FIGURE 5: SHIA AND NON-SHIA PEOPLE EXECUTED FOR “TERRORISM”-RELATED OFFENCES: JANUARY 2014 TO JUNE 2025

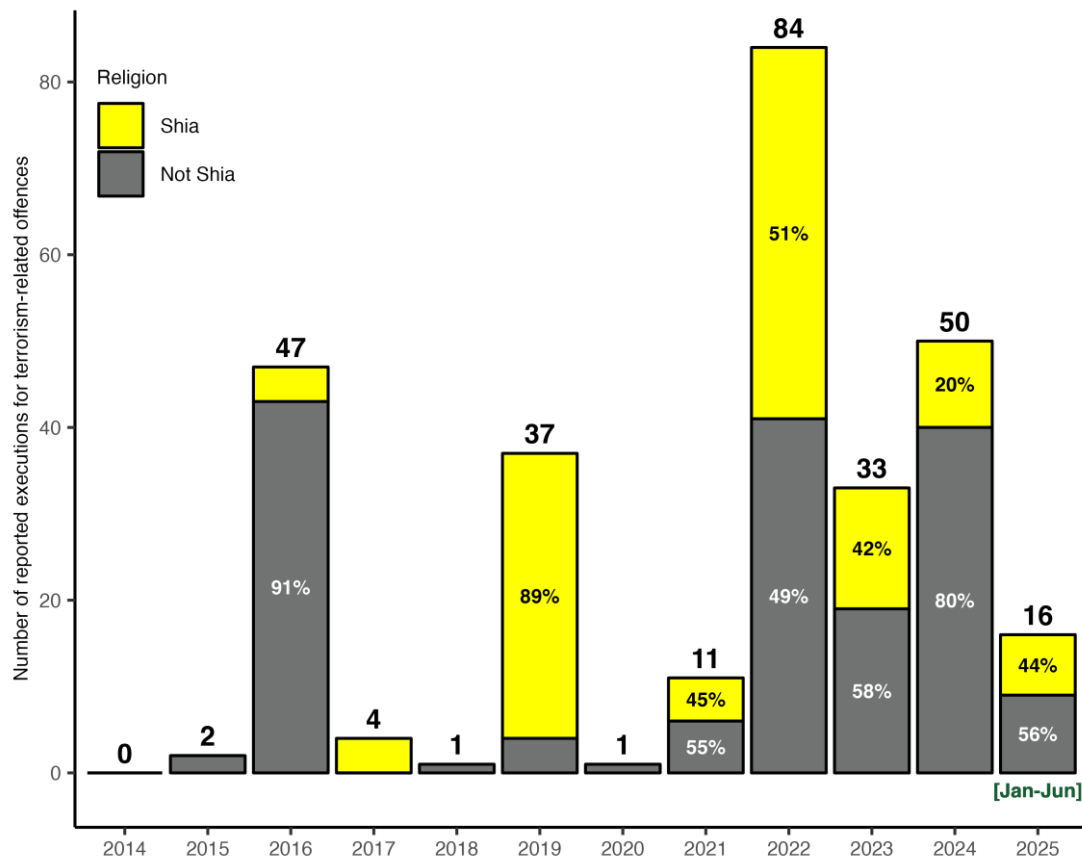


Figure 5: This bar graph shows the proportion of people identified by the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights as belonging to Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority community among the executions reported by SPA each year that mentioned “terrorism” or “treason” as part of the offence and collated by Amnesty International. The total number of executions that were carried out is higher. The number on the top of each bar indicates the total number of people executed for “terrorism”-related charges that year. The 2025 bar only represents the first half of the year, from January to June 2025. Bar segments are coloured according to whether the person executed was identified as a member of the Shia minority (yellow) or not (grey). Bar segments are annotated with the percentage of total “terrorism”-related executions of Shia individuals versus all other people for a given year.

According to Amnesty International’s analysis, Saudi Arabia has executed an increasing number of people for “terrorism”-related offences. Between January 2014 and December 2017, Saudi Arabia executed 53 people on “terrorism”-related offences, constituting around 10% out of the total executions carried out during this period. Between January 2018 and December 2021, 50 people were executed for “terrorism”-related offences, constituting around 12% out of the total executions carried out during this period. Executions of members of the Shia minority sharply increased over time, with such executions making up 76% (38 people) of the total between January 2018 and December 2021 (compared to 8 people, or 15.1% of the total between January 2014 and December 2017).

In 2022, the number of overall “terrorism”-related executions rose starkly. Between January 2022 and June 2025, Saudi Arabia executed 183 people for “terrorism”-related offences, including 74 members of the Shia community (40.4%).

This sharp increase of executions of members of the Shia minority for “terrorism”-related offences can be linked to increasing prosecutions and sentences of members of the Shia community for their involvement in anti-government protests in the Shia majority Eastern Province between 2011 and 2013.

In the wake of the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, thousands of men and women from Saudi Arabia’s historically marginalized Shia religious minority rose in protests in the country’s Eastern Province. Those protesting called for political, economic, and social reforms, demanded the release of

hundreds of people from their community who had been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial,¹⁸² and urged an end to systemic discrimination against the Shia community, including unequal access to employment.

In response, King Abdullah announced additional state benefits and deployed significant security forces to quash protests. In March 2011, the government reissued its long-standing ban on all demonstrations in the country.¹⁸³

Between 2011 and 2012, hundreds of people from the Shia minority were reportedly arrested in the Eastern Province due to their involvement in protests.¹⁸⁴ Many were prosecuted in ensuing years. From 2019 onwards, more and more of these people began to be executed.

Mass executions have driven part of this increase. In 2019, Saudi Arabia carried out a mass execution, including of 37 men who were convicted of “terrorism”-related offences, 33 (89%) of whom were from the Shia minority.¹⁸⁵ In 2022, there was a significant spike in executions of members of the Shia community. That year, Saudi Arabia conducted another mass execution for “terrorism”-related offences; over half of the people executed (at least 43) were from the Shia minority.¹⁸⁶

Several of those executed in the 2022 mass execution were convicted of charges such as “disrupting the social fabric and national cohesion” and “participating in and inciting sit-ins and protests”. These describe acts that are protected by the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Amongst those executed for such offences were Mohammad al-Shakhouri and As’ad Ali. Both men were tried by Saudi Arabia’s Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) for “terrorism”-related offences. Both men said they made “confessions” due to torture. In both cases, the judge did not order an investigation into the torture allegations. Both men were sentenced to death and executed in 2022.

According to court documents analysed by Amnesty International, the SCC sentenced Mohammad al-Shakhouri to death on 21 February 2021 on “terrorism”-related charges for alleged violent offences related to his participation in anti-government protests. He had no access to legal representation during his detention and interrogation, and his family was only allowed to visit him for the first time eight months after his arrest. Al-Shakhouri told the court that he suffered bruising and severe pain in his back, ribs and mouth after being tortured. He lost most of his teeth after security officers repeatedly punched him in the face, yet he was denied medical care. At trial, Al-Shakhouri withdrew his “confession”, which he said he made as a result of torture. The judge still sentenced him to death. In light of his withdrawal of the confession, his court documents state that the judge decided to sentence him to death based on his discretion (*ta’zir*), instead of under *hadd*, which would have required him to validate his confession before the judge. The judge did not order an investigation into the torture allegations. He was executed in March 2022.

As’ad Ali was sentenced to death by the SCC on 30 January 2021 for similar offences under the counterterrorism law. At his trial he told the court that he had suffered physical and psychological torture while being interrogated in solitary confinement and that his “confession” had also been extracted through torture. As’ad Ali said that he was denied medical treatment despite suffering from acute pain. At trial, he withdrew his “confession”, which he said he made as a result of torture. Similar to Mohammad al-Shakhouri’s case, in light of As’ad Ali’s withdrawal of the “confession”, his court documents state that the judge decided to sentence him to death based on his discretion (*ta’zir*), instead of under *hadd*. The judge did not order an investigation into the torture. As’ad Ali was executed in March 2022.

According to Amnesty International’s quantitative analysis, 73 of the 120 (60.8%) members of the Shia minority executed for “terrorism”-related offences over the past ten years were on the basis of *ta’zir*. Of the remaining 47, one person was executed on the basis of *hadd* and 46 people were executed without a known sharia categorization (See Chapter 3.1 on the “unknown” legal basis for executions).

The SCC, which was set-up to try terrorism-related cases, has been the authorities’ tool of choice to put on trial Shia dissidents and protesters. Since 2013, many dozens of people from the country’s Shia minority

¹⁸² Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security* (Index: MDE 23/016/2011), 1 December 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE23/016/2011/en/>

¹⁸³ BBC, “Saudi Arabia imposes ban on all protests”, 5 March 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12656744>

¹⁸⁴ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security* (previously cited).

¹⁸⁵ Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: 37 put to death in shocking execution spree”, 23 April 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/04/saudi-arabia-37-put-to-death-in-shocking-execution-spreed/>

¹⁸⁶ Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Mass execution of 81 men shows urgent need to abolish the death penalty”, 15 March 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/saudi-arabia-mass-execution-of-81-men-shows-urgent-need-to-abolish-the-death-penalty/>

have been prosecuted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms or death following grossly unfair trials for “terrorism”-related charges tied to their participation in anti-government protests.¹⁸⁷

Amnesty International has repeatedly documented how Saudi authorities have employed the country’s counterterrorism laws, which use overly vague definitions of “terrorism”, a “terrorist crime” and a “terrorist entity”, to punish and silence members of the Shia minority for their dissent. These provisions have been used in hundreds of cases to criminalize and impose the death penalty for the exercise of fundamental rights, including expression and assembly.

Following his visit to Saudi Arabia between 30 April and 4 May 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on promoting and protecting human rights while countering terrorism raised key human rights concerns with regard to “existing abusive counterterrorism and security-related legislation to stifle dissent, the over broad definition of terrorism that often serves as a basis for prosecuting people engaged in non-violent expression and advocacy, especially in defence of human rights and journalists, as well as the pattern of systematic repression in the country’s Eastern Province, where the majority of the Shia population resides.”¹⁸⁸

5.1 CONTINUING TO SUBJECT CHILDREN TO THE DEATH PENALTY

Saudi authorities have backtracked on their commitments to abolish the use of the death penalty on people who were children, i.e. younger than 18 years of age, at the time of their alleged offences.

Saudi Arabia’s 2018 Juvenile Law and a subsequent 2020 royal order aimed to reform punishments imposed for *ta’zir* (discretionary) offences committed by children, including by removing the death penalty as a punishment and replacing it with a maximum of 10 years imprisonment. A carve out, however, was maintained for children who were alleged to have committed “terrorism”-related offences.

In May 2023, the SHRC announced the complete abolition of the death penalty for those younger than 18 at the time of the alleged offence in *ta’zir* cases,¹⁸⁹ although the execution of children remains possible for offences classified as *hadd* or *qisas*. The SHRC’s announcement seemed to indicate that executions of children who were alleged to have committed “terrorism”-related offences in *ta’zir* cases would now end.

However, people accused of committing *ta’zir* offences as children continue to be subjected to the death penalty. Amnesty International has documented the cases of seven young men, six of whom are from Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority, who were children at the time of their alleged *ta’zir* offences; some as young as 12. At time of writing, six of these young men remain at risk of execution. Due to the lack of transparency in cases of people sentenced to death in the country, it is possible the number of people on death row who were children at the time of their offence is higher.

For four of these seven young men, whose cases garnered international scrutiny,¹⁹⁰ a retrial was granted in November 2024, but the court re-imposed death sentences after addressing some procedural flaws (see below: Juveniles on death row). The four young men who were tried for “terrorism”-related offences, were children at the time of the alleged offence, and their original sentencing was based on *ta’zir*.

The imposition of the death penalty for offences committed when a defendant was below 18 years old is absolutely prohibited under international human rights law. This is a peremptory norm of general international law. Saudi Arabia is party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which in Article 37(a) prohibits the imposition of the death penalty on children. When becoming party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government of Saudi Arabia entered a significant reservation “with respect to all such articles as are in conflict with the provisions of Islamic law”.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Muzzling critical voices: politicized trials before Saudi Arabia’s Specialized Criminal Court* (previously cited).

¹⁸⁸ UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism concludes visit to Saudi Arabia, Preliminary findings of the visit to Saudi Arabia, 4 May 2017, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21584&LangID=E

¹⁸⁹ Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Abolition of juvenile death penalty must be followed by clear implementation”, 27 April 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/saudi-arabia-abolition-of-juvenile-death-penalty/>

¹⁹⁰ US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “Youssef al-Manasif”, Religious Prisoners of Conscience: FoRB Victims Database, <https://www.uscifr.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/youssef-al-manasif> (accessed on 27 June 2025).

¹⁹¹ United Nations Treaty Collection, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=en#EndDec ¹⁹¹ United Nations Treaty Collection, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-

In its General Comment 24, which deals more generally with reservations to human rights treaties, the UN Human Rights Committee explains that provisions in the treaty that “represent customary international law (and a fortiori when they have the character of peremptory norms) may not be the subject of reservations. Accordingly, a State may not reserve the right to engage in slavery, to torture, to subject persons to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, to arbitrarily deprive persons of their lives, to arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, to deny freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to presume a person guilty unless he proves his innocence, to execute pregnant women or children [...].”¹⁹²

In its Concluding Observations in 2016, following the review of Saudi Arabia’s compliance with the CRC, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its concern “about the State party’s general reservation to the Convention, which provides for the precedence of sharia law over international treaties and undermines the effective implementation of the Convention. The Committee reiterates its previous recommendations that the State party review the general nature of its reservation with a view to withdrawing it in accordance with the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights, held in 1993”. The Committee requested the authorities to “amend its legislation without any further delay with a view to unambiguously prohibiting the imposition of the death sentence on children, in line with its obligations under article 37 of the Convention.”¹⁹³

JUVENILES ON DEATH ROW



↑ Left to right: Yusuf al-Manasif, Abdullah al-Darazi and Jalal Labbad © Private

In November 2024, reports from families indicated that the death sentences of five people who were children when their alleged offences were committed had been overturned by the SCC appeals court, leading to retrials in some cases. The family of **Yusuf al-Manasif**, who was a child at the time of his alleged offences, called the SCC appeals court, which confirmed that his death sentence had been commuted and that he would be retried. The court did not explain why his sentence had been overturned.

According to trusted sources, Yusuf was retried on 5 December 2024, with the Public Prosecution presenting the same initial charge sheet that had been used against Yusuf at his first trial. Charges included: “Joining an armed terrorist entity” and “Seeking to disrupt the social fabric and national cohesion and participating and inciting sit-ins and protests that disrupt the state’s cohesion and security”. In the retrial, the Public Prosecution again demanded the death penalty for Yusuf. The court appointed a new lawyer for Yusuf. The SCC held a number of subsequent hearings between December 2024 and February 2025.

On 25 February 2025, trusted sources informed Amnesty International that Yusuf al-Manasif was once again sentenced to death. The sentencing hearing was held under a heavy military presence, and defendants, including Yusuf, had their hands and feet shackled.

11&chapter=4&clang=_en#EndDec **United Nations Treaty Collection, 11. Convention on the Rights of the Child,** https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=_en#EndDec

¹⁹² UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General Comment 24: Issues Relating to Reservations Made Upon Ratification or Accession to the Covenant or the Optional Protocols Thereto, or in Relation to Declarations Under Article 41 of the Covenant (previously cited), para.8.

¹⁹³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia, 25 October 2016, UN Doc. CRC/C/SAU/CO/3-4, paras 6 and 21.

In a 15 November 2024 opinion, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) concluded that that the detention of **Yusuf al-Manasif** and four other people from Saudi Arabia's Shia minority, **Jalal Labbad**, **Jawad Qureiris**, **Abdullah al-Darazi**, and **Hassan al-Faraj**, who are on death row for offences in relation to their participation in anti-government protests when they were minors, is arbitrary.¹⁹⁴ The UN WGAD based its conclusion on the fact that their arrests had no legal basis (finding that vaguely and broadly worded provisions in the country's anti-cybercrime and counterterrorism laws violate the principle of legality), resulted from their exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, and were conducted on discriminatory grounds because they belonged to the Shia minority. The UN WGAD also concluded that the gravity of fair trial and due process violations that the five people faced before the SCC made their detention arbitrary. The UN WGAD reiterated its concern that the SCC "cannot be considered an independent and impartial tribunal".¹⁹⁵

Abdullah al-Darazi, **Jawad Qureiris** and **Hassan al-Faraj** were also retried and again sentenced to death in the beginning of 2025.¹⁹⁶ **Jalal Labbad** and **Abdullah al-Darazi** were not retried. Jalal and Abdullah continue to be at imminent risk of execution after an appeal court confirmed their sentences in August and October 2022, respectively.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), *Opinion No. 71/2024 concerning Abdullah al-Darazi, Jalal al-Labbad, Yusuf Muhammad Mahdi al-Manasif, Jawad Abdullah Qureiris and Hassan Zaki al-Faraj (Saudi Arabia)*, adopted on 15 November 2024, UN Doc. A/HRC/WGAD/2024/71.

¹⁹⁵ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), *Opinion No. 71/2024 concerning Abdullah al-Darazi, Jalal al-Labbad, Yusuf Muhammad Mahdi al-Manasif, Jawad Abdullah Qureiris and Hassan Zaki al-Faraj (Saudi Arabia)* (previously cited).

¹⁹⁶ Interview through secure messaging with researchers from the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights, 11 June 2025.

¹⁹⁷ Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Young men face imminent execution despite assurances on re-sentencing juveniles to prison terms", 10 October 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/saudi-arabia-young-men-face-imminent-execution-despite-assurances-on-re-sentencing-juveniles-to-prison-terms/>

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Saudi Arabia's extensive use of the death penalty, particularly for drug-related offences, is in clear breach of its commitments under international human rights law and standards, as well as the growing global consensus towards the abolition of the death penalty.

Between January 2014 and June 2025, Saudi Arabia executed 1,816 people. Nearly one in three of these people were executed solely for drug-related offences, which do not meet the threshold of the “most serious crimes” under international law.¹⁹⁸ By continuing to execute people for offences that do not involve intentional killing, Saudi Arabia is in breach of international safeguards on the use of this punishment. Saudi Arabia is also in a clear isolated minority – one of only four countries known to have carried out such executions in 2024.

Despite repeated claims of limiting the use of the death penalty, the authorities have resumed executions at an unprecedented scale. The record number of executions in Saudi Arabia in 2024, including 122 for solely drug-related offences, reflects a sharp reversal from the brief moratorium on the use of the death penalty for such offences that had signalled potential reform.

Judges in Saudi Arabia regularly impose death sentences based on vague and overly broad legal provisions, including in the country's anti-narcotics and counterterrorism laws, in proceedings that lack transparency and fall far short of fair trial guarantees. Instead of being a tool to restrict the use of the death penalty to intentional killing in the most egregious circumstances as required by international human rights law, in Saudi Arabia, the use of ta'zir (discretionary) sentencing has been used extensively to impose death sentences, including for drug-related and terrorism-related offences. Judges have imposed death sentences in cases marred by due process violations, relying on “confessions” extracted through torture, and in the absence of effective legal representation, if any at all.

Over the past decade, foreign nationals have borne the brunt of the authorities' increasing use of the death penalty for solely drug-related offences. In 2024 alone, 75% of those executed for solely drug-related offences were foreign nationals.

Foreign nationals deprived of their liberty in Saudi Arabia face unique and intersecting disadvantages. For the 25 foreign nationals who faced the death penalty in Saudi Arabia in recent years for drug-related offences whose cases Amnesty International analysed for this report, many navigated the justice system alone, unable to understand or obtain court documents or the charges against them, and without consular assistance.

The lack of familiarity with the Saudi criminal justice system, culture and language; limited awareness of their rights upon arrest; the risk of coerced “confessions”, obtained without adequate interpretation and legal representation; and lack of robust support networks made it incredibly difficult and, in some cases, impossible for foreign nationals to navigate the complex legal process in Saudi Arabia and secure an effective defence. In two cases, people said that they were coerced to traffic prohibited drugs, yet courts failed to investigate or acknowledge these circumstances.

¹⁹⁸ Amnesty International's quantitative analysis is based on statements collated and analysed from the Saudi Press Agency (See: Chapter 2: Methodology).

The authorities have also continued to wield the death penalty against the country's Shia minority, including as a response to protests in the country's Eastern Province calling for political, economic, and social reforms. Amnesty International's quantitative analysis reveals that, although the Shia minority make up 10-12% of the total Saudi population, they accounted for 42% of total executions for "terrorism"-related offences between January 2014 and June 2025.

As a member of the United Nations and a state party to key international human rights treaties, Saudi Arabia is legally bound to uphold the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other core instruments.

International law strictly limits the use of the death penalty to the "most serious crimes", interpreted to mean intentional killing. It explicitly prohibits the use of the death penalty against people who were children, i.e. under 18, at the time of the offence, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

International law and standards also protect, including with regard to the right to a fair trial, against the arbitrary deprivation of life. Saudi Arabia should immediately undertake an independent transparent investigation into potential discrimination in the application of the death penalty, including analysing the application of the death penalty based on a person's gender, age, nationality, religion, sect, socio-economic status and ethnic background and examining whether any discriminatory practices are occurring in regards patterns of arrest and prosecution, quality of legal defence, and sentencing, particularly for discretionary death penalty sentences in drug and "terrorism"-related cases. Applying the death penalty in a discriminatory way amounts to an arbitrary deprivation of the right to life.

The arbitrary deprivation of life, together with torture and other ill-treatment and punishment, is absolutely prohibited under customary international law.¹⁹⁹ Under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Saudi Arabia is obligated to prevent torture and ill-treatment and to ensure that no confessions extracted under such conditions are admitted in legal proceedings.

Amnesty International urges the authorities of Saudi Arabia to immediately abolish the death penalty for all crimes and commute all death sentences. Pending this, the organization makes the following recommendations:

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SAUDI ARABIA

TO THE KING AND CROWN PRINCE

We urge the King and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to fully abolish the death penalty. Pending full abolition, we urge the government of Saudi Arabia to:

- Establish a moratorium on all executions, with a view to abolishing the death penalty for all crimes;
- Quash all convictions and death sentences issued following unfair trials;
- Retry all those whose detentions are rendered arbitrary due to severe non-observance of fair trial rights, in particular those involving reliance on "confessions" extracted under torture and other ill-treatment. If charged with internationally recognizable offences, people must be retried in proceedings that meet the most rigorous international fair trial standards, excluding "confessions" obtained under torture and other ill-treatment, and without recourse to the death penalty;
- Ensure that law enforcement and judicial proceedings meet the highest standards for a fair trial, from the time of arrest.

¹⁹⁹ UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General Comment 24: Issues Relating to Reservations Made Upon Ratification or Accession to the Covenant or the Optional Protocols Thereto, or in Relation to Declarations Under Article 41 of the Covenant (previously cited), paras 8 and 10.

TO THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

- Pending full abolition of the death penalty, bring provisions in national legislation that allow for the use of the death penalty in line with international law and standards, including by:
 - Amending national laws that allow for the use of the death penalty, such as the Law of Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Law on Combating Terrorism Crimes and Its Financing, by removing from the scope of the death penalty any offences other than intentional killing;
 - Amending the Juvenile Law to explicitly prohibit the use of the death penalty for offences committed by children, i.e. persons below 18 years of age, in all circumstances and without any discretion left to judges to impose the death penalty in these circumstances;
 - Repealing any provisions that include mandatory death sentences.
- Review all cases where people have been sentenced to death with a view to commuting the death sentences. In particular:
 - Review all cases where the death penalty has been imposed for any offences other than intentional killing, particularly for drug-related offences, or where the trial did not meet the most rigorous international fair trial standards;
 - In cases where the procedures were seriously flawed, offer a fair retrial without resort to the death penalty;
 - When allegations of torture and other ill-treatment by the police or other authorities are made, ensure: prompt, thorough, impartial and effective investigations by independent bodies; that victims have access to an effective remedy and receive adequate reparations; and that, if there is sufficient admissible evidence, those suspected of responsibility, including superior officers who knew or should have known that those under their command were resorting to torture or other ill-treatment and who did not take all measures in their power to prevent, halt or report it, are prosecuted in fair proceedings and without resort to the death penalty.
- Put in place a wide set of gender-sensitive and holistic socio-economic protection measures to ensure that drug laws and policies contribute to overcoming structural sources of vulnerability, stigma and discrimination that lead people – especially women and those belonging to marginalized and disadvantaged groups – to engage in the drug trade. These sources include ill-health, denial of education, unemployment, lack of housing, poverty;
- Ensure that all people facing the death penalty, regardless of nationality, are promptly notified of their execution date, and that families and consular representatives are granted timely notification and access in accordance with international standards of transparency and dignity;
- Guarantee the right of families to receive the bodies of executed prisoners without undue delay and to conduct burial rites in accordance with cultural and religious practices;
- Coordinate with countries of origin diplomatic missions to establish a special unit offering free legal support for foreign nationals who face legal proceedings in the country;
- Undertake an independent transparent investigation into potential discrimination in the application of the death penalty, including analysing the application of the death penalty based on a person's gender, age, nationality, religion, sect, socio-economic status and ethnic background and examining whether any discriminatory practices are occurring in regards to patterns of arrest and prosecution, quality of legal defence, and sentencing, particularly for discretionary death penalty sentences in drug and "terrorism"-related cases;
- Ratify without reservations the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and their optional protocols.

TO THE JUDICIARY

- Exclude from proceedings statements or other evidence extracted through torture or other ill-treatment or other forms of coercion regardless of the stage at which defendants make the allegation and ensure that any allegations made in court or to a judge or other judicial officer that a defendant or witness has been subjected to such treatment are thoroughly and independently investigated;

- Ensure that defendants have access to qualified interpreters at all stages of arrest, investigation, trial, and appeal, and that all legal documents, including charges and confessions, are made available in a language the defendant understands;
- Ensure that defendants have competent legal representation from the time of arrest and throughout their trial proceedings.
- Regularly publish comprehensive and detailed information, disaggregated at least by gender, age, nationality, religion, sect and ethnic background, about criminal proceedings for drug-related offences which can contribute to public debates on this issue, while protecting the rights of defendants. The data should include: the number of persons arrested for drug-related offences, for what offences, and sentencing outcomes; the total number of persons under sentence of death for drug-related offences; the number of death sentences reversed or commuted on appeal for drug-related offences; the number of prisoners appealing sentences and at what level; location of detention; and the number of instances in which pardons have been granted.

TO THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

- Ensure that conditions in detention respect the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

TO FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES IN SAUDI ARABIA

- Ensure that consular assistance to nationals facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is readily available, adequately resourced, and effective;
- Strengthen and mandate pre-travel training and orientation for all migrant workers recruited to work in Saudi Arabia. These trainings should educate prospective workers about their rights and obligations in their destination country and inform them about the mechanisms available to seek help if they face abuse or come into conflict with the law;
- Request observers to monitor fair trial standards in all ongoing capital proceedings.

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“IF WE HAD MONEY AND A LAWYER, MAYBE MY BROTHER WOULD BE ALIVE”

SAUDI ARABIA’S EXECUTION CRISIS

Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, executions in Saudi Arabia reached record-high numbers, including hundreds of people executed for drug-related offences.

Between January 2014 and June 2025, Amnesty International monitored, collated and analysed official information on 1,816 executions. Of the 1,816 people, 597 people were executed for drug-related offences. Nearly 75% of those were foreign nationals.

To better understand the experience of foreign nationals on death row in Saudi Arabia, Amnesty International, in collaboration with the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights and Justice Project Pakistan, examined the cases of 25 foreign nationals from Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Pakistan and Somalia currently on death row or recently executed for drug-related offences. All these foreign nationals were sentenced to death after grossly unfair trials.

The authorities have also continued to wield the death penalty against the country’s Shia minority, including for political dissent. The Shia minority accounted for 42% of executions for “terrorism”-related offences in the past decade.

Amnesty International calls on the Saudi authorities to establish a moratorium on executions, with a view to abolishing the death penalty for all crimes.