Saudi Arabia Surpasses 2,000 Executions Under King Salman

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As of early April, the number of executions carried out by Saudi Arabia since King Salman bin Abdulaziz's accession to the throne on January 23, 2015 (and the subsequent appointment of his son, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, on June 21, 2017) has surpassed 2,000, according to the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), marking a stark escalation in the use of capital punishment under their rule.

This era has witnessed an unprecedented number of executions, including the execution of child defendants, disproportionate executions of foreign nationals, and politically motivated executions of individuals sentenced for acts related to the exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

Saudi Arabia's execution figures sharply contradict the official statements and narrative of sweeping human rights reforms promoted by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since he came to power. In 2018, he publicly pledged to significantly curtail the use of the death penalty. In practice, however, executions in Saudi Arabia have accelerated.

It took six years, between 2015 and 2021, to reach the first 1,000 executions under the rule of King Salman and Mohammad bin Salman according to ESOHR. By contrast, the next 1,000 were carried out in the past four years – marking an increase in pace of nearly 50%. The true figure may be even higher, as at least 51 executions were reportedly conducted in secret, without official announcements by the Ministry of Interior.

Promises to End Child Executions vs. Reality

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has executed at least 17 individuals for crimes committed when they were children, including 13 executions carried out after the introduction of the Juvenile Law in 2018 according to data collated by ESOHR. The Juvenile Law explicitly provides for the abolition of discretionary death sentences for offences committed by children, replacing them with a maximum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment, in line with Saudi Arabia's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1996,. In 2020, Saudi Arabia reiterated this commitment by issuing a Royal Decree banning the death penalty for minors.

Despite this, according to ESOHR monitoring at least six other juvenile defendants remain at risk of execution, in clear violation of these commitments and indicating a continued determination to pursue such practices. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that such death sentences and executions are not only arbitrary but represent a grave violation of international human rights law.

Expansion of the use of the Death Penalty

Since 2015, Saudi authorities have repeatedly stated that the death penalty would be limited to specific crimes. In March 2022, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in an interview with *The Atlantic* that the death penalty was now restricted to cases involving intentional killing, where the victim's family may seek justice or grant pardon.

However, data analysis reveals a starkly different reality. Murder cases account for only around 43.9% of executions, meaning that approximately 56.1% are carried out for offences that do not meet the threshold of the "most serious crimes" under international law, which restricts the use of the death penalty to cases involving intentional killing.

This is particularly evident in the widespread use of discretionary (ta'zir) sentences, more than half of all death sentences issued. These sentences are applied to offenses not explicitly proscribed under Islamic law, in which sentencing is left to judicial discretion or state legislation.This is especially true in cases in which criteria for hudud, serious crimes defined under the country's interpretation of Islamic law that carry specific penalties, or qisas, retributive justice offenses, are not met.

This expansive and discretionary use of the death penalty also extends beyond ordinary criminal offences to encompass acts that are, in reality, expressions of fundamental rights, including the exercise of freedom of expression.ESOHR data shows that approximately 14% of executions have been linked to such political charges, with the Specialized Criminal Court widely used to prosecute and sentence individuals accused of acts linked totheir right to free expression.

Drug-Related Executions

Non-lethal drug-related offences account for approximately 35% of the total executions, demonstrating a clear expansion of capital punishment beyond the international threshold of "most serious crimes."

The government has repeatedly indicated its willingness to comply with this standard of international law, but practice has shown a different reality. In January 2021, the Saudi Human Rights Commission announced a moratorium on executions for drug offences. However, ESOHR found out that executions resumed on a large scale in subsequent years, reaching approximately 67% of all executions in 2025, a record high.

This practice has been explicitly condemned by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which found that executions for drug-related offences are incompatible with international human rights law and fall outside the scope of the "most serious crimes." The Working Group further urged Saudi authorities to reinstate the moratorium and emphasized that imposing the death penalty for such offences constitutes a clear violation of international legal standards.

Foreign Nationals and Vulnerable Groups Disproportionately Affected

Out of the approximately 2,000 executions, 845 individuals were foreign nationals, around 42% of

the total, representing 34 different nationalities from Asia and Africa, as well as one US citizen.

This occurs in the context of systematic violations affecting migrant workers within the judicial system, including denial of adequate legal representation, lack of access to interpretation, and limited ability to secure proper defence. These factors contribute to a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, particularly migrant workers.

This discriminatory pattern has been repeatedly raised by UN mechanisms. In December 2024, the SR SUMMEX and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment addressed a joint communication to the Government of Saudi Arabia concerning the execution of three Egyptian nationals and the imminent execution of 29 other male foreign nationals, including 28 Egyptians and one Jordanian. UN Special Procedures expressed concern that the "individual cases mentioned above lead to presume a discriminatory application of the death penalty for drug offences on foreign nationals, previously raised in the context of Saudi Arabia".

During King Salman and Mohammad bin Salman's rule, 41 women were also executed. Documented cases indicate serious deficiencies in how women's cases are handled, including situations involving victims of domestic violence or human trafficking.

Human rights organizations stress that reaching 2,000 executions under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is not merely a numerical increase, but reflects a dangerous shift in the use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. This shift is characterized by its expanded scope, accelerated pace, and application to crimes that do not reach the "most serious crimes" threshold.

This trajectory exposes a structural contradiction between official rhetoric and actual practice, as the escalation in executions occurs alongside efforts to project an image of reform internationally.

The undersigned Human rights organizations stress that the death penalty in Saudi Arabia has become a widely and systematically used tool, in clear violation of international obligations and fundamental human rights standards.

We call for an immediate halt to executions in Saudi Arabia, and for a comprehensive review of all cases in line with international human rights law and Saudi Arabia's international obligations, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture.

NGOs:

1. Action by Christians for Abolition of Torture (ACAT-France)
2. Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT-Liberia)
3. ALQST for Human Rights
4. Capital Punishment Justice Project (CPJP)
5. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)

6. CIVICUS
7. Colegio de Abogados y Abogadas de Puerto Rico
8. Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide
9. Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms
10. Egyptian Front for Human Rights
11. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)
12. European Saudi Organization for Human Rights
13. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
14. Harm Reduction International (HRI)
15. Human Rights Sentinel
16. Human Rights Watch
17. Hope Behind Bars Africa
18. HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
19. International Federation for Human to Rights (FIDH)
20. Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO)
21. Julian Wagner Memorial Fund Inc
22. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
23. Law and Democracy Support Foundation (LDSF)
24. Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)
25. MENA Rights Group
26. Partenariat pour la Protection Intégrée (PPI), République Démocratique du Congo
27. Reprieve
28. Salam for Democracy and Human Rights (SALAM DHR)
29. Sinai Foundation for Human Rights
30. Skyline International for Human Rights (SIHR)
31. SOHRAM- CASRA Centre d'Action Sociale, Réhabilitation et Adaptation pour la Victime de la Torture, de la guerre et de la Violence
32. The Advocates for Human Rights
33. Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM)
34. Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)
35. Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON)
36. World Coalition Against the Death Penalty
37. World Organization against torture (OMCT)

38. South Asia & Middle-East network (SAME)

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HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement · info@humena.org