

## **Cases of Contention: Activism, Social Media and Law in Saudi Arabia**

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*Since 2011, Saudi Arabia has increased its efforts to silence activists who have expressed their demands for political change on social media. In the following, I examine how the Saudi Arabian government has legitimized its actions and make suggestions for the future of political reform in the Kingdom. My discussion is largely based on my engagement as the Amnesty International USA Saudi Arabia Country Specialist.*

"A security officer asked me, 'do you have any imprisoned relatives?' I said, yes all prisoners are my family. He replied – and I quote him - 'Do you want to join them in prison?' I replied, No ... we want them released."<sup>1</sup> Mohammed al-Bajadi's tweet went viral during a protest on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011.<sup>2</sup> The next day, al-Bajadi was arrested on his way to work, held incommunicado for three weeks, and sentenced to four years in prison the following year.<sup>3</sup> Al-Bajadi is one of many human activists that have been arrested, detained, jailed, and by some accounts ill-treated while imprisoned as a result of activism on social media.<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch reported that efforts to harass, intimidate, and silence human rights activists have doubled since early 2011.<sup>5</sup> This begs a question: How has the Saudi Arabian government legitimized its actions on human rights activism and the exercise of freedom of expression on social media, and what are the implications thereof for political change in the Kingdom?

I suggest that Saudi authorities have legitimized their actions through broad interpretation of existing laws and the enactment of new regulations since 2011. Authorities have used the often vague language of the legal and judicial system to

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*. London, UK: October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014,

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/025/2014/en> (accessed October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/025/2014/en> (accessed October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.  
His sentence was recently overturned and he is now facing retrial before the Specialized Criminal Court.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Amnesty International suspects al-Bajadi has been subjected to verbal abuse and other ill-treatment during his detention

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Challenging the Red Lines-Stories of Rights Activists in Saudi Arabia*. United States of America: December 2013. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudi1213webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudi1213webwcover_0.pdf) (accessed on January 23, 2015), 2.

legitimize the arrest, detention, imprisonment, and ill-treatment of activists for their exercise of freedom of expression on social media. I propose that these measures have and will continue to restrict opportunity for political change in the Kingdom. Further, it seems probable that given the developments in the legal and judicial system since 2011, the Saudi Arabian government will not shy away from enacting measures that will further undermine human rights activism and freedom of expression on social media and elsewhere. To substantiate my claims, I examine the Kingdom's Basic Law of Governance (1992), Law of Printing and Publication (2003), Anti-Cyber Crime Law (2007), Executive Regulation for Electronic Publishing (2011), and the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (2014). I explore these regulations alongside nine cases of human rights activists that have been jailed since 2011. These cases include Abdullah bin Hamid Ali al-Hamid, Turki al-Hamid, Waleed Abu al-Khair, Nazer al-Majeed, Mohammad bin Fahad al-Qahtani, Mikhlif al-Shammari, Hussein al-Sulaimain, Raif Badawi, and Hamza Kasghari. All of these activists used social media to express their demands for political change in the Kingdom.

### **Saudi Arabia's Legal and Judicial System: Freedom of Expression and Beyond**

In 1992, King Fahad ibn Abdul-Aziz transformed Saudi Arabia's political environment by introducing three fundamental laws: The Basic System of Government, The Consultative Council Law, and The Regional Law.<sup>6</sup> Arguably the most important constitutional document, the Basic System, or as after being issued by Royal Decree, The Basic Law of Governance, proclaims the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a sovereign Arab Islamic State.<sup>7</sup> Article 7 states that the government derives its authority from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which constitute the ultimate source of all administrative regulations of the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> The Basic Law of Governance establishes that it is the state's role and objective to protect the principles of Islam and enforce its Shar'iah.<sup>9</sup> The law also lays out the separation between the three branches of government. Article 44 identifies the three authorities of the state as follows: 1) The Judicial Authority 2) The Executive Authority 3) The Legislative Regulatory Authority.<sup>10</sup> These authorities ought to "cooperate in the performance of their functions, according to this Law (the Basic Law of Governance) or other laws."<sup>11</sup> Further, the law establishes that the King is the ultimate arbiter of these authorities.<sup>12</sup> The King's encompassing control over the government is particularly explicit in his functions in the legal system: He is the enforcer of divine law and has broad

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<sup>6</sup> Abdullah F. Ansary. *A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System*. GlobaLex, NYU Law. New York, USA: July 2008. [http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/saudi\\_arabia.htm](http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/saudi_arabia.htm) (accessed on January 23 2015), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Basic Law of Governance*. Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. Washington, DC: March 1, 1992.

[http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/The\\_Basic\\_Law\\_Of\\_Governance.aspx](http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/The_Basic_Law_Of_Governance.aspx) (accessed on January 23 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ansary, Abdullah F. *A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Basic Law of Governance*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

discretion over the field of Islamic public policy.<sup>13</sup> For example, any legislative proposal or amendment in the process of being enacted as law must be approved by the Council of Ministers (headed by the King), the Shura Council (appointed by the King), and the King.<sup>14</sup> The King thus holds a major rulemaking function and has the authority to “repeal, enact, or amend any laws and regulation by Royal Order.”<sup>15</sup> With regard to the judiciary system, the King’s ultimate authority exhibits itself by his function of appointing judges.<sup>16</sup> However, while the King appoints the judges, he may not “interfere in the judicial process by altering decisions or redirecting cases.”<sup>17</sup> Article 46 of The Basic Law of Governance makes this separation between authorities clear: “The Judiciary is an independent authority. The decisions of judges shall not be subject to any authority other than the authority of the Islamic Sharia.”<sup>18</sup> Judges generally have some discretion in adjudicating cases and are guided by their interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunnah.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Saudi judges apply ‘ijtihād’ in cases that fall outside these two sources of law.<sup>20</sup> In 2005, the judicial system underwent reform and established specialized courts, which have complete jurisdiction over their area of specialization.<sup>21</sup> Many activists have been tried under these newly established specialized courts in criminal cases.

On freedom of expression, Article 39 of The Basic Law of Governance states the following:

Mass media and all other vehicles of expression shall employ civil and polite language, contribute towards the education of the nation and strengthen unity. It is prohibited to commit acts leading to disorder and division, affecting the security of the state and its public relations, or undermining human dignity and rights. Details shall be specified in the Law.<sup>22</sup>

This law recognizes the importance of expression as a ‘vehicle’ or mechanism for national unity, state security, human dignity and rights. However, it sharply distinguishes between expression as an act that positively contributes to society and that with the corresponding negative effect. Meaning that expression that positively contributes to society vis-a-vis education and unity is permitted by law, whereas expression that may lead to disorder and division is prohibited. The unspecified nature and form that expression can take on in its variegated function allows for diverse interpretation of the law. In other words, the vague language of Article 39 of The Basic Law of Governance leaves plenty of room for interpretation by the judicial system in cases that concern freedom of expression. One of the laws mention in Article 39 that can be referenced for further specification on freedom of expression is the Law of Printing and Publication.

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<sup>13</sup> Ansary, Abdullah F. *A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>18</sup> King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Basic Law of Governance*.

<sup>19</sup> Ansary, Abdullah F. *A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System*,8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 and 15.

<sup>22</sup> King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Basic Law of Governance*.

The Law of Printing and Publication was enacted on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2003 and concerns matters of expression in various forms, including writing, drawing, radio, television, and photography.<sup>23</sup> Article 3 establishes that the purpose of expression shall be to “call to Islam”, to “spread culture and knowledge”, as well as to lead to “all that is good and proper.”<sup>24</sup> The latter part, “all that is good and proper”, is unspecified in nature and form similarly to the note on expression as a vehicle for unity and security as per Article 39 of The Basic Law of Governance. The limitations of freedom of expression are established explicitly in Article 8 of the Law of Printing and Publication, which states: Freedom of expression is guaranteed in the different media of publication within the limits of Sharia Rules and Law.<sup>25</sup> The restrictions are further concretized in Article 9, which (among other considerations) notes that permitted printed matter shall not be conflicting with Sharia Rules, shall not lead to breach of public security or public policy, or shall not stir up discord among citizens.<sup>26</sup> The direct reference to Islam and Sharia Law, as well as the mentioning of expression as a vehicle for national unity, state security or disorder in these articles is in line with the fundamental aspects of The Basic Law of Governance. It is especially reminiscent of the proclamation that the Qur’an and the Sunnah constitute the ultimate sources of all administrative regulations of the Kingdom (Article 7) and that expression as an act that negatively contributes to society (vis-a-vis disorder or breach of security) is prohibited (Article 39).

Another law mentioned in Article 39 of The Basic Law of Governance that can be referenced for further specification on freedom of expression is the Anti-Cyber Crime Law enacted on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2007. This law identifies the constitutive elements of what shall be considered a cyber crime (of which expression is one such element), while it also proclaims the respective punishment of such crimes.<sup>27</sup> Article 6 establishes that the “production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy, through the information network or computers” constitutes a cyber crime.<sup>28</sup> Though this law does not explicitly speak of expression, the implication in the meaning of ‘material’ has been used as sufficient leverage to charge several human rights activists for their exercise of freedom of expression on social media. Beyond this, the repeated reference to breach of public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy as a result of production of ‘material’ (whether written or in other forms) is noteworthy. Also important to highlight is the explicit reference to information networks and computers – a novel aspect in the legal discussion on freedom of expression. The Anti-Cyber Crime Law may well be the first law that officially includes online networks as mediums of freedom of expression. Though the Law of Printing and Publication mentions numerous mediums through which expression may

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<sup>23</sup> King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Law of Printing and Publication*. Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. Washington, DC: October 28, 2003. [http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/Law\\_of\\_Printing\\_and\\_Publication.aspx](http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/Law_of_Printing_and_Publication.aspx) (accessed on January 23 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> King Abdullah ibn Abdilaziz Al Saud. *Anti-Cyber Crime Law*. Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. Washington, DC: August 1, 2010.

<http://www.saudiembassy.net/announcement/announcement03260701.aspx> (accessed on January 23 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

occur (including radio and television), it is not until the 2011 Executive Regulation for Electronic Publishing that the Saudi authorities established legal ground to subject all forms of electronic news and information to the 2003 law.<sup>29</sup> This regulation set a new tone for freedom of expression on social media in that it requires all material produced to operate within the limits of Sharia Rules and Laws (Article 8), call to Islam and lead to all that is ‘good and proper’ as per Article 3, and may not breach public security or cause discord among citizens.<sup>30</sup> The Executive Regulation for Electronic Publishing was issued by the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information in January 2011, a few months before Amnesty International received the first leaked draft of a proposed law by the name of Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing that was enacted January 31<sup>st</sup> 2014.<sup>31</sup>

The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing defines terrorism as any act “intended to disturb the public order of the state... or to insult the reputation of the state or its position.”<sup>32</sup> These acts may take the form of questioning the fundamentals of Islam (Article 1) and the King’s authority (Article 2) to establishing organizations antagonistic to the Kingdom (Article 11).<sup>33</sup> The law goes as far as criminalizing “contact of correspondence with any groups, currents of thought, or individuals hostile to the Kingdom” (Article 6) or identifying a terrorist as “anyone who harms the unity or stability of the Kingdom by any means” as per Article 8.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, ‘terrorist’ acts may be non-violent in forms of expression, for example.<sup>35</sup> The reference to Islam, disturbance of public order and state reputation, as well as the disruption of unity and stability are aspects that are reminiscent of all the laws discussed in this section and fall in line with the very vague language of Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law of Governance. A language that leaves plenty of room for interpretation on behalf of the judicial system in cases that concern freedom of expression.

### **Activism, Freedom of Expression, and Social Media in 2011**

The Day of Rage marked March 11, 2011; a large planned demonstration in the Eastern Province.<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International reported that in the first half of the year, Saudi authorities increased their security measures on those suspected to take part in

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<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Challenging the Red Lines-Stories of Rights Activists in Saudi Arabia*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. *The Law of Printing and Publication*.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Challenging the Red Lines-Stories of Rights Activists in Saudi Arabia*, 10.

Amnesty International. *Repression in the Name of Security*. London, UK: 2011.

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/saudisecurity.pdf> (accessed on January 24 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Saudi Arabia: Terrorism Law Tramples on Rights*. News. February 6, 2014. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/06/saudi-arabia-terrorism-law-tramples-rights> (accessed on January 25 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights*. News. March 20 2014.

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights> (accessed on January 25 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia’s Day of Rage: One Year On*. London, UK: March 2012.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/007/2012/en/c648b1a6-2c8e-4fc7-a1e1-24c5f5cf5d47/mde230072012en.pdf> (accessed on January 24 2015), 4.

demonstrations or express views critical of the government.<sup>37</sup> Checkpoints, thorough searches of the content of mobile phones, and confiscation of documentation of the protests were among the newly employed measures in anticipation, and aftermath, of the Day of Rage.<sup>38</sup> The US Department of State released information that by December 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, 4662 political prisoners were held on terrorism-related charges – these include human rights activists who exercised freedom of expression.<sup>39</sup>

The call for and organization of the Day of Rage and other protests largely occurred online. Via virtual platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, activists encouraged participation in demonstrations.<sup>40</sup> According to BBC News, there were 13 million Internet users in Saudi Arabia in 2011 of which 1.9 million used Twitter.<sup>41</sup> These 1.9 million people account for more than fifty percent of all Twitter users in the Arab region.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, in late 2011, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal acquired a large stake (\$300m) in Twitter, arguably to assert influence over the social media site.<sup>43</sup> Also, by the end of the year, about sixteen percent of the Saudi population thirteen and up used Facebook as a social media outlet.<sup>44</sup>

Of the hundreds of individuals that were arrested and detained as a result of their activism and exercise of freedom of expression on social media or on the streets, many have been held without charge, trial, access to a lawyer, and there have been reports of ill-treated in prison.<sup>45</sup> For example, Hussein Salman Yassin al-Sulaimain was arrested on September 21<sup>st</sup> 2011 for “expressing compassion with the Bahraini protesters and calling for the release of dissidents in Saudi Arabia on Facebook.”<sup>46</sup> Al-Sulaimain, who suffers from polio, was allegedly shackled by his hands and feet and was taken to hospital after a prison officer broke the polio-affected leg.<sup>47</sup> His family filed an official complaint, but is still awaiting response.<sup>48</sup> By the year’s end, al-Sulaimain remained detained.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Nazeer al-Majed was reportedly ill-treated and held without charge after he was arrested on April 17, 2011.<sup>50</sup> His arrest came days after al-Majed published the

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<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International. *Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province*. London, UK: May 2012. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/011/2012/en/35243c61-37c3-461b-9df1-087e825a205a/mde230112012en.pdf> (accessed on January 24 2015), 1 and 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia - Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011*. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Washington DC, USA: 2011. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/186659.pdf> (accessed on January 24 2015), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>41</sup> BBC News Middle East. *Saudi Arabia Profile*. August 22, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703480> (accessed on December 15, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Arab Social Media Report. *Facebook in the Arab Region*. <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat> (accessed January 23, 2015)

<sup>45</sup> Amnesty International. *Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

article “I protest therefore I am a (good) human” (translation) on numerous websites.<sup>51</sup> Besides this piece, al-Majed had written and posted articles on social and political issues in print media and online prior to his arrest.<sup>52</sup> The security officers searched al-Majed’s apartment without warrant and confiscated his laptop and books by Saudi opposition figures.<sup>53</sup> The Saudi authorities claim that he was formally accused of “taking part in a protest, encouraging protests and communicating with foreign media.”<sup>54</sup> These statements remain unverified.<sup>55</sup> However Amnesty International received reports that al-Majed “was subject to torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.”<sup>56</sup>

Besides this, al-Majed was also affected by Saudi Arabia’s Rules for Disciplining Employees and other recently released Royal Orders.<sup>57</sup> The Rules for Disciplining Employees allows the dismissal of public sector employees for various disciplinary penalties.<sup>58</sup> Article 13, for example, establishes that dismissal of a public sector employee is permitted if the questioning of the respective individual leads to “strong suspicion that harm the job’s dignity or the employee’s integrity, honor or reputation.”<sup>59</sup> Further, Article 43 states that “any employee held in preventative detention is considered suspended”, while Article 32 provides a list of possible penalties such as deduction of salary, losing any potential raise, and/or dismissal from a job.<sup>60</sup> In 2011/2012, the Minister of Interior issued a circular numbered 11410 and a related order numbered 5049, which called on public institutions “to do what is necessary to raise awareness among their employees ... to not publish, issue, or sign petitions or statements that oppose the policy of the state or are incongruous with the state’s basic rules.”<sup>61</sup> The documents also enforced the Ministry of Civil Service rules by emphasizing that employees are prohibited from “directing criticism or blame to the government in any domestic or foreign media.”<sup>62</sup> An employee at a public school, al-Majed’s salary was suspended for six months, half of his net account was deducted, and he did not receive any cost of living increase or annual raise while in detention.<sup>63</sup> By the year’s end al-Majed remained detained, unable to access a lawyer, and at risk of further ill-treatment and torture.<sup>64</sup>

### **Activism, Freedom of Expression, and Social Media in 2012**

In its 2012 annual country report, Human Rights Watch reported that Saudi Arabia has further increased its arrests of human rights activists who peacefully exercised their right

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.,21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.,25.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.,24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.,25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

to freedom of expression.<sup>65</sup> The US Department of State noted that fifty percent of the 11,000 people arrested on ‘security-related’ charges since 2001 were in prison in 2012.<sup>66</sup> These numbers however were contradicted by a local media report later that year which put 2,709 detainees in prison.<sup>67</sup> In terms of social media, an infographic published by The Social Clinic, a social business consultancy and social media agency based in Jeddah, documented the state of social media in Saudi Arabia and presented the following findings: In 2012, three million people used Twitter of which 45% were female and 55% were male.<sup>68</sup> With regards to Facebook it was found that 6 million people used the social networking site of which 30% were female and 70% were male.<sup>69</sup> The Social Clinic reported that Saudi Arabia has the highest daily viewership numbers of YouTube videos in the world.<sup>70</sup> Saudi Arabians use YouTube as the number one alternative to state television.<sup>71</sup> Amnesty International reported that in February 2012, two websites – al-Fajr and Awwamiya – which ran social and political content were blocked by authorities.<sup>72</sup> Managers and editors of both websites were arrested and held without charge after the sites were shut down.<sup>73</sup>

Among those arrested for expressing themselves on social media in 2012 were Turki al-Hamid, Raif Badawi, and Hamza Kashgari.<sup>74</sup> In late December 2012, prominent novelist Turki al-Hamid tweeted (in translation): “Our Prophet came to rectify the faith of Abraham, and now is a time when we need someone to rectify the faith of Mohammad.”<sup>75</sup> This tweet reportedly caused the most upset out of a series of tweets that allegedly criticized Islam and the Royal family.<sup>76</sup> Al-Hamid was arrested after publishing these comments on social media and remained in detention until the year’s end.<sup>77</sup> For his famous trilogy ‘Phantoms of the Deserted Alleys’, in which he tells the story of a young man growing up in Saudi Arabia who questions philosophy, social constraints, and religion, al-Hamid received four fatwas.<sup>78</sup> In a review of his own books, he commented: “Where I live there are three taboos: religion, politics, and sex. It is forbidden to speak

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<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2012*. USA: 2012.

<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/wr2012.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015), 620.

<sup>66</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Washington DC, USA: 2012.

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204593.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015), 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Arabian Gazette. *Revealed: Saudi Arabia Social Media Statistics 2012*. AG Reporter, January 6, 2013.

<http://www.arabiangazette.com/revealed-saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics-2012/> (accessed on January 23, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> The Economist. *A virtual revolution*. Sept 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21617064-why-social-media-have-greater-impact-kingdom-elsewhere-virtual> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> Amnesty International. *Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Freedom House. *Freedom of Press – Saudi Arabia*. 2013. [https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/saudi-arabia#.VMOGbwTF\\_38](https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/saudi-arabia#.VMOGbwTF_38) (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2013*. USA: 2013.

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2013\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2013_web.pdf) (accessed on January 24, 2015).607.

<sup>75</sup> Alakhbar English. *Saudi novelist arrested for tweets criticizing Islam*. December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14497> (accessed on January 23, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Alakhbar English. *Saudi novelist arrested for tweets criticizing Islam*.



about these. The situation has been static for so long, I wrote this trilogy to get things moving.”<sup>79</sup> His books are banned in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain.<sup>80</sup>

Earlier in 2012, blogger Hamza Kashgari was arrested in Malaysia and charged with apostasy, a crime punished by the death penalty, for his remarks on twitter.<sup>81</sup> Kashgari left Saudi Arabia on February 6 that year after being accused of blasphemy for a twitter post that was deemed to insult the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>82</sup> Shortly after his departure, King Abdullah bin Abdul Al Saud ordered the arrest of Kasghari, which occurred on February 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>83</sup> Kasghari repented and as a result was transferred to a prison closer to his family’s residence.<sup>84</sup> He remained imprisoned by the end of 2012.<sup>85</sup>

Raif Badawi was detained in June 2012 as result of the comments he posted on his website, Saudi Liberal Network.<sup>86</sup> The comments were characterized as “violating Islamic values, encouraging blasphemy, and mocking Islamic religious symbols.”<sup>87</sup> He was initially charged with apostasy.<sup>88</sup> By the year’s end, the apostasy charges were still held, but in January 2013, the case was sent to the Criminal Court in Jeddah for review.<sup>89</sup>

Besides these three cases, politicized charges were issued against Abdullah al-Hamid, Muhammad al-Qahtani, and Walid Abu al-Khair – all highlighted in this article. Al-Majid, who was detained the year before was released in 2012.<sup>90</sup>

### **Activism, Freedom of Expression, and Social Media in 2013**

Human rights reports on freedom of expression on social media in Saudi Arabia in 2013 focused on the closure of the independent human rights organization Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), the arrest and detention of its members Abdullah bin Hamid Ali al-Hamid and Mohammad bin Fahad bin Mflih al-Qahtani, as well as the new charges against Raif Badawi, who was arrested the year prior.<sup>91</sup> ACPRA was founded in 2009 as a non-governmental organization that sought to promote human rights, establish a new system of government, form civil society associations and political

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<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Turki al-Hamad: “Getting Things Moving.”* December 18, 2013. <http://www.hrw.org/es/node/121372/section/12> (accessed on January 23, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Alakhbar English. *Saudi novelist arrested for tweets criticizing Islam.*

<sup>81</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Amnesty International. *Man might face death penalty for tweets.* Urgent Action 48/12. February 13, 2012. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/002/2012/ar/18f0fbc1-b365-432f-b478-d8e2730dd720/mde230022012en.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International. *Raif Badawi’s Sentence Upheld.* Urgent Action 3/13. September 1, 2014. <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/MDE23/023/2014/en/e99f59bf-62fc-49f1-aa66-b03a0cfd061b/mde230232014en.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2013*,.607.

<sup>91</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia’s ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*, entire United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013.* Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Washington DC, USA: 2013. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220586.pdf> accessed on January 24, 2015), 17.

parties, as well as to respect and protect freedom of expression.<sup>92</sup> The organization was funded by its members' financial contributions and was operated from its members' residences.<sup>93</sup>

Al-Hamid and al-Qahtani, both co-founders of ACPRA, were sentenced on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2013 on the following offenses: breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler, questioning the integrity of officials, seeking to disrupt security and inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations, disseminating false information to foreign groups, violating Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law and forming an unlicensed organization (ACPRA).<sup>94</sup> Al-Hamid was arrested in March 2013 and sentenced to eleven years in prison, followed by a ten-year travel ban.<sup>95</sup> This was not al-Hamid's first sentence and detainment: He was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in 2005 on charges such as "sowing dissent and disobeying the ruler."<sup>96</sup> Al-Hamid was a professor of contemporary literature at al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University before he was dismissed for his activism and published numerous articles on human rights and the independence of the judiciary.<sup>97</sup>

Al-Qahtani was also a professor and hosted weekly TV shows discussing economic issues.<sup>98</sup> Unlike al-Hamid, al-Qahtani was sentenced to ten years imprisonment followed by a ten-year travel ban.<sup>99</sup> He has been very outspoken about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia in the media and a strong supporter of the Women2Drive campaign.<sup>100</sup> Despite the fact that al-Qahtani's trial began in 2012, both, al-Hamid and al-Qahtani began their sentences as of March 2013.<sup>101</sup>

Though Badawi was arrested and began his trial in 2012, it was not until 2013 that he received his first officially recognized charges.<sup>102</sup> His case was passed from one court to the next until July 29<sup>th</sup> 2013.<sup>103</sup> On this day, Badawi was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes by the Criminal Court.<sup>104</sup> His lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair who is also highlighted in this article, appealed the decision and Badawi's case was sent back to the Court of Appeals for further sentencing in 2014.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Amnesty International. *NGO founders jailed for activism, dissent*. Urgent Action 257/17. March 11, 2013. <http://www.amnesty.org/ar/library/asset/MDE23/010/2013/fr/35c0f2ac-0014-4487-b29a-18b438eb500a/mde230102013en.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>95</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*, 17  
Amnesty International. *NGO founders jailed for activism, dissent*.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Amnesty International. *NGO founders jailed for activism, dissent*

<sup>100</sup> Amnesty International. *Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the kingdom silences its human rights activists*, 17.

<sup>101</sup> Amnesty International. *NGO founders jailed for activism, dissent*

<sup>102</sup> Amnesty International. *Raif Badawi's Sentence Upheld*

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

The other two individuals arrested in 2012 were released in 2013.<sup>106</sup> Turki al-Hamid was released into the custody of his family on June 5<sup>th</sup> and blogger Hamza Kashgari was released on October 29<sup>th</sup> – also to the custody of his family.<sup>107</sup>

Important to note in terms of social media penetration in 2013, is the steadily high number of Twitter users (1.9 million), yet a slight decrease in Facebook users of eighteen percent in 2013 compared to a little over twenty percent in the prior year.<sup>108</sup>

### **Activism, Freedom of Expression, and Social Media in 2014**

Saudi authorities have never tolerated criticism of their policies, but these recent laws and regulations (the ‘terror law’) turn almost any critical expression or independent association into crimes of terrorism... These regulations dash any hope that King Abdullah intends to open space for peaceful dissent or independent groups. – Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Human Rights Watch<sup>109</sup>

Stork’s reaction to the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing reflects the overall climate for activists and those expressing dissent on social media in 2014. Badawi’s trial continued this year with a final decision made by the Court of Appeals on September 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>110</sup> The sentence of 10 years in prison, 1000 lashes, a 10 year travel ban, a ban on using media outlets, and a fine of one million Saudi Arabian riyals (about US \$266 000) initially imposed on May 7<sup>th</sup> by the Jeddah Criminal Court, was upheld in December.<sup>111</sup> Badawi was charged for the creation of his website and insulting Islam.<sup>112</sup> The flogging of Badawi began on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2015 and is set to continue with 50 lashes per week every Friday.<sup>113</sup>

Badawi’s lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, was detained on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 without explanation.<sup>114</sup> He was initially taken to al-Hai’r prison and later transferred to Briman prison in Jeddah.<sup>115</sup> Al-Khair was sentenced to 15 years in prison, followed by a 15 year travel ban, and a fine of 200 000 Saudi Arabian Riyals (about US \$53 000) on July 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>116</sup> The charges against him include the following: disobeying the ruler and seeking to remove his legitimacy, insulting the judiciary and questioning the integrity of judges, setting up an unlicensed organization, harming the reputation of the state by communicating with international organization, and preparing, storing, and sending information that harms public order.<sup>117</sup> In a piece ‘Saudi Stymied by Fear’ written before

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<sup>106</sup> United States Department of State. *Saudi Arabia -R eports on Human Rights Practices for 2013*. 17.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Arab Social Media Report. *Facebook in the Arab Region*.

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights*.

<sup>110</sup> Amnesty International. *Raif Badawi’s Sentence Upheld*

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Amnesty International. *Waleed Abu al-Khair jailed for 15 years*. Urgent Action 98/14. July 8<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/MDE23/016/2014/en/8581c0c2-0c5f-4af8-bc7f-6f318fce8502/mde230162014en.pdf> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

his arrest, al-Khair anticipated his detention in several lines.<sup>118</sup> He wrote:

It is not easy to be an activist in Saudi Arabia. I have been taken into custody for investigation many times; I have been beaten; my wife is banned from leaving Saudi Arabia; and my Twitter, my Facebook account and my website are blocked. I have no doubt they want to put me in prison and one day this will happen – the authorities are just waiting for a good opportunity.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly unafraid of expressing his opinion online is activist Mikhlif al-Shammari, who was sentenced to two years in prison and 200 lashes on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2014.<sup>120</sup> He was found guilty for “stirring public opinion by sitting with the Shi’a” and “violating instructions by the rulers holding a private gathering and tweeting.”<sup>121</sup> Al-Shammari has a long history of activism and expressing opposition, and an equally long history of arrest, detention, and convictions.<sup>122</sup> The writings of al-Shammari have led to numerous detentions and instances of ill-treatment in prison starting from 2007.<sup>123</sup> While detained for another charge, al-Shammari wrote a letter from Dammam Central Prison which was published by the Gulf Center for Human Rights in December 2011:

*Dear Sirs:*

*As I am completing the eighteenth month behind bars because of my defense of human rights and my right to freedom of expression, I feel proud for the efforts I have made in the dissemination of human rights culture, promoting peace, and fighting against extremism in Saudi Arabia outside and inside the prison.*

*I know very well that the journey is long and if we, the activists, do not sacrifice our freedoms, ordinary people will not enjoy their freedom. We have to try hard to be patient and have the courage in order for the generations to learn from us the value and importance of defending human rights.*

*Myself and my colleagues are behind bars in Saudi Arabia, due to exercising our natural right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and defense of human rights, which is a flagrant violation of all international conventions and treaties, and a clear violation of international law.*

*In conclusion, I assure you of my full conviction and strong determination to continue my peaceful efforts in spreading the culture of human rights and to defend against the violations and help victims in Saudi Arabia and the world. The repression, imprisonment, and torture that I suffer from are a Medal of Honor to me in the service of humanity.*

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<sup>118</sup> Waleed Abu al-Khair. *Saudis Stymied by Fear*. Institute for War and Peace Monitoring. July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/saudis-stymied-fear> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Amnesty International. *Human Rights Defender Sentences Again*. Urgent Action 169/13. November 17th, 2014. <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:s-w0JVGXA-4J:https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/flu16913.docx+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us> (accessed on January 24, 2015).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

*Be Blessed and God bless your deeds*

*Yours sincerely,  
Mikhliif bin Daham Alshammari  
10/12/2011<sup>124</sup>*

### **How the Government Legitimizes its Actions Against Dissent**

The discussion of the legal and judicial system and the examination of the nine cases brought against human rights activists offer insight into how the Saudi Arabian government has legitimized its actions against activists and those expressing dissent on social media. I propose four findings:

All cases were subject to the Kingdom's Basic Law of Governance (1992), Law of Printing and Publication (2003), Anti-Cyber Crime Law (2007), Executive Regulation for Electronic Publishing (2011), while the cases of Badawi, al-Khair, and al-Shammari were also subject to the new Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (2014). I argue that these laws, and specifically the vagueness in the language, provide the framework for the legitimization of actions on activism and freedom of expression by the Saudi Arabian government. Further, I suggest that through the enactment of the 2011 Executive Regulation for Electronic Publishing and the 2014 Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, the authorities purposely and effectively widened their discretion for the legitimization of these actions.

Secondly, while all cases were subject to the abovementioned laws, not all individuals were officially charged under them: There are no verified reports that Turki al-Hamid and Nazeer al-Majed were ever officially charged. I suggest that in these two cases, a legal legitimization of the authorities' actions against the individuals cannot be established. Nevertheless, al-Hamid and al-Majed were detained, imprisoned, and in the case of al-Majed also ill-treated and tortured.

Three, I suggest that through the broad discretion ascribed to judges in the interpretation of the law (as per The Basic Law of Governance) and the vague language of the laws, the Saudi Arabian government can virtually legitimize any action against activists and those expressing dissent. I argue that though elements of the laws were referenced in several charges brought against the activists, these references were often blurry, yet still led to convictions. For example, the charges against al-Sulaimain – expressing compassion with the Bahraini protesters and calling for the release of dissidents in Saudi Arabia on Facebook – do not reflect any explicit element of the laws noted. However, I suggest that the judiciary may have interpreted al-Sulaimain's expression on Facebook as “affecting the security of the state and its public relations” as per Article 39 of the Basic Law of Governance, “serving foreign interest that conflict with national interest” as per Article 9 of the Law for Printing and Publication subjected under the executive regulation of 2011, and transmitting material impinging on “public morals” as per Anti-Cyber Crime Law.

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<sup>124</sup> Gulf Center for Human Rights. Saudi Arabia: A Letter Sent from Dammam Central Prison by Courageous Defender of HR Mikhliif Alshammari to GCHR. Mikhliif bin Daham Alshammari. December 10, 2011. <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/38> (accessed on January 23, 2015).

While this interpretation is hypothetical, it illustrates how the Saudi Arabian government could legitimize its actions against activists and those expressing dissent.

Four, I argue that in cases where relatively clear reference to elements of the laws have been established in the charges against the individuals, the Saudi authorities can very concretely legitimize their actions. For example, the charges brought against both ACPRA members, al-Hamid and al-Qahtani such as ‘seeking to disrupt security and inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations’ and ‘violating Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law’ clearly reflect elements of the applicable laws. In these cases, the Saudi Arabian government can legitimize its actions in direct reference to the laws with little room for questioning of arbitrary interpretation by the judiciary or the vagueness of the language of the laws.

These four findings may lead one to conclude that political change in terms of allowing dissent in Saudi Arabia seems rather unlikely. I would however conclude that the premise of legitimization lies at the heart of any possible political reform in the country. As seen in the cases examined, this has been recognized and the efforts for political change have specifically targeted the legal and judicial systems, which constitute the cradle of human rights activism and freedom of expression in the Kingdom and anywhere else.

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