

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) - Annual Report 2015:
Human Rights Defenders in Prison and in Peril throughout the Gulf and
Neighbouring Countries

February 2016



“What motivates me more to survive is my responsibility, not only for raising my children, but also the responsibility of changing the dark reality in which we live now in order to build a future of justice, freedom and equality for all Saudi citizens. Remember that history does not forget, it will exalt those who have fought for freedom and cast aside the memory of those who succumbed to a life of humiliation and servitude.”

(Samar Badawi, Saudi human rights defender)



“Nothing, not even our 100,000 deaths or harsh siege, or betrayal of the international community can ever defeat the will of people who have a dream and faith in the future.”

(Razan Zaitouneh, Disappeared Syrian human rights defender)



“Do not give up. Standstill. Continue the struggle for human rights, justice and the values of freedom. Keep your voices free. Chant everywhere, because your voices are respected by everyone, as long as you chose to fight in the path of freedom to fulfill our dream.”

(Hussain Jawad, Bahraini human rights defender)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the fourth Annual Report of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), an independent NGO founded by human rights defenders from the Gulf region in 2011. GCHR documents the environment in which human rights defenders work in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. This report outlines GCHR's work in 2015 and the main issues faced by human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries as they bravely carry out their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities at great personal risk.

In 2015, the situation for human rights defenders continued to deteriorate in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. Those working peacefully and legitimately for the promotion and protection of human rights do so in an increasingly dangerous environment, particularly in war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen and the impact of those conflicts have been felt in neighbouring countries. According to our research based on documentation, missions and interviews, human rights defenders face increased harassment, intimidation, arrest, detention and torture as a result of their human rights work. Many prominent human right defenders remain in detention and are subjected to inhumane prison conditions as well as ill treatment at the hands of prison authorities. Freedom of expression continues to be seriously curtailed throughout the region and the exercise of this fundamental right has led to hundreds of arrests and judicial harassment throughout 2015. Rather than protecting human rights defenders and promoting their work at a time when their role in peace building is so desperately needed, the authorities have passed new laws such as cyber-crime laws, and clamped down on on-line expression, curtailing digital rights. Despite this challenging environment human rights defenders continue their work tirelessly, refusing to be silenced through intimidation, harassment or detention.

GCHR Activities and Achievements

GCHR supports human rights defenders through a number of ways, in an effort to create safe spaces for their work. In 2015, GCHR issued 128 appeals, statements and letters relating to more than 200 human rights defenders, and published three reports including an annual report for the previous year. GCHR advocated and raised awareness about the situation of human rights defenders through its active participations in meetings and conferences at local, European and International levels. GCHR prepared evidence-based reports and documentation of violations on multiple levels including state and non-states actors, following missions to Turkey to interview Syrian human rights defenders, and to Qatar to investigate restrictions on civil society. GCHR ran nine training workshops including on digital security, capacity building, well-being and stress management, and the use of United Nations mechanisms, training over 100 human rights defenders. It organised several side events at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and staff participated in a number of human rights events, including on Internet governance. GCHR facilitated ten assistance grants to human rights defenders and organisations in order that they will be safer and more protected in their work.



Networking and International Partnerships: In 2015, GCHR continued to expand its partnerships and joined the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) MENA Coalition, a collective to offer a support system to WHRDs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to promote and protect their human rights and have women's voices heard. In 2015, GCHR developed a partnership with the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights to support the Women's Human Rights Defenders Network in MENA and Asia, of which Maryam Al-Khawaja, GCHR Co-Director, is a founder. The Network aims to help raise the voices of women in MENA and Asia, and to address the religious, legal, social, political and cultural mechanisms that prevent women's voices from being heard. Through this platform, the Women's Network aims to provide activists with a meeting place where they can share ideas and strategies on how to promote women's human rights and achieve lasting change. The Network aims to collaborate by networking, advocacy, documenting, monitoring and outreach, and GCHR will assist with training. GCHR also became a member of IFEX a global network of over 100 organisations that aims to defend and promote everyone's right to freedom of expression.

United Nations Advocacy: GCHR continued to actively engage in the UN system. In February 2015, GCHR attended a UN strategy meeting in Kenya with [Maina Kiai](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Peaceful freedom of Assembly and Association, and then in August attended a UN experts meeting in South Africa. GCHR also attended a MENA consultation event to collect recommendations from the region for the UNHRC, as well as consultations with the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of opinion and expression, and on the situation of human rights defenders. In March at the 28th session of the UNHRC in Geneva, GCHR held a side event entitled "On-going attacks on HRDs in the Gulf and Neighbouring Countries, focus on Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iraq" where it also launched its [2014 Annual Report](#) as well as a new [report](#) on torture in UAE prisons.

GCHR held two side events at the 29th UNHRC session in June, the "[Situation of HRDs and Journalists in Yemen](#)", and the "Situation on HRDs and journalists in Syria and Iraq", and participated in side events including "[Overcoming Restriction on Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA region](#)", "Right to Protest", "Using information and communication technologies to protect human rights" and "HRDs and political prisoners in Bahrain".

At the 30th UNHRC session, which ran from 14 September to 2 October, GCHR organised two side events. "Human Rights Defenders: The Challenges and Their Urgent Need for Protection" was organised along with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, ARTICLE 19 and the Cairo institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS). "Civilians and Rights Activists Under Fire - Addressing Impunity that fuels the humanitarian crisis" was held with Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, CIHRS and FIDH about the situation in Yemen. GCHR also co-sponsored a side event on Bahrain called "Counter-resolutionaries: Overcoming Bahraini Obstinace at the HRC".

Special Reports: In May, GCHR published a special report entitled [Yemeni journalists and human rights defenders at risk during wartime](#), based on research and interviews with Yemeni HRDs. Although the presence of human rights defenders and their work documenting human rights violations was most needed in Yemen following the beginning of the bombing campaign in March, their lives are more at risk than ever.



Legal Challenges: In June, GCHR [launched](#) a high court challenge in the United Kingdom against the decision by the UK's Ministry of Justice to sell prison and probation services to Gulf States. In September, Just Solutions International (JSi) the “commercial arm” of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) announced it would not pursue any new projects and in October the UK government [cancelled](#) its controversial bid to supply prison services to Saudi Arabia.

International Advocacy: In May, on the eve of the summit meeting held by President Obama with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), GCHR [submitted](#) an open letter urging him to help free jailed human rights defenders in the GCC. The same month, GCHR attended the 14th International Human Rights Colloquium in Brazil. GCHR also carried out an advocacy tour in Scandinavia to raise awareness about prisoners of conscience in the Gulf and encourage governments to support a Bahrain resolution at the UNHRC.

GCHR also further developed its working relationship with the European Union in 2015. In Brussels in November and December, GCHR participated in the EU-NGO Forum and the EU Platform on the temporary relocation of human rights defenders, of which it is a co-founder, and helped coordinate a MENA regional platform for relocation in Istanbul.

On-Line Campaigning: In October, GCHR [led](#) a [Thunderclap campaign](#) with support from 15 NGOs and hundreds of individuals, with a combined social media following of 1.4 million, to wish happy birthday to Bahraini human rights defender Zainab Al-Khawaja, and to call for her convictions to be quashed so she would not go to jail with her young baby. Her sentence was reduced from three years to one on appeal and she credits the campaign with helping lower the sentence, and helping keep her free for the time being.

Capacity Building and Safety Training: GCHR organised a number of workshops throughout the year, including a digital security workshop held in March in Istanbul. In May and June GCHR jointly held capacity building workshops together with Maharat Foundation, as well as a workshop on the use of UN human rights mechanisms for lawyers in Istanbul. In November, GCHR held a two-day safety and security workshop for journalists in Iraq. In December, GCHR organised a joint panel with Maharat Foundation and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) at the Arab Internet Governance Forum in Lebanon on Freedom of opinion and expression on the Internet.

Also in November, GCHR convened the third Gulf Platform for Human Rights Defenders in Istanbul, where participants declared their “absolute solidarity with the detained human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience in the various countries of our region who have been targeted solely due to their peaceful and legitimate human rights work.” The platform participants also expressed “concern and condemnation for the use of anti-terrorism and cyber-crime laws to target human rights defenders including independent journalists, bloggers and Internet activists.” Jamshid Gaziyeu (Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs) as well as representatives from WITNESS, Human Rights Watch, Small Media and Front Line Defenders were present.

Country Summaries

Bahrain

2015 saw an escalation in the ill-treatment and abuse of human rights defenders in prison in Bahrain. Response to such treatment resulted in hunger strikes throughout the year, including by GCHR Founding Director **Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja** and blogger and human rights defender **Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace**, in an attempt to protest ill-treatment to which they were subjected and demand better conditions for prisoners. Freedom of expression continued to be targeted and women human rights defenders were subjected to on-going judicial harassment. The climate continues to be one of hostility and danger for human rights defenders, including GCHR Founding Director **Nabeel Rajab**, President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, who spent four months in prison for a tweet. Given the large number of cases directed against human rights defenders, including **Ghada Jamsheer, Zainab Al-Khawaja, Naji Fateel** and **Mohammed Al-Maskati** GCHR issued 28 appeals, three statements and one letter on Bahrain during 2015, as well as running campaigns to free them or keep them free.

Iran

Appeals issued in 2015 focused on women human rights defenders detained for promoting human rights through the exercise of their right to freedom of expression, especially following the rise of violence against women following acid attacks in October 2014. Human rights lawyer and women's rights activist **Narges Mohammadi**, human rights defender **Bahareh Hedayat** and cartoonist **Atena Farghadani**, all detained in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, are suffering from serious ill health as a result of the prison conditions. Journalists, bloggers and social media activists promoting human rights continue to face threats and harassment by state authorities as freedom of expression and opinion is severely restricted. While independent journalist **Jason Rezaian** was convicted on charges of "espionage" in October, he was later freed in January 2016. But many human rights defenders remain in detention or at risk due to their human rights work, and the need for further support to them is ever present.

Iraq

In 2015 human rights conditions in general deteriorated further leading to political instability and internal conflict was exacerbated by the fight against the extremist group Islamic State (IS or Da'esh). Human rights defenders work in extremely dangerous conditions for the promotion of human rights, risking death, imprisonment and torture by security forces and armed groups. Sadly many have lost their lives, like prominent human rights defender **Ammar Shahbender**, who was [killed](#) during a terrorist attack on a café in Baghdad in May. Women human rights defenders in the *de facto* state of Iraqi Kurdistan continue to face serious difficulties relating to their work, which challenges the traditional notions of family and gender roles within families, and is often focused on gender-based violence. Freedom of expression continues to be curtailed and in February a group of journalists was attacked and beaten by a state official's bodyguards.

Kuwait

Kuwait's Universal Period Review (UPR) took place at the UNHRC in January 2015; however there was no improvement in the human rights situation in 2015. Human rights defender **Nawaf Al-Hendal** was arrested shortly after returning from the UPR, and GCHR believes it is very closely related to his vocal presence in the UNHRC making his arrest a reprisal due to his Human Rights work. The Bedoon community remains stateless with no protection of their human rights, and Bedoon activist **Abdulahakim Al-Fadhli** was sentenced to one year in jail plus hard labour. Women continued to be discriminated against and human rights defenders were jailed as a result of on-line postings as freedom of expression remains restricted. A new Cyber-Crime Law was approved in June which will likely further curtail freedom of expression and be used against human rights defenders.

Oman

The major issues of concern in Oman include the curtailment of the right to freedom of expression and opinion and a lack of safe environment for human right defenders and organisations in which to operate. The Internal Security Service (ISS) escalated its targeting of human rights activists throughout the year. Many human rights defenders were jailed on baseless charges and prominent human rights defender **Saeed Jadad** was continuously harassed by authorities and is currently in detention. In 2015, GCHR issued 23 appeals and updates and three statements outlining the cases of human rights defenders, many of whom are on-line activists targeted for expressing their opinions on-line through social media.

Qatar

There is a distinct lack of oppositional civil society and a dearth of human rights activism in Qatar, according to a GCHR report being released in March 2016. The report, *Qatar, civil society and human rights: Lack of civil society space hinders work of human rights defenders*, is based on research and a mission to the country in December 2015. While there are many civil society organisations in Qatar that provide support to vulnerable people and, as well as providing cultural outlets for the many nationalities represented in the country's population, there is very little civil society space for challenging the decisions of the unelected government of the country. There is very little space for freedom of expression. Poet **Mohamed Rashid Al-Ajami** remains in prison on a 15-year prison sentence for insulting the Emir of Qatar and allegedly "inciting to overthrow the ruling state." He had originally been sentenced to life in prison on 29 November 2011 after being arrested after the publication of his "Jasmine Uprising" poem which criticised governments across the Gulf region in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings.

Yemen

Human rights violations in Yemen take place on a daily basis as the conflict escalated in 2015 the situation for civilians and human rights defenders worsened, facing danger from all sides including targeted attacks and kidnapping and the risk of harm or death from bombing. Human rights defenders were stranded in different countries around Yemen searching for a safe haven and waiting for the airports to open the doors for them to come back in vain. March saw the murder of prominent journalist **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani** highlighting the dangerous environment in which journalists carry out their work. GCHR issued a special report in March 2015 "*Yemeni journalists and human rights defenders at risk during wartime.*" It also held two side events on Yemen at the HRC in June and September discussing the situation of human rights defenders and journalists during wartime and addressing impunity.

Saudi Arabia

2015 saw a continuation of the systematic targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia, including those connected to NGOs such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), whose members have been jailed. The peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and opinion was met with arrests and lengthy prison sentences. Detained human rights defenders face appalling conditions and treatment, including the high-profile case of blogger **Raif Badawi**, who was flogged in January despite an international outcry. He [won](#) the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2015. The jail sentence of prominent human rights lawyer **Waleed Abu Al-Khair** was increased by the Specialised Criminal Court to 15 years. Following a legal challenge by GCHR, the United Kingdom government cancelled its controversial bid to supply prison services to Saudi Arabia given the dire human rights abuses that take place in the prisons. Despite gaining the right to vote in and run for municipal elections, the situation for women in Saudi Arabia is still extremely repressive and those fighting for women's rights, such as the right to drive, are subjected to threats and harassment, as well as arrest. In September, Saudi Arabia was elected as head of a UNHRC Panel - a decision that was met with much criticism. GCHR issued 13 appeals and updates, five statements and one closed letter.

Syria

During 2015, the war in Syria continued, human rights violations were commonplace and the environment in which human rights defenders operate remained dangerous. Syrian bloggers and journalists were targeted for exercising their right to freedom of expression and opinion, including being murdered inside Syria or abroad in Turkey by both state and non-state actors such as the Islamic State (IS or Da'esh.) Hundreds were killed under torture in government prisons. Human rights defenders continue to work under fear of arrest and harassment, many are victims of enforced disappearance and those in detention suffer ill treatment and poor conditions at the hands of the authorities. Members of the Syrian citizen journalist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS) were murdered and threatened with death by IS. On a positive note, the three members of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), detained since February 2012, were finally unconditionally released following much international pressure. SCM head Mazen Darwish won the prestigious UNESCO/Cano World Press Freedom Day Prize, after being nominated by GCHR. Other human rights defenders, who have been subjected to enforced disappearance - including Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Khalil, Nazem Hamadi and Wa'el Hamada, remain missing and calls continued for an investigation into their abduction. GCHR issued over 20 appeals, statements and letters in relation to Syria in 2015, including a number of joint actions.

United Arab Emirates

The authorities continued to crackdown on bloggers and on-line activists in 2015 for exercising their right to freedom of expression and opinion. The space for dissent is shrinking as was feared following the introduction of the Cyber-Crime Law in 2012 and Anti-Terrorism legislation in 2014, both of which have been used to target human rights defenders. In January GCHR's website was blocked. Arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights defenders and their families continued in 2015. Those in detention, including the majority of defendants known collectively as the UAE94, face harrowing conditions as outlined in GCHR's report published in March "*Torture and Abuse in Prisons in the United Arab Emirates*". Family members of the UAE94 were arrested and at the close of 2015, the whereabouts of activist **Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith** remained unknown since his enforced disappearance in August.

2. COUNTRY REPORTS

BAHRAIN

Most of Bahrain's prominent human rights defenders either remain in prison, face risk of detention and arrest, or are in exile, as the state attempts to silence criticism and punish all activists who cooperate with international NGOs and the United Nations. Judicial harassment of human rights defenders continued relentlessly in 2015. **Nabeel Rajab** was subjected to ongoing hearings and spent four months in prison. Women human rights defenders **Zainab Al-Khawaja** and **Ghada Jamsheer** appeared before the Court on numerous occasions as a result of exercising their right to freedom of expression. Members of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR) were targeted, including **Naji Fateel**, who reportedly suffered multiple injuries including a broken leg and nose during a disturbance in prison in March.

The start of the year saw a continuation of the targeting of journalists covering protests in Bahrain. In January 2015, photojournalist **Mazen Mahdi**, correspondent for the German Press Agency (DPA) and (formerly) the European Press Photo Agency (EPA), was hit by teargas during a protest. On the same day, **Amer Mohammed** and **Hammed I Mohammed**, both working for Reuters, were also subjected to direct police teargas attacks. In another crackdown on freedom of expression, the only independent newspaper in the country *Al-Wasat* was temporarily suspended in August.

On 31 January 2015, the Bahrain Ministry of the Interior announced a list of 72 Bahrainis whose citizenship would be revoked for "illegal acts". The list included journalists and human rights defender **Sayed Ahmed Al-Wadaei**, Director of Advocacy of the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD). Since November 2012, over 120 people reportedly have had their citizenship revoked, including Husain Abdulla, Executive Director of Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB).

In January, GCHR issued a joint appeal urging Bahrain's allies to publicly call on the Bahraini authorities to drop charges against **Nabeel Rajab**, Founding Director of GCHR, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Deputy Secretary-General of FIDH, and a member of Human Rights Watch Middle East division's advisory committee. He was arrested in October 2014 for posting comments on Twitter about the security forces. On 20 January, he was sentenced to six months in prison. Another member of the BCHR, **Hussain Radhi**, was also subjected to judicial harassment and GCHR and BCHR issued a joint appeal on his case.

On 2 April, security forces arrested Rajab at his home and accused him of spreading "false news" in postings on *Twitter* which related to torture in Jaw prison. His arrest came amid serious concerns about conditions at Jaw prison. In March 2015, Bahraini security forces allegedly attacked prisoners at Jaw Prison using rubber bullets, tear gas, and shotgun pellets. In its appeal, GCHR called on Bahraini authorities inter alia to carry out a thorough investigation into the poor conditions and treatment of prisoners at Jaw prison.

In April, GCHR was one of 16 human rights organisations that released a joint statement condemning his arrest and detention and called for Rajab's immediate release, the dropping of all charges and the end of reprisals against him. Two charges were brought against him relating to his on-line postings and an opinion piece published in the *Huffington Post*. The first was for "insulting a statutory body" in connection to his documentation of mistreatment and torture in Jaw Prison. The second charge of "spreading rumors during wartime" relates to his reporting on civilian deaths in Yemen. In May, Rajab was held in solitary confinement pending his hearing.

On 9 July, the European Parliament passed a resolution entitled *On Bahrain, in particular the case of Nabeel Rajab*. It called for the "dropping of charges and the immediate and unconditional release of all human rights defenders, political activists and other individuals detained and charged with alleged violations related to the rights of expression, peaceful assembly and association, including Rajab, Sheikh Ali Salman and the 'Bahrain 13'". It also referred to the misuse of anti-terrorism laws, the use of torture in prisons, and encouraged cooperation between Bahrain and UN Special Rapporteurs. It called for a rapid EU collective effort to develop a comprehensive strategy on how the EU can push for the release of imprisoned activists and prisoners of conscience.

Less than a week after the EU resolution was passed a royal pardon was issued under which Nabeel Rajab was released on health grounds. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders **Michel Forst**; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression David Kaye; and the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association **Maina Kiai**, acknowledged the shortcomings of the pardon. While welcoming Rajab's release, they said it was "only a half measure, given that he is still facing charges that carry up to fifteen years of imprisonment."

In November, over 80 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), issued a letter calling on the Bahraini government to immediately lift the travel ban and drop all charges **Nabeel Rajab**. In a joint appeal, GCHR was one of 20 international NGOs that welcomed this letter and reiterated its calls.

On 16 February 2015, **Hussain Jawad**, head of the European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR), was arrested during a raid at his home. GCHR expressed fear for his safety, following reports that he was tortured. He was released on bail following a court hearing on 12 May on allegations of "collecting money from [within] Bahrain and abroad to aid and abet saboteurs." He was later sentenced *in absentia* to two years in prison on 15 December by a Lower Criminal Court in Manama on those charges, based on a confession he says he made while being tortured at the notorious Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID). He is separately facing charges of allegedly insulting the King of Bahrain and "inciting hatred against the state" following a speech he gave about human rights, with a verdict expected on 15 March 2016.

“Do not give up. Standstill. Continue the struggle for human rights, justice and the values of freedom. Keep your voices free. Chant everywhere, because your voices are respected by everyone, as long as you chose to fight in the path of freedom to fulfill our dream,” wrote Hussain Jawad in a letter from prison.

In February, GCHR issued an appeal about members of the BYSHR, an organisation that monitors and documents human rights violations. BYSHR Board member **Naji Fateel**, who was arrested during a raid on his home in 2013, was tortured in prison and sentenced to 15 years. In March 2015, he was reportedly badly beaten by prison guards during a prisoner protest. The trial of a young member of the BYSHR, **Hussein Ali Abdulnabi**, was ongoing following his arrest in September 2013. Vice-President of the BYSHR, **Yousif Ahmed Abdelrasoul** was summoned, interrogated and threatened by the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID). **Jehan Ma'touq**, a member of the BYSHR, remains under ongoing targeting and harassment. **Ahmed Helal Abbas**, also a member of the BYSHR, remains in prison after being arrested in January 2012 and sentenced to five years in prison.

On 31 December 2014, **Mohammed Al-Maskati**, former President of the BYSHR and digital security expert at Front Line Defenders, was sentenced to six months in prison. The charges, which included “rioting and participating in an illegal gathering”, related to his participation in a protest called “Self Determination” in October 2012. Weeks before his arrest he had participated in side events at the UNHRC in Geneva. The verdict of the Court of Appeal was meant to be delivered in December 2015 but was postponed until January 2016 when his sentence was unexpectedly overturned. GCHR had initiated a joint campaign for his case.

On 23 February, GCHR published an appeal on abuse and torture in detention. It expressed concern for the health of detained human rights defenders and other activists (known as the Bahrain 13) after they commenced a hunger strike on 19 February 2015 to protest recurring attacks on minors in Jaw prison. The Bahrain 13 is a group of imprisoned human rights defenders including **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**, co-founder of GCHR and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, and human rights defender and blogger **Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace**. They are among seven of the group who have received life sentences for their peaceful pro-democracy activities.

On 2 March 2015, Al-Khawaja announced that he had begun a water-only hunger strike in protest of his continued arbitrary detention and mistreatment while in prison. He suffers from serious health issues and is at severe risk of further health complications. GCHR issued a joint appeal together with 26 other organisations expressing their grave concern at the continued mistreatment of Al-Khawaja while in detention and calling on the government of Bahrain to immediately and unconditionally address Al-Khawaja’s legitimate demands.

On 10 May 2015, Al-Khawaja wrote to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein explaining that he was on hunger strike due to “the ongoing violations occurring at Jaw prison where I have been held as a prisoner of conscience for the past 4 years” and enclosed information telling of beatings by prison officers with metal rods, intimidation by police dogs, chaining of prisoners, death threats, and injuries suffered at the hands of the prison officers including scalp lacerations, hip dislocation, fractured noses, arms and legs. He ended his hunger strike on 21 May after 32 days because the OHCHR addressed his concerns.

Despite the fact that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), in July 2015, found that arbitrary detention and torture are used systematically in the criminal justice system of Bahrain, such detention remained a major issue of concern in 2015. The WGAD declared that the detention of detainees, including Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, amounted to arbitrary detention and stated that they must be released.

In July, GCHR and eight other Bahraini and international NGOs and the University College Union launched a campaign marking the 100th day of detained human rights defender **Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace**'s hunger strike against the torture and ill treatment of prisoners and the poor conditions at Jaw prison. They called for access to be granted to necessary medical treatment, and for him and all other human rights defenders in Bahrain to be immediately released. He is a prominent academic and blogger and was arrested for his participation in the peaceful Arab Spring protests in 2011. Regular joint appeals have been issued marking milestones for Dr. Al-Singace who still had not eaten solid food by the end of the year. In October 2015, 21 organisations made a similar appeal demanding his immediate and unconditional release and the release of all political prisoners detained in Bahrain.

On 2 June 2015, **Zainab Al-Khawaja** was sentenced to nine months in prison on charges of entering a restricted area related to her attempt to visit her father Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Jaw prison in August 2014. In December 2014, she was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 3000 BHD (approx. USD\$7960) on the charge of ripping a picture of Bahrain's monarch during a court hearing in October 2014. In October 2015, GCHR initiated a Thunderclap campaign to wish Al-Khawaja a happy birthday and to call for her convictions to be quashed. The campaign had a social media reach of over 1.4 million, which is supported by 15 NGOS. The Bahrain Court of Appeal reduced the three-year sentence for tearing up the photo of the King to one year.

Two charges of two-month sentences were handed down to Al-Khawaja on 9 December 2014 for “destroying public property” when she ripped a picture of the King, as well as a charge of allegedly “insulting a public official” (a police officer) for which she was sentenced to one year in prison. On 3 December 2015, she lost her right of appeal and sentences totaling 16 months were upheld. A sentence of nine-months for entering a restricted area in Jaw prison was upheld in November. She could be taken into custody at any time, along with her baby son, Abdulhadi, as she has been sentenced to a combined total of over three years in prison on various charges. Furthermore, her child is being denied a birth certificate and documentation and her own passport has not been renewed.

Attacks and intimidation against Bahraini human rights defenders for their engagement with UN human rights mechanisms have increased in recent years. In March 2015, during a side event that was organised by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), human rights defenders **Husain Abdulla**, Executive Director of ADHRB, and **Abdulnabi Al-Ekri**, President of Bahrain Transparency Society, along with a member of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory (BHRO), were reportedly verbally threatened by MP Khalid Al-Shaer, Chairman of the Human Rights Committee in the Bahraini Parliament, who was appointed to the National Institute for Human Rights by the King after his return to Bahrain.

In August, human rights defender **Dr. Maytham Al-Salman**, Head of the Religious Freedom Unit of BHRO, was arrested at Bahrain airport and interrogated at the Cyber-Crime Unit of the CID before being released. He was travelling home from a meeting on hate speech organised by the UN. He is a prominent human rights activist who is well known for his engagement with various international mechanisms.

Women's human rights defender **Ghada Jamsheer** continued to be targeted in 2015. She is President of the Women's Petition Committee (WPC), a network of Bahraini women human rights defenders who campaign for the codification of Bahrain's family laws and their reform. On her way to get medical treatment in France in March 2015 she was informed at the airport that there was a travel ban in place against her and she was not permitted to travel. In May, she was sentenced to one year in prison on the fabricated charge of "assaulting a police officer". The sentence was upheld in November. In June, she was sentenced to one year and eight months in prison on the basis of messages posted on her *Twitter* account about corruption in King Hamad University Hospital. On 15 December 2014, she was released from prison having spent more than three months in detention in connection with 12 charges.

On 5 November, **Ali Isa Al-Tajer**, brother of prominent human right lawyer **Mohammed Al-Tajer**, was arrested during a raid on his home and held in an undisclosed location without access to a lawyer or his family. During this time, he was beaten, stripped naked, sexually assaulted and forced to sign a confession. On 30 November, baseless charges of "joining a terrorist organisation to overthrow the government by force" and "training individuals to use weapons for terrorist purposes" were brought against him. Two appeals were issued on his case. It is believed that he is being targeted in an attempt to hinder his brother's work.

Bahrain is trying to portray a reformist vision by creating new human rights mechanisms, such as the Bahraini Office of the Ombudsman of the Ministry of Interior or the National Institute for Human Rights. But the reality on the ground is that cosmetic reforms have proven ineffective and are instead masking the hardships faced by human rights defenders and anyone who criticises the government.

IRAN

Women human rights defenders in Iran continue to face harassment and intimidation at the hands of the authorities and their human rights remain seriously curtailed, especially seeing the rise in violence against women in Iran following acid attacks in October 2014 after the introduction of the 'Plan on Protection of Promoters of Virtue and Preventers of Vice' and the 'Plan to Protect Chastity and Hijab'. Human rights activists detained in the notorious Evin prison face inhumane conditions and treatment on a daily basis. 2015 saw a deterioration in the health of women human rights defenders detained for the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. Journalists and those publishing criticism of the state remained at risk.

In January 2015, GCHR issued an appeal for well-known women's and students' rights activist **Mahdieh Golrou**. She was arrested at her home on 24 October 2014 following her participation in protests against acid attacks on women. She was placed in solitary confinement for 40 days and then placed in a small cell inside Evin prison in Tehran. She was released on 28 January on bail. Other women's and students' rights activists have been detained in Iran, some for long periods, including activist **Bahareh Hedayat**, imprisoned since 2009, who has been hospitalised repeatedly due to ill health and poor prison conditions.

In May 2015, human rights lawyer and women's rights activist **Narges Mohammadi** was arrested and taken to Evin prison to serve a six-year sentence handed down in 2012 following a grossly unfair trial on trumped up charges. She is Deputy Director of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC) and President of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Peace in Iran. She is an internationally renowned figure and is known for her human rights activism including her participation in protests against acid attacks. She has been separated from her two children, and her husband is exiled in France since 2011.

On 14 May 2015, after seven months in Evin prison, children's rights defender **Atena Daemi** was [sentenced](#) to 14 years in prison during a 15-minute trial that observers say did not meet international standards. She received seven years for allegedly "gathering and colluding against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system," among other charges. In September, another child right's defender, **Saeed Shirzad**, was sentenced to five years in prison.

On 01 June 2015, cartoonist **Atena Farghadani** was sentenced to 12 years and nine months in prison. She was originally arrested in August 2014 on several charges including "insulting members of parliament" in reference to a cartoon she drew criticizing a draft law restricting access to birth control and women's rights, and she then spent three months in Evin prison. In November 2014, she had been briefly released and re-arrested following a half-day trial based on information obtained during nine-hour interrogations while she was held in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer. She was found guilty of "colluding against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system" through her artwork. She remains in prison and her health deteriorated rapidly after she undertook a hunger strike to protest against the inhumane prison conditions. There are real fears for her health particularly given the poor conditions, and she was showing signs of lymphatic disease.

During a visit from Farghadani's lawyer, **Mohammad Moghimi**, they shook hands, and both Farghadani and her lawyer were charged with "illegitimate sexual relations". The lawyer was then arrested on 13 June 2015 for the act of shaking Farghadani's hand, and released three days later after he'd paid a large bail of around US\$60,000. Farghadani reported that she was forced to undergo a "virginity and pregnancy test" in August, prior to her trial in relation to the handshake. In January 2016, the two were acquitted in this case, but Farghadani remains in jail on her 12-year sentence. She is the recipient of Cartoonists Rights Network International's 2015 Courage in Editorial Cartooning Award and Index on Censorship listed her among its 100 free expression heroes in 2016, after being nominated by GCHR.

In October 2015, independent journalist **Jason Rezaian**, a dual Iranian-American citizen who works for the "*Washington Post*, was convicted on charges of "espionage", "collaboration with hostile governments", "gathering classified information" and "disseminating propaganda against Iran". Rezaian and **Yeganeh Salehi**, a married couple who are both journalists, were arrested following a raid by Iranian security forces on 22 July 2014. Salehi, a reporter for the UAE-based *The National*, was released without charge on 6 October 2014. Rezaian was sentenced to an unspecified prison sentence but later released in January 2016 during a prisoner swap between the United States and Iran.

Rezaian's release came after the lifting of sanctions on Iran by the US, following successful nuclear negotiations, leading to some hope for an improvement in the human rights situation.

IRAQ

Violations of human rights were widespread leading to political instability and internal conflict was exacerbated by the fight against the Islamic State (IS or Da'esh) in 2015. Atrocities were committed by IS, government security forces, militias and popular mobilisation committees. Human rights defenders find themselves working in an extremely dangerous environment. Women human rights defenders in the *de facto* state of Iraqi Kurdistan continue to face serious difficulties, including risk of violence. Freedom of expression continues to be silenced in Iraq.

In February 2015, GCHR issued an appeal when a group of journalists was attacked by the bodyguards of Iraq's National Security Advisor, Faleh Al-Fayad. The attack took place at a seminar in Baghdad when a journalist tried to take a photo in front of Al-Fayad. The bodyguards started to beat him and when the other journalists protested in solidarity they too were attacked. Journalists **Senan Al-Saba'a** and **Ahmed Al-Ebdari** were reportedly severely beaten during the assault. Al-Saba'a sustained a broken arm and Al-Ebdari suffered many punches to his face. Photojournalists who were present were detained for five hours and their cameras and mobile phones were confiscated.

In May 2015, prominent human rights defender Ammar Shahbender was killed during a terrorist attack on a café in Baghdad. He was Director of the Institute of War and Peace Reporting in Iraq (IWPR) and co-founded the Iraqi Peace Network Peace com. He was a great supporter and friend of GCHR and his untimely death will be sorely felt by the human rights community.

Women human rights defenders in the *de facto* state of Iraqi Kurdistan continue to face serious difficulties relating to their work, which challenges the traditional notions of family and gender roles within families, and is often focused on gender-based violence. This results in hostile reactions not only from members of the communities but also from the authorities. Women human rights defenders have reported to GCHR about constant threats and intimidation in carrying out their work.

The challenges have been compounded by the conflict with IS. The vast numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees place extra pressures on all services and the authorities and all NGOs are struggling to cope. The extreme crisis facing the Yezidi communities continues with approximately 3,600 women and girls still being held by IS and the authorities have been criticised for the way in which this is being handled. There is a desperate need for the international community to do more to assist this situation, with funding, with capacity building and with specialist therapeutic services.

KUWAIT

State authorities continue to target those who speak out and document the human rights violations and limitations in Kuwait. Prominent human rights advocate Nawaf Al-Hendal faced reprisals as a result of his participation in the UNHRC, a common repercussion across the Gulf for those who raise their voices at the UN. The plight of the stateless Bedoon community was not resolved in 2015 and Bedoon activists continued to be targeted, such as Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli. A new Cyber-Crimes Law was approved by the National Assembly on 16 June 2015, which will likely further curtail freedom of expression and be used against human rights defenders and online activists, particularly with overbroad restrictions on public morality and on press and publications. It went into force in January 2016.

On 28 January 2015, GCHR issued an appeal for human rights defender **Nawaf Al-Hendal** after State Security Apparatus at the Interior Ministry issued an arrest warrant against him following postings on his Twitter account. He is an active human rights defender and works as an observer of peaceful marches. He is also the founder and director of Kuwait Watch, a NGO that monitors and documents violations in Kuwait and the Gulf region. He was beaten and arrested on 23 March 2015 as he was monitoring a protest calling for reform of the judiciary and the release of detained activists. It is believed that his arrest is linked to [a speech he made on 20 March](#) at the UNHRC in which he talked about freedom of expression and opinion and the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and Internet activists in Kuwait. Two days after his arrest a travel ban was imposed against him, and he was charged with “illegal gathering” and released on bail. The travel ban has since been lifted.

On 29 January 2015, human rights defender **Mohammed Al-Ajmi**, a member of the National Committee for Monitoring Violations (NCV), was forcibly taken by a group of unidentified men to an undisclosed location. He was later charged over postings on Twitter deemed insulting to Saudi Arabia. He was arrested twice in 2014 in relation to his human rights work. The same day, Bedoon human rights activist **Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli** was sentenced to a year in prison with hard labour followed by deportation. The charges against him include allegedly attacking and using force against police officers on duty, wounding some of them, and calling for an illegal demonstration in order to breach security.

In June 2015, human rights defender **Rana Al-Sadoun**, co-founder of the NCV, was sentenced *in absentia* to three years in prison with hard labour. She was convicted for repeating a speech delivered in 2002 by former MP Musallam Al-Barrak in which he criticised the electoral law and for which he is currently serving a two-year prison term.

In July 2015, the National Assembly approved a Cyber-Crimes Law which establishes criminal penalties for offences such as hacking and retrieving personal data without authorisation. However, articles 6 and 7 also expand the reach of existing prohibitions on print publications so that they encompass the dissemination of information on-line including the use of social media and blogs. It is feared that this new law may be used to further curtail the right to freedom of opinion and expression and to hamper the activities of human rights defenders and on-line activists. See: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1164>

Article 4 (4) punishes by imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years and a fine of not less than two thousand dinars and not exceeding five thousand dinars: “Item 4. Whoever establishes a website or publishes or produces or prepares or creates or sends or stores information or data with a view to use, distribute or display to others via the Internet or an information technology device that would prejudice public morality or manages a place for this purpose.” Article 4 is overly broad as it fails to define what constitutes “prejudice to public morality.”

Article 6 is based on Article 27 (1, 2 and 3) of the Press and Publications Law (no. 3/2006) which punishes editors and writers who commit acts that are described in article 19, 20 and 21 of the law, with up to one-year imprisonment and a fine of up to 20,000 Dinars. Article 27 gives powers to the Criminal Court to punish any of the described acts by revoking the license or shutting down a newspaper for a period not exceeding one year, as well as the confiscation of published copies.

OMAN

Freedom of expression and opinion is a major issue in Oman as authorities continue to persecute those who speak out critically against them. Oman is a very small country, with high levels of surveillance, which has imposed tough laws and restrictions on human rights defenders. In 2015 the Internal Security Service (ISS) actively set out to dismantle the human rights movement by targeting human rights defenders and on-line activists in a series of arrests and detention. Many faced convictions on baseless charges and prominent human rights defender **Saed Jadad** was continuously harassed throughout 2015 and remains in jail on sentences related to his peaceful human rights work.

On 19 January, prominent human rights defender **Saed Jadad** was summoned to appear before the Court of First Instance in Muscat. On Facebook he said he would not obey the summons and would commence a hunger strike on his arrest. On 21 January, more than 20 members of the Omani security forces raided his home. On 8 March, he was sentenced to three years in prison, on charges including “undermining the country’s position and prestige” and “incitement against the government and public order disruption.” On 31 March, Jadad was tried and sentenced to one year in prison and a fine of 2600 Omani Rials (USD\$6755) for violating the Cyber-Crimes Law. He was released on bail pending appeal in that case in April.

Jadad has been the subject of an on-going campaign of harassment for many years, including numerous fines and detentions. He was instrumental in organising and leading pro-reform protests in 2011 and has spoken publicly to crowds of up to 20,000 people. He has been an active blogger and has signed several petitions calling for reform in Oman.

On 25 November, state security forces again raided Jadad's home. They arrested him and transferred him to Arzat prison in the city of Salalah. On 18 November 2015, the Court of Appeal ratified the sentence issued by the Court of First Instance in April, of a one-year prison term and a fine of 1000 Omani Rials (USD\$2600) on charges of his alleged "use of an information network (Internet) in the dissemination of material that would prejudice public order." GCHR issued appeals on his case throughout January, February, March and April. On 2 February, and again in December 2015, GCHR wrote an open [letter](#) to Sultan Qaboos urging him to free Jadad unconditionally.

In January 2015, GCHR issued an appeal on the release of writer **Ali Al-Rawahi**. He was arrested on 29 December, after being summoned by the ISS, in relation to two postings he made on Twitter, in which he talked about corruption and urged people to demand their rights. He spent four days in detention.

Freedom of expression continued to be targeted throughout 2015 as online activists were detained. On 11 March 2015, the Special Division of the Omani Police summoned human rights defender **Abdullah Ghailani** and detained him for three days. His arrest also related to postings he made on-line. On 18 March, writer and online activist **Saeed Al-Darodi** was sentenced to one year in prison *in absentia*.

On 23 March 2015, online activist **Talib Al-Saedi** disappeared after he was summoned by the ISS to appear for investigation before the Special Division of the Omani Police in Muscat. He was detained incommunicado with no access to his family or lawyer before being released without charge in August 2015. It is believed that he was arrested in relation to his activities on social media networks, including persistent calls for freedom and reform in Oman. Al-Saedi is a well-known Omani activist who has been monitoring and documenting cases of detained activists by the ISS.

In April, four Internet activists were arrested in the Northern Province of Liwa over the course of a few days after the ISS summoned them by telephone. Their arrests are believed to be related to their on-line demands for the release of Dr. Talib Al-Mamari, a member of the Shura Council for Liwa Province who has been in prison since 2013 following his participation in a peaceful protest against environmental pollution caused by petrochemical installations. **Majid Al-Bloushi**, **Abdullah Al-Kindi** and **Saed Al-Khourosi** were arrested on 5 April and **Mohammed Al-Manaee** was arrested the following day. The online activists were held initially incommunicado and without access to their lawyers.

Well-known Internet activist **Ahmed Al-Moghairi** was summoned by the ISS to appear for investigation and was detained in solitary confinement for over three weeks until his release on 9 July 2015. He was denied access to a lawyer and was only allowed one visit from his family. It is believed that he was detained as a result of on-line activities where he talked about corruption and people's demands for freedom and reform.

Mohammad Al-Fazari, a well-known human rights defender and blogger, was able to flee the country to the UK on 17 July 2015, despite having been placed under house arrest and a travel ban since December 2014. He is the founder and editor of the e-magazine *Mowaten (Citizen)*, which published a number of articles on corruption in government departments, including the Public Prosecution Office. It is believed that these articles may have been the motivation for his arrest in 2014 and the travel ban in place against him. *Mowaten* was forced to stop publishing in January 2016.)

On 3 August, security authorities arrested human rights defenders **Dr. Salih Al-Azri**, **Ali Al-Muqbali** and **Talib Al-Saedi** and took them to an unknown destination before finally releasing them on 24 August. Their arrests are connected to their on-line activities. Dr. Al-Azri, a doctor working for the Ministry of Health, has written a lot about corruption in the health system of Oman and has promoted freedom of expression and defended the rights of detained human rights defenders in Oman through social media. Al-Muqbali is a human rights defender and online activist who has written on social media networks about corruption and in defense of prisoners of conscience. Al-Saedi has been monitoring and documenting cases of detained activists by the ISS. All three have been previously arrested as a result of their human rights work.

On 4 August 2015, security forces arrested human rights defenders and Internet activists, **Mukhtar Al-Hanaei** and **Ahmed Al-Blushi**, while they were on their way to the UAE from Oman. Al-Blushi was released after a few hours while Al-Hanaei was released on 24 August. Al-Hanaei is a well-known human rights defender and blogger in Oman and was previously arrested during a peaceful protest.

On 23 August, the ISS arrested Internet activist **Khalid Al-Nawafi** and initially detained him incommunicado. He has written on social media networks about corruption and the defense of prisoners of conscience. On the same day, human rights defender **Fahd Al-Kharousi** was summoned by the ISS before being released the following day. Both men have been previously arrested.

On 23 August, the ISS summoned human rights defender and blogger **Ismael Al-Maqbali**. He was detained from 29 August until 3 September. He actively supported the Sohar protests in 2011 and continues to support detained activists through his online activity. In 2012 he was sentenced to one and a half years in prison, charged with “Insulting the Sultan” and only freed by the Sultan Qaboos during an amnesty. On the same day, human rights defender and blogger **Helal Al-Alawi** was arrested and detained incommunicado before being released on 31 August 2015. He was also arrested in relation to Sohar protests, sentenced to five years in prison and released after two and a half years through an amnesty from the Sultan.

On 17 September, online activist **Hassan Al-Basham** was arrested by the ISS. He was released on 23 September only to be arrested again two days later and he remained in detention with no proper access to his family or lawyer. On 18 October he was reportedly transferred to the Public Prosecution Office in Sohar and charged with “insulting the Sultan and “undermining the prestige of the State.” He remains in prison awaiting a verdict on 8 February 2016. He has written in defence of prisoners of conscience and also carries out social and humanitarian activities.

These cases are just some of the examples of the restrictions on the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and they provide evidence of the on-going trend of targeting and harassing online activists and those who strive for the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights in Oman.

In March, GCHR expressed grave concern that the Omani Citizenship Law, enacted in August 2014, could be used to target human rights defenders and activists. The new law, which consists of 22 articles, prevents courts from hearing complaints regarding citizenship issues and instead fully places control of such decisions in the hands of the Interior Ministry. Article 20 provides for the withdrawal of Omani citizenship if it is proved that a person is “A member of a group or party or organisation that embraces the principles or ideologies that harm Oman’s interest; or works for a foreign country in any capacity, whether it is done inside or outside Oman, and does not meet the Omani government's request to leave this work during the specified period outlined to him; or works in favour of a hostile country that acts against the interests of the Oman.” GCHR fears that the vagueness of this article will allow it to be used against human rights defenders.

On 23 March 2015, GCHR and CIVICUS made a joint submission to the UN UPR on Oman, outlining concerns related to the environment in which civil society activists and human rights defenders operate and the legislative and extra-legal measures which curb civil society activities and threaten freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

On 17 June 2015, at the 29th session of the UNHRC, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association Maina Kiai presented his report following his visit to Oman in September 2014. He expressed his dismay at alleged reprisals against civil society members, who had engaged with him during his visit. During the mission he met with government bodies and members of civil society and raised concerns regarding restrictions on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly. However, the Omani government failed to address these concerns and attempted to intimidate the Special Rapporteur and civil society members. GCHR was one of eight signatories to a statement expressing their support for the Special Rapporteur and his team and calling on the government of Oman to fully cooperate with him and to implement the recommendations set out in the country report.

[SAUDI ARABIA](#)

The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia remained critical throughout 2015. Human rights defenders are increasingly subjected to arrest, trials, lengthy sentences and harassment as a result of their peaceful activities and their involvement with NGOs. Many remain in detention where they are subjected to ongoing ill treatment. The rights of women and girls continue to be violated and on-line activists are targeted for expressing their right to freedom of opinion and expression. Human rights defenders continue to appear before the Specialised Criminal Court whose jurisdiction is to deal with terrorism-related matters.

In 2014, in a case that inspired worldwide outrage, human rights defender **Raif Badawi** was sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1000 lashes, a 10-year travel ban to start on expiration of his jail sentence, a ban on using media outlets and a fine of one million Saudi Riyals (about US\$266,600) after being detained for almost two years. He is co-founder and editor of the website Liberal Saudi Network, an on-line forum created to foster political and social debate in Saudi Arabia. On 9 January 2015, he received 50 lashes in public. The sentence of 1000 lashes was ratified by the Supreme Court in Riyadh in June 2015 but he has not yet been lashed again, according to his family. In December 2015, he was awarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

On 12 January, the sentence of prominent human rights lawyer **Waleed Abu Al-Khair** was increased by the Specialised Criminal Court to 15 years. He had originally been sentenced to a 15-year sentence with the last five years suspended. He is the founder and Director of the independent non-profit civil rights organisation Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA). Multiple trumped up charges were brought against him including allegedly “antagonising international organisations against the kingdom,” relating to his engagement with international human rights mechanisms including the UN system and “setting up and supervising an unlicensed association,” referring to MHRSA.

The MHRSA and GCHR issued a joint appeal when his sentenced was revised, calling for his immediate release and the dropping of all charges against him. On 4 February 2015, the authorities transferred him from Malaz prison in his home city of Jeddah to Al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh without warning. This was the sixth time that Abu Al-Khair was transferred to a new prison. In April 2015, he was beaten by another prisoner, whom it is believed was encouraged to carry out the attack by the prison administration.

On 12 February 2015, women human rights defenders **Maysaa Al-Amoudi** and **Loujain Al-Hathloul** were released from detention after more than two months in jail for driving. They were detained on 1 December 2015 when they drove to meet each other at the border of the UAE. Both of them were charged with “breaching public order” and “overriding [her] guardian’s authority,” for driving a car without permission (in this case, the King’s authority.) Saudi Arabia still remains the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive. GCHR supported the #Women2Drive campaign.

Members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) continued to be sentenced for their participation in the NGO, which was founded in 2009 partly to respond to increased arrests following the second Gulf war. Members have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms of up to 15 years by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), which is assigned to cases related to terrorism and the security of the state. In March 2015, the SCC in Riyadh sentenced **Mohammed Al-Bajadi**, founding member of the ACPRA, to ten years in prison, with the last five suspended. He was arrested on 20 March 2011 after he communicated with the UN on the case of **Sultan Al-Daees**, a Yemeni prisoner, whose death was suspected to have been caused by torture at the hands of state authorities. Al-Bajadi has gone on hunger strike on several occasions in protest against his ill treatment, including spending four months in solitary confinement.

On 13 October 2015, the SCC sentenced **Dr. Abdulrahman Al-Hamid**, ACPRA co-founder, to nine years in prison, a fine of 50,000 Saudi Riyals (approx. USD\$13,300) and a nine-year travel ban to take effect on completion of his sentence. The sentence was handed down following a grossly unfair trial that was based on trumped up charges including incitement against public order and participating in establishing an unlicensed organisation (ACPRA). On the same day, the same court sentenced human rights defender **Abdulaziz Al-Senaidi** to eight years in prison, a fine of 50,000 Saudi Riyals (approx. USD\$13,300) and an eight-year travel ban to take effect on completion of his sentence. The sentence was based on charges including alleged incitement against public order for signing a petition calling for demonstrations in public squares, and insulting the king and spreading chaos and inciting public opinion via his Twitter account. Both men were denied proper access to lawyers during their initial interrogations and also throughout the trials. This is in flagrant breach of international law and the right to a fair trial.

On 19 October 2015, the Specialised Criminal Court sentenced **Dr. Abdulkarim Al-Khoder**, another ACPRA co-founder, to ten years in prison and a ten-year travel ban to take effect on completion of his sentence. Once again, the sentence was handed down following a grossly unfair trial that was based on trumped up charges that include disobedience of the ruler, instigation to cause chaos through the organisation of protests and demonstrations, undermining the state's image by publishing false information and distributing it to foreign organisations and the collaboration in founding a non-licensed association (ACPRA). He was the tenth founding member of ACPRA to be jailed, and many of his colleagues remain in prison, including **Dr. Mohammad Fahad Al-Qahtani, Fowzan Al-Harbi, Saleh ben Ashwan Al-Ashwan, Dr. Sulaiman Al-Rashudi and Dr. Abdullah Al-Hamid**.

In November, **Omar Mohammed Al-Saeed**, an associate member of ACPRA, was sentenced by the SCC to two and a half years and a travel ban of the same duration. Charges against him include breaking allegiance with the ruler and joining an unlicensed civil society (ACPRA). He was released on 22 December 2015, due to time served in detention after having been arrested on 16 April 2013.

In November, GCHR also issued an appeal on the continued systematic targeting of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia through the use of legal proceedings. The Court of Appeal ratified the sentence of blogger **Mikhlif Al-Shammari**, handed down in October 2014 which included two years in prison and 200 lashes.

On 21 December, human rights defender and journalist **Zuhair Al-Kutbi** was handed a four-year prison sentence, five-year travel ban and 15-year writing ban after he called for reforms on a television talk show.

In March, in an unprecedented move, Sweden did not renew military contracts with Saudi Arabia. GCHR [welcomed](#) this decision and encouraged other States to follow suit. On 9 March 2015, Saudi Arabia blocked Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström from speaking about human rights, including women's rights, issues at a meeting of the Arab League in Cairo, despite the fact that she had been invited as the Guest of Honour. According to Wallström, "The explanation we have been given is that Sweden has highlighted the situation for democracy and human rights, and that is why they do not want me to speak." The following day, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven confirmed the news that Sweden was cancelling its arms trade agreement with Saudi Arabia.

On 16 July 2015, GCHR and eight other human rights organisations [wrote](#) to the Saudi leadership expressing grave concern about the worsening situation of human rights defenders. The letter asked for the release of detained human rights defenders including **Waleed Abu Al-Khair, Dr. Mohammed Al-Qahtani, Dr. Abdullah Al-Hamid, Dr. Abdulkarim Al-Khodr, Raif Badawi, Mohammed Al-Bajadi, Fadel Al-Manasef, Fawzan Al-Harbi, Sulaiman Al-Rashudi, Issa Al-Nukheifi** and all of their colleagues. To date they still have not received a reply.

On 15 September 2015, GCHR, CIVICUS, ARTICLE 19 and the Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) held a [side event](#) focused on Saudi Arabia entitled, “Human Rights Defenders: The Challenges and Their Urgent Need for Protection” during the 30th Session of the UNHRC.

On 17 September, the International Hrant Dink Award 2015 was given to Saudi human rights defender **Samar Badawi**. The award is given to individuals who risk their lives for ideals and principles through peaceful means aiming for a world free of violence, discrimination and racism. Badawi has stood out as a leading voice advocating for women’s rights, including the right to drive, and for raising international awareness about the oppression of human rights defenders in her country. She has been jailed for her activities and faced threats and harassment from the authorities. She is married to Waleed Abu Al-Khair. Due to a travel ban in place against her, she was unable to travel to Istanbul to collect the award so a member of GCHR accepted the award on her behalf.

“What motivates me more to survive is my responsibility, not only for raising my children, but also the responsibility of changing the dark reality in which we live now in order to build a future of justice, freedom and equality for all Saudi citizens. Remember that history does not forget, it will exalt those who have fought for freedom and cast aside the memory of those who succumbed to a life of humiliation and servitude,”
said Samar Badawi.

In September, GCHR’s challenge of the legality of Just Solutions International (JSi), the commercial arm of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) came to a positive conclusion. In June it launched a High Court challenge to the decision by the UK Ministry of Justice to sell prison and probation services to Gulf States. JSi, operating within the auspices of the Ministry of Justice, had submitted a £5.9 million proposal to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and likewise a large-scale bid to the Sultanate of Oman for assistance with the design of a new prison. Scores of human rights defenders are being arbitrarily detained, imprisoned and tortured in both countries. In September the UK Ministry of Justice announced that JSi would not pursue any new projects but would continue to pursue existing projects including the proposal to work with the Saudi prison and probation service. Later that month the High Court ruled that the case raises “significant issues of general public importance” and granted a cap on legal fees. On 13 October 2015, the UK government [cancelled](#) its controversial bid to supply prison services to Saudi Arabia. Questions still remain about Ministry of Justice sales to other governments such as Oman.

In an unsettling and much criticised move in September, Saudi Arabia was elected head of a key UNHRC panel that selects key officials who shape international human rights standards and report on violations worldwide. Just weeks after the appointment an opportunity was missed by the UNHRC when a resolution failed to set up an inquiry into the war crimes and human rights abuses in Yemen. A draft resolution tabled by the Netherlands proposing such an inquiry was withdrawn and the Council instead adopted a resolution tabled by Saudi Arabia which did not include such an inquiry. GCHR strongly [condemned](#) the appointment of Saudi Arabia to the Council as human rights in Saudi Arabia continue to be grievously violated and the authorities blatantly disregard their international human rights obligations.

12 December 2015 marked a small victory for women's rights in Saudi Arabia as for the first time they voted and stood for municipal elections. Women in Saudi Arabia still face among the worst human rights violations and barriers to freedom worldwide.

[SYRIA](#)

Bloggers, journalists, human rights defenders and those who exercised their right to freedom of opinion and expression continued to be targeted by authorities in 2015. Criticism of the state, including on-line, was met with arrest and detention. Well-known human rights defenders, such as **Razan Zaitouneh**, who have been subjected to enforced disappearance due to their human rights activities, remain missing and fear mounts for their safety. On an encouraging note, following much international campaigning, three members of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) were finally released under a general amnesty in 2015.

In January broadcaster and human rights activist **Maisa Saleh** was fired from her job after she clicked "like" on *Facebook* posts that were critical of the owner of the Orient TV channel for making inappropriate sectarian comments.

The Islamic State (IS or Da'esh) was responsible for the murder of many human rights defenders and journalists, including Syrian journalist and documentary maker **Naji Jerf**, editor-in-chief of the independent monthly *Hentah*. Jerf, who was killed in Gaziantep in Turkey, near the Syrian border, on 27 December, had made a recent documentary on the award-winning Syrian citizen journalist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS). The murder of Jerf followed the murder of **Ahmed Mohamed Al-Mousa**, a 23-year-old editor for RBSS who was shot dead by IS in Idlib province in Syria on 16 December. His brother **Hammoud Al-Mousa**, a human rights defender who co-founded RBSS, has also been constantly threatened by IS, and their father and aunt were also kidnapped and killed by IS. The date of 28 April 2015 marked the 38th birthday of missing human rights lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh**, head of the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC). To mark the occasion, 71 NGOs including GCHR, called on armed groups and governments to take steps to investigate the abduction of the four VDC staff members - Zaitouneh, **Samira Khalil**, **Nazem Hamadi** and **Wa'el Hamada**, known as the "Douma Four". They were abducted during a raid on their offices by a group of armed men on 9 December 2013. On the second anniversary of the abduction of the Douma Four, GCHR and eight other human rights organisations urged the Government of Canada to ensure the four are located and released. Zaitouneh's parents arrived in Canada from Syria in 2014, as did her sister Reem Zaitouneh, with her husband and two children. Since settling in Canada, Reem Zaitouneh has continued her activist work with the VDC.

“Nothing, not even our 100,000 deaths or harsh siege, or betrayal of the international community can ever defeat the will of people who have a dream and faith in the future,” said Razan Zaitouneh in a video interview with FIDH prior to her abduction.

GCHR continued to advocate for the release of **Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zitani** and **Hussein Gharir**, members of the SCM, throughout 2015 until their release in July and August. In February 2012, the Syrian Air Force arrested the three men during a raid on the offices of the SCM. A year after their arrest they appeared before the Anti-Terrorism Court on charges of “publicising terrorist acts”. A UN resolution in May 2013 called for their release, in January 2014 the UNWGAD declared that their detention arbitrary and a general amnesty issued on 9 June 2014 should have included them, yet they were not freed that year. In March 2015, a date was set for the verdict of the case. In April Mazen Darwish was awarded the prestigious 2015 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

In June the European Parliament issued a motion for a resolution in the situation in Syria and the case of Darwish, Al-Zitani and Gharir. It called for their release and that of the Douma Four and acknowledged the pattern of systematic targeting of human rights defenders and expressed its admiration and solidarity for all Syrian activists who continue to tirelessly monitor, document and report on the human rights situation.

On 25 June 2015, GCHR organised a side event in Geneva at the 29th Session of the UNHRC on the situation of human rights defenders and journalists in Syria and Iraq. It was co-sponsored by eight organisations including the SCM. It highlighted the importance of creating awareness of all enforced disappearances, unfair trials, deaths and tortures of human rights defenders in Syria and the need to guarantee accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations.

In July, a special presidential amnesty was granted under which Gharir and Al-Zitani were finally released from prison. Eventually, on 10 August, Darwish was also released. On 31 August, the Anti-Terrorism Court ruled that the case of the SCM members be included in a general amnesty and they were unconditionally released and charges dropped.

In August, journalist, human rights defender and wife of Mazen Darwish, **Yara Bader** was awarded the Human Right Watch Alison des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism together with three other human rights defenders. She has worked continuously to expose detention and torture of journalists and detainees in Syria and assumed the role of Director of the SCM during her husband’s detention. The same month a UN Security Council Presidential Statement referred to UN resolution 2139 passed in February 2014, which demanded a release of all those arbitrarily detained in Syria.

In September, GCHR received the sad news that human rights defender and cartoonist **Akram Raslan** was killed under torture in a government detention centre a few months after his arrest in October 2012. He was well known for his courageous cartoons, which often highlighted the violations against the Syrian people. In 2013 he won the Cartoonists Rights Network International’s Award for Courage in Editorial Cartooning.

6 October 2015 marked the third anniversary of the enforced disappearance of human rights lawyer **Khalil Ma'touq** and his assistant and friend **Mohamed Zaza**. In October 2012 the men were arrested at a government checkpoint. Since then there has been no confirmation of their whereabouts however some reports claim they are being detained in Military Intelligence Branch 235 in Damascus which is notorious for poor and unhygienic living conditions. GCHR together with 50 other NGOs signed a joint statement calling for their immediate release.

On 7 October, 31 organisations including GCHR, made a statement urging authorities to disclose the whereabouts of detained freedom of expression advocate **Bassel Khartabil**, and to release him. He was arrested by Military Intelligence on 15 March 2012 and has been in detention ever since. Prior to his arrest, he used his technical expertise to promote freedom of speech and access to information on-line and he has received a number of awards. He was initially held in incommunicado detention and tortured for three weeks. A further statement was issued on his case by 22 organisations on 4 November. Reports received in late November suggest that since his disappearance he has been tried by a Military Field Court in Military Police Headquarters and may be facing the death penalty. On 20 November, 36 local and international organisations including GCHR again urged Syrian authorities to ensure his release and safe return to his family.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Human rights defenders in the UAE face arrest, detention and ill treatment as the space for freedom of expression is increasingly narrowed. In January 2015 GCHR website was blocked by authorities and throughout the year online activists and bloggers were targeted. Arbitrary detention continued and members of the UAE94 remain in detention and their families have been targeted. GCHR's report on torture in prisons based on testimonies of those unjustly detained, detail the terrible conditions in which they are being imprisoned. An Omani blogger remained in detention in the UAE.

In January 2015, GCHR's website was blocked in the UAE. An attempt to access it was met with the message "Access to this site is currently blocked. The site falls under the Prohibited Content Categories of the UAE's Internet Access Management Policy". To mark World Day Against Cyber-Censorship, Reporters Without Borders launched "Operation Collateral Freedom" to mirror nine censored websites in 11 countries including GCHR's in UAE. Not only do local human rights defenders risk arrest and incommunicado detention in the UAE, but human rights defenders with other nationalities are at risk in the country. Omani blogger **Muawiya Al-Rawahi** was arbitrarily detained at the United Arab Emirates border on his way from Muscat on 24 February and was held incommunicado. Before his arrest he had criticised the ruling family in Abu Dhabi in his online postings. In May, GCHR issued a further appeal on his case following his transfer to solitary confinement in the notorious Al-Wathba prison. On 9 November 2015, Al-Rawahi was brought to hospital from prison. On the same day Al-Rawahi published a recording on social media sites saying that he had not received "fair treatment" from the UAE State Security Apparatus. ISS previously prevented him from receiving his medication for two months, and he was hospitalised for a week as a result. He said he had spent four months in solitary confinement and threatened harm to himself by saying, "If I cannot find fair treatment I will start a hunger strike or commit suicide." In June 2015, his mother had sent an appeal to authorities in the UAE and Oman to facilitate the provision of medication to her son.

March 2015 marked the second anniversary of the trial of the UAE94, in a case that imprisoned dozens of government critics and reform activists in the UAE, including prominent human rights defenders, judges, academics, and student leaders. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that the trial had deprived the defendants of their right to a fair trial enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A coalition of 13 organisations, including GCHR, issued a statement calling on the UAE government to release immediately and unconditionally all those imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association following this grossly unfair trial, as well as those who remain detained or imprisoned for publicising concerns about it.

In February, sisters of imprisoned UAE94 activists were subjected to enforced disappearance at the hands of the State Security Apparatus. The three sisters, **Asma Khalifa Al-Suwaidi, Maryam Khalifa Al-Suwaidi** and **Alyaziyah Khalifa Al-Suwaidi**, were summoned for questioning. The three have campaigned peacefully on-line for the release of their brother, one of the UAE94, **Dr. Issa Al-Suwaidi**, highlighting also his unfair trial and the human rights violations to which he was subjected by the authorities. The three women were released after several months on 15 May.

On 12 March 2015, GCHR launched a report “Torture and Abuse in Prisons in the United Arab Emirates”, at a side event at the UNHRC in Geneva. The report documents torture and abuse of prisoners belonging to the UAE94, 61 of whom remain in jail since July 2013, and details their testimony and evidence. It details a wide range of human rights violations, identifies cruel and degrading treatment to which the detainees were subjected, lists perpetrators and concludes with a list of recommendations including the establishment of an inquiry into the abuse and the release of all those imprisoned based on unfair trials.

On 18 August 2015, human rights defender **Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith** was arrested by the State Security Authority at his workplace in Abu Dhabi. He was taken first to his home where a search was carried out and then to an unknown location. He is a respected economist and academic and was arrested in April 2011 with four other human rights defenders in a case known as the UAE5. They were charged with “publicly insulting” UAE’s rulers and using a banned online political forum. Before his arrest in 2015 he had spoken out on-line against mass killing in Cairo in 2013. GCHR issued a further appeal on his case on 25 November 2015, as three months after his arrest his whereabouts remained unknown and he has had no access to a lawyer or his family.

In October 2015, human rights defender **Ahmed Mansoor**, one of the UAE5 and member of GCHR’s Advisory Board, won the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. The award is given to human rights defenders who have shown deep commitment and face great personal risk as a result of their human rights work. However, due to a travel ban in place against him he was unable to attend the award ceremony in Geneva. For many years, Mansoor has been subjected to repeated harassment, intimidation and death threats from the state security apparatus, as well as media smear campaigns. In 2011 his passport was confiscated and since then, despite being released and pardoned of the charges brought against, him the authorities have refused to return his passport. In September the Jury of the Martin Ennals Award issued a statement urging the authorities to lift the travel ban against him so that he could travel to the award ceremony but this fell on deaf ears.

YEMEN

War-torn Yemen continues to be a violent and dangerous place both for civilians and human rights defenders. Human rights violations take place continuously at the hands of all sides to the conflict. Those who speak out and exercise their right to freedom of expression are particularly under threat. 2015 saw the murder of prominent journalist **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani**. After the Saudi bombing campaign began in March, GCHR issued a report on the situation of journalists and human rights defenders. It also held two side events at the UNHRC which highlighted the dire situation in Yemen.

On 18 March 2015, journalist and activist **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani** was murdered in Sanaa. Armed men on motorbikes gunned him down as he left his home. He was a prominent journalist and former editor-in-chief of the pro-democracy online newspaper *Al-Shoura*. He advocated for the right to freedom of expression and wrote about government corruption. He was awarded the Special Award for Human Rights Journalism Under Threat by Amnesty International in 2008. He suffered regular threats, attacks and imprisonment as a result of his writing. He was sentenced to one year in prison in 2004, and was abducted and tortured in 2007. In 2008, he was sentenced to six years in prison, a sentence which was eventually suspended after a pardon was granted in 2009. His brutal murder is stark evidence of the dangerous environment in which journalists in Yemen work.

In advance of World Freedom Press Day on 3 May, GCHR launched its special human rights report entitled “Yemeni journalists and human rights defenders at risk during wartime.” The report provides background on the political context and the conflict in the country in the aftermath of the 18 March 2011 revolution and highlights the deterioration of security conditions since the bombing campaign began in March 2015. It discusses the situation of media freedom and the challenges facing journalist who are increasingly targeted. It concludes with a set of of recommendations to the Arab League member states and all conflicted parties in Yemen to take all necessary steps toward peace and negotiations in respect of human rights and safety for Yemeni human rights defenders.

On 22 June 2015, at the 29th session of the UNHRC, GCHR organised a side event co-sponsored by CIVICUS, Freedom House, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and Sisters Arab Forum (SAF), on the situation of human rights defenders and journalists during wartime in Yemen. The event was attended by NGOs, member state representatives, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO and others. Throughout the event, all panelists confirmed and reiterated their call for accountability and the cessation of violence on all sides.

In September at the 30th session of the UNHRC, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, GCHR, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) and FIDH organised a side event focused on Yemen entitled “Civilians & Rights Activists Under Fire - Addressing impunity that fuels the humanitarian crisis”. Speakers talked about the targeting of civilians in the on-going war in Yemen and about the imminent risks that human rights defenders in the country face from all parties to the conflict. All participants reiterated the need for a peaceful outcome to the conflict and the end of violence in the country.

3. CONCLUSION

The human rights situation continued to remain grave in 2015 as human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries continued to be targeted on a daily basis. They go about their peaceful and legitimate human rights work bravely despite being faced with threats of arrest, intimidation, judicial harassment, and violence. Civil society organisations strive to ensure an open and safe environment where human rights can be promoted.

Many human rights defenders in detention suffered under appalling conditions. In Bahrain in March 2015 the situation reached a crisis point as prisoners were subjected to beatings and ill treatment, sparking a series of hunger strikes. In Iran fears mounted for the health of women human rights defenders detained in Evin prison. In Syria enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention continued to plague human rights defenders. At the close of 2015 many human rights defenders remain arbitrarily detained or missing, including some collective cases known as the Bahrain 13, Syria's Douma Four and many of the UAE94.

Conflict in many Gulf and neighbouring countries continued throughout 2015, most notably in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and the general human rights situation deteriorated as both state and non-state actors committed atrocities.

Freedom of expression violations remained a serious human rights issue in 2015 as those who exercised their right to freedom of expression and opinion were targeted. In recent years there has been an increase in the targeting of those posting on-line, a trend which continued throughout 2015 particularly evidenced by cases of on-line activists persecuted in Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria and UAE, including through the use of Cyber-Crime laws.

Despite the overall critical situation, there were some positive human rights developments in 2015 including the albeit limited granting of women's right to vote in municipal elections in Saudi Arabia and the release of the SCM members in Syria. On an international stage Sweden's refusal to renew military contracts with Saudi Arabia and the UK government cancelling its bid to supply services to Saudi prisons were welcome moves.

Human rights defenders are more enabled to document human rights violations as NGOs such as GCHR training in human rights mechanisms, capacity building, documentation, security and protection, among other topics. When advocacy is targeted to allies and influential actors, human rights defenders receive international recognition, ultimately offering a measure of protection.

2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and there is an international UN campaign to ensure their ratification and promotion. Let it be an opportunity for the authorities in Gulf and neighbouring countries to improve the human rights situation and ensure a safe environment for human rights defenders.



In a statement issued for International Human Rights Defenders Day, marked on 9 December 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Michel Forst, honoured human rights defenders stating:

“They are ‘Gandhis’ and ‘Mandelas’. They are ‘Rosa Parks’ and ‘Malalas’. They are also ordinary individuals, lawyers, women activists, community leaders, journalists, unionists and environmentalists who strive to re-claim our rights and promote our freedoms. They are called human rights defenders, countless individuals and groups advocating for human rights, educating and raising awareness of situations around the world, and holding governments to account for their actions... They face enormous risks and threats as a result of the work they do, or because of who they are... I call on States to support and protect human rights defenders at the international, regional and national levels through building defenders-friendly alliances and adopting concrete measures to protect rights activists. In our strife for freedom, equality and justice, it is imperative that we empower and protect human rights defenders – our heroes, our sentinels who fight our human rights battles. They deserve our unequivocal support.”

GCHR is committed to continue supporting and protecting human rights defenders and to work to ensure their safety as they carry out their peaceful and legitimate human rights work in the face of adversity. Thank you to all the supporters worldwide who offer solace and assistance to human rights defenders in need.