# Civil society urges French President Macron to consider Saudi Arabia's horrific human rights record during Crown Prince's visit to Paris

Letter · Saudi Arabia · 22 June 2023

Palais de l'Élysée

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75008, Paris

France

21 June 2023

**Subject:** Visit of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, to France

Mr President,

We, the undersigned organisations, kindly address this letter to express our deepest concern at the welcoming of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to France and to the Élysée palace.

We believe this reception veils Saudi Arabia's abysmal human rights record over the past few years and encourages Mohammed Bin Salman to commit further crimes. Since his ascension to power in 2017, Bin Salman has created new security and public prosecution offices and centralized all powers under his control. He used these offices to terrorize his opponents and commit what many have described as unprecedented repression and gross human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, particularly against individuals exercising their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

Saudi Arabia continues to imprison advocates for civil, political, and women's rights. You may recall the harrowing cases of the two Saudi women, Salma al-Shehab and Noura al-Qahtani. The Saudi authorities sentenced them in 2022 to 27 and 45 years in prison, respectively, for merely tweeting and tortured both of them in prison. Their cases resemble that of Loujain al-Hathloul a prominent Saudi human rights defender who campaigned against the driving ban and the male guardianship system, and was sentenced in December 2018 to five years and eight months in prison, where she was tortured and sexually harassed.

Under Bin Salman, the Saudi authorities have 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 expiry of his lengthy and unjust 10-year prison sentence,

and despite repeated global civil society calls, UN urgent appeals, and expressions of concern from many states. The Saudi authorities had deliberately neglected the medical needs of Abdullah al-Hamid, al-Qahtani's colleague and renowned Saudi Arabian thinker and peaceful activist, leading to his tragic death while still in custody in April 2020.

These cases are far from being isolated and demonstrate that Bin Salman has practically eradicated civic space in Saudi Arabia. Hundreds of people, including women, who dare to engage in any form of peaceful dissent face Bin Salman's wrath and increasingly harsh punishments. Manahel al-Otaibi, a 29-year-old Saudi fitness instructor, is one of the most recent cases. She was arrested in November 2022 over her Twitter and Snapchat posts that simply embraced recent social reforms in Bin Salman's Saudi Arabia and called for an end to male guardianship.

Also under Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has made headlines over the past six years for almost doubling its rate of executions, despite the authorities' repeated promises to reduce the scope of its use of the death penalty. The Saudi authorities mass executed 81 people in a single day in March 2022. More than half of them were from religious minorities. In 2022, the authorities executed 147 people, more than twice as many as the previous year. This announced number is apparently less than the actual number of executions, as the Saudi Human Rights Commission disclosed to Amnesty International that Saudi Arabia had executed 196 people in 2022. This year, the authorities have already announced the execution of 50 people and currently have on death row at least nine young men for "offences" reportedly committed when they were minors.

We recall that credible evidence points to Bin Salman's involvement in the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, according to U.S. intelligence reports and the report of the former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Agnes Callamard, which was published in June 2019. Callamard, who is a French citizen, has been subjected to severe backlash from the Saudi authorities and received threats from Saudi officials who were prepared to "take care of her." Welcoming the Crown Prince to France is a clear disregard of the ruthlessness of his government against its own citizens and anyone who tries to hold him accountable or prevent his crimes.

It has come to our attention that the Crown Prince's visit to France is in fact to seek support for Saudi Arabia's candidacy to Expo 2030. We would like to reiterate our collective call to exclude the candidacy of Saudi Arabia as a possible host for the World Expo 2030. In particular, we would like to urge you to consider Saudi Arabia's continued use of the death penalty, its crushing of human rights activism, silencing of women's rights advocates, and targeting of dissidents beyond its borders, in addition to its draconian restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association.

World Expo 2030 will be no exception to the Crown Prince's lack of compunction in pursuing extravagant projects regardless of their human toll. For instance, Saudi Arabia claims its NEOM smart city project will be "an accelerator of human progress that will embody the future of innovation in business, liveability and sustainability." The reality is that since 2020, the construction of NEOM has displaced indigenous tribes in the Tabuk province and disproportionately punished their members for resisting eviction. Among them is the al-Huwaitat tribe, several of whose

members have been sentenced to death or decades-long prison terms on trumped-up “terrorism” charges, simply for opposing their displacement. A group of UN experts recently denounced these violations and urged “all companies involved, including foreign investors, to ensure that they are not causing or contributing to, and are not directly linked to serious human rights abuses”.

We urge you, Mr President, to raise all the above-mentioned matters directly with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and take it into account in your future engagements with Saudi authorities.

Sincerely,

ALQST for Human Rights

CIVICUS

Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)

European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR)

Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains (FIDH)

Gulf Centre for Human Rights

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement

Human Rights Foundation

MENA Rights Group

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

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