Civil society urges BIE Member States not to vote for Saudi Arabia to host the World Expo 2030

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Bureau International des Expositions (BIE)

General Assembly

34, Avenue d'Iéna, 75116, France

Open letter to BIE Member States: do not vote for Saudi Arabia to host World Expo 2030

We, the undersigned organisations, write to express our deep concern about Saudi Arabia's candidacy to host the World Expo 2030. By providing a global platform to a regime with a history of violating basic human rights and curbing freedoms, the international community risks sending a tacit message that such actions are acceptable. We therefore urge you not to vote for Saudi Arabia, given its appalling human rights situation.

In the last few years, freedom of expression and civic space have shrunk to nonexistence, torture and enforced disappearance are routinely used as punishment, and executions have skyrocketed to an all-time high in the Kingdom. Saudi authorities routinely commit human rights abuses such as arbitrary detention, target women's rights activists and human rights defenders, and violate the rights to due process, fair trial, and freedom of expression.

Saudi Arabia has one of the highest execution rates in the world, with at least 1,243 (PDF) executions recorded between 2010 and 2021. In 2022, Saudi authorities carried out 196 executions, breaking all previous yearly records, and as of October 2023, the Kingdom has executed at least 112 individuals. Alarmingly, the Kingdom has sentenced many young Saudis to death for 'crimes' committed when they were still minors. For example, Jalal al-Labbad and Abdullah al-Derazi face imminent execution for allegedly participating in protests calling for basic human rights. Additionally, there are at least seven other young Saudis currently on death row for similar 'crimes' committed when they were minors, and at least 11 individuals (PDF) have been executed for childhood crimes since 2016.

Saudi Arabia continues to imprison proponents of civil and political rights. Most notably, the Kingdom has kept Mohammed al-Qahtani, a prominent human rights defender and co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), in inhumane prison conditions beyond the completion of his 10-year sentence for exercising his rights to freedom of expression and association. Since October 2022, al-Qahtani has been forcibly disappeared and denied contact with

his family, his lawyer and the outside world. Despite repeated global civil society calls, United Nations (UN) urgent appeals and concerns raised by many states, the Kingdom refuses to release him and other members of ACPRA.

Not only do Saudi authorities detain human rights defenders in the country, but they also target activists abroad. Perhaps the most notable case in this regard is the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which was carried out by Saudi authorities according to former UN Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard and the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (PDF).

Freedom of expression has also been under attack, as Saudi authorities issued the first ever death penalty sentence related to peaceful social media activity against retired 54-year old teacher Mohammed al-Ghamdi. More recently, Sarah al-Jaar was sentenced to a staggering 27 years in prison for innocuous posts on social media. In fact, Saudi courts routinely sentence individuals exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In 2022, PhD student Salma al-Shehab was sentenced to 34 years in prison, before her sentence was reduced to 27 years. Prior to her arrest, she had been vocal on Twitter about her support for human rights and women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Nourah al-Qahtani was sentenced to 45 years in prison for her social media activity on the basis of the draconian 2017 Law on Combating Terrorism and its Financing (PDF) and the Anti-Cyber Crime Law (PDF). As for Manahel al-Otaibi, she has been arbitrarily held in pre-trial detention since November 2022. Her charges include tweeting in opposition to the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia, a 'crime' under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law (PDF).

Moreover, gender equality remains a fundamental issue in the country despite some relaxation of strict restrictions imposed on women. In fact, the male guardianship system – a legal framework that treats adult women as minors – continues to negatively affect countless aspects of women's lives and severely restricts their rights and liberties.

Even more telling is the state of women's rights defenders in the country, who all have been sanctioned for their work to push for a better future for women in Saudi Arabia. Prominent examples include Nassima al-Sadah, Samar Badawi and Loujain al-Hathloul, who have long advocated for women's rights, and who were charged and sentenced by Saudi courts for their activism. Along with their families, they continue to face heavy restrictions since being released from prison, most notably in the form of travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country.

The Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) defines the World Expo as "global events dedicated to finding solutions to fundamental challenges facing humanity" and "a platform for international dialogue in favour of progress". Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's proposed theme for the Expo in 2030 is "The Era of Change: Together for a Foresighted Tomorrow".

In this context, we strongly believe that Saudi Arabia's systematic practice of human rights violations does not align with the BIE and World Expo's values. It is crucial to consider the potential long-term consequences on the global stage, as the normalisation of such regimes can undermine the values that events like the World Expo aim to champion. Moreover, hosting events of this

magnitude in Saudi Arabia may inadvertently serve as a cover-up for systemic human rights abuses, diverting attention away from the harsh realities faced by Saudi citizens.

We specifically call upon the BIE Member States not to vote for Saudi Arabia during the 173rd General Assembly taking place on 28 November 2023, and to consider its candidacy nonviable. The Kingdom cannot “find solutions to global challenges facing humanity”, nor can it “favour progress” when its domestic human rights record is ridden with its own challenges that are, on the contrary, regressive.

Sincerely,

Signatories:

ALQST For Human Rights

Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)

European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR)

Freedom House

Freedom Initiative

Human Rights Foundation (HRF)

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement

International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

MENA Rights Group

Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)

Right Livelihood

Rights Realization Centre

Salam for Democracy and Human Rights

Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM)

Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation

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