



## Joint Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture

### *In response to the Call for inputs on Global Trends and Developments on Torture*

9 May 2025

#### **About Submitting Organisations**

The **European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)** is a non-governmental organisation based in Europe that monitors and documents human rights violations in Saudi Arabia, particularly those related to the death penalty, arbitrary detention, and torture. ESOHR works with international bodies to raise awareness and advocate for accountability and reforms.

**Reprieve** is a charitable organisation registered in the United Kingdom (No. 1114900), with special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Reprieve provides free legal and investigative support to those who have been subjected to state-sponsored human rights abuses. We protect the rights of those facing the death penalty and of victims of arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial execution.

Submission: **1997** words

## 1. Summary

1.1 Reprieve and ESOHR submit this joint report to contribute to the Special Rapporteur on torture's upcoming report to the 80th session of the General Assembly, focusing on global patterns and developments related to torture. This submission responds to the call for inputs and presents information on Saudi Arabia.

1.2 During the reporting period (July 2024 – April 2025), Saudi Arabia has not taken any concrete steps toward abolishing the death penalty. On the contrary, the period witnessed a record escalation in executions, especially for non-lethal drug-related offences, which had previously seen a temporary suspension.

1.3 A total of **257 executions** were carried out in the second half of 2024, followed by **98 executions** in the first four months of 2025, placing Saudi Arabia among the top countries globally in terms of execution rates.

1.4 The highest record of women's execution was carried out during the reporting period, with seven women executed, more than half of whom on non-lethal drug offences.

1.5 Saudi Arabia continues to contradict its commitment to abolishing the death penalty for non-lethal drug offences, with **119** individuals executed during the reporting period for such crimes. From July to December 2024, the number of executions nearly tripled, averaging over one per day.

1.6 During its 2024 Universal Periodic Review, Saudi Arabia rejected the majority of recommendations calling for the restriction or suspension of capital punishment. The only accepted recommendation called for "abolishing the death penalty or, at the very least, restricting it to the most serious crimes, adopting a narrow definition of terrorism, and abolishing the penalty for juvenile offenders." As of this report, that recommendation has not been implemented<sup>1</sup>.

## Submission

### 2. Conditions of Detention and Treatment in Prisons

2.1 Saudi authorities have not taken measures to ensure compliance with minimum standards for the treatment of death row prisoners. Reprieve and ESOHR have documented conditions that constitute treatment that may amount to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://upr-info.org/en/review/saudi-arabia>

2.2. At **Tabuk Prison**, on **27 November 2024**, all inmates sentenced to death were transferred into one overcrowded cell lacking beds and proper ventilation. These conditions persisted for over two months, despite repeated appeals from the inmates.<sup>2</sup> Amongst these inmates, Reprieve and ESOHR have document six cases of individuals sentenced to death on torture extracted “confessions”. Moreover, the vast majority of these individuals did receive adequate legal representation during their trials and do not seem to have been informed of their right to appeal.

2.3 Subsequent reports documented intimidation of the prisoners' families both inside Saudi Arabia and in Egypt, in an apparent attempt to prevent protests or diplomatic appeals. On **18 February 2025**, several inmates launched a hunger strike in protest of communication restrictions with their families and reported degrading treatment during medical transfers, including being forced<sup>5</sup> to walk barefoot and handcuffed.<sup>3</sup>

2.4 Reprieve and ESOHR also monitored the case of Adnan al-Shraydah, a 60-year-old Jordanian man on death row for non-lethal drug offences, who died in detention on 27 December 2024. Despite his severe medical vulnerabilities, including paralysis, dementia symptoms, and a history of heart surgery, Saudi authorities informed him they would proceed with his execution. His family believes the shock of this triggered the fatal heart attack that caused his death.<sup>4</sup>

2.4 UN Special Rapporteurs sent an official communication regarding the mistreatment these prisoners on 3 December 2024, highlighting allegations of torture, denial of legal representation, and unsafe detention conditions. The communication urged Saudi authorities to take protective measures and improve conditions. However, no response or corrective action has been issued to date<sup>5</sup>.

2.5 Saudi authorities continue to systematically use prolonged solitary confinement. A prominent example is **Sheikh Salman al-Ouda**<sup>6</sup>, who has been held in total isolation since 2017 without access to a fair trial or legal defence. Prosecutors continue to seek the death penalty against him, despite the 2023 opinion from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary detention calling for his immediate release and finding his detention to be arbitrary.

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<sup>2</sup> Information held on file at Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>3</sup> Information held on file at Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>4</sup> Reports held on file with Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>5</sup> Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, UA SAU 5/2024, 3 December 2024.

Available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29550>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.esohr.org/en/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A4/>

2.6 His continued isolation constitutes a clear violation of the **UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules)**, which prohibit solitary confinement exceeding 15 days without justification.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Methods of Execution and the Cruelty of the Process

3.1 Many prisoners, particularly those convicted of drug offences, are held under the constant threat of execution without being informed of the date. At Tabuk Prison, death row inmates had been given assurances by prison authorities and the Egyptian embassy that their sentences might be commuted or pardoned during the moratorium on executions.<sup>8</sup> However, executions resumed without warning in May 2024, causing severe psychological trauma, particularly for individuals like Issam al Shazly, an Egyptian national on death row in Tabuk for non-lethal drug offences. Issam has been diagnosed with depression and is experiencing suicidal ideation as he remains indefinitely on death row.

3.2 On 27 November 2024, Egyptian inmates at Tabuk prison reported being moved into the same cell. Authorities informed them that this arrangement was due to their imminent execution, expected to take place in the coming days. The prisoners were forced to witness their fellow inmates being removed from the cell for executions on a daily basis before being returned to their original cells in January 2025.<sup>9</sup>

3.3 On 17 April 2025, the families received news that two individuals in the same cell block as the Egyptian inmates have been executed, leaving only the Egyptian inmates remaining. As such, their families feared they would be next, triggering yet another wave of distress. This renewed trauma has had a profound psychological impact on both the inmates and their families, compounding their ongoing anxiety and sense of helplessness. In their official communication, UN Special Rapporteurs noted that executions in Saudi Arabia often occur without prior notification to families or legal representatives, leaving them in a constant state of fear and uncertainty.<sup>10</sup>

3.4 Executions in Saudi Arabia are conducted in conditions of extreme secrecy, with no independent monitoring or official publication of execution details. Executions are routinely carried out without prior notice to prisoners or their families, intensifying the punitive nature of

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<sup>7</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime, The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 17 December 2015. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson\\_Mandela\\_Rules-E-book.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-book.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Reports held on file at Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>9</sup> Reports held on file at Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>10</sup> Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, UA SAU 5/2024, 3 December 2024. Available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29550>

the penalty. In **August 2024**, **Abdul Majid al-Nimr**<sup>11</sup> was executed without any advance notice to his family, who were only informed after the execution had taken place.

3.5 In **January 2025**, an Egyptian inmate at Tabuk Prison was executed without the knowledge of his fellow inmates or family. He was taken from his cell at night and disappeared, with confirmation of his execution emerging only days later.<sup>12</sup>

3.6 As noted by the Special Rapporteurs in their official communication,<sup>13</sup> Saudi authorities frequently withhold the bodies of executed individuals and refuse to disclose burial locations, even in cases involving foreign nationals. This practice amounts to a form of torture and ill-treatment as it exacerbates the psychological suffering of bereaved families and obstructs their ability to observe religious and cultural burial rites.<sup>14</sup>

3.7 As executions as carried out in secret and bodies are not returned, it is unclear what the method of execution is in Saudi Arabia. Reports have recently indicated that Saudi Arabia is using firing squads to carry out executions.

#### **4. Persistent Challenges and False Reforms**

4.1 Despite repeated public promises to reduce the use of the death penalty, no meaningful reforms have been implemented. In April 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told *Time* magazine that Saudi Arabia was replacing the death penalty with life imprisonment for crimes that did not involve wilful killing.<sup>15</sup> In 2020, the Royal Decree was falsely presented as a step toward ending executions for child defendants.

4.2 On 10 June 2021, King Salman reportedly issued royal directives to the General Directorate of Prisons, instructing officials to implement pardon procedures for individuals detained for drug

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.spa.gov.sa/N2156108>

<sup>12</sup> Reports held on file at Reprieve and ESOHR.

<sup>13</sup> Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, UA SAU 5/2024, 3 December 2024. Available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29550>

<sup>14</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Morris Tidball-Binz, Protection of the dead, available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/066/26/pdf/g2406626.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Time Magazine, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Talks to Time About Saudi Arabia, The Middle East and President Trump, 5 April 2018, available at <https://time.com/5228006/mohammed-bin-salman-interview-transcript-full/>

offences.<sup>16</sup> In March 2022, Mohammed bin Salman claimed that Saudi Arabia was working to abolish the death penalty for non-lethal offences entirely.<sup>17</sup>

4.3 On 22 January 2024, during their Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Saudi Arabia reaffirmed that the death penalty is reserved solely for the "most serious" crimes.<sup>18</sup> This claim was repeated in July 2024 and October 2024 by Saudi Arabia to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's (CEDAW), respectively.<sup>19</sup>

4.4 However, none of these statements translated into legislative or judicial changes and serve as examples of Saudi Arabia lies to the international community. Executions continue to be imposed for crimes not considered among the "most serious" under international standards with 217 executions for such crimes during the reporting period.

4.5 At least three individuals are currently on death row of childhood crimes, including **Youssef al-Manasif**, whose death sentence for non-lethal, protest related crimes was reinstated at his retrial in February 2025. The court relied on his torture tainted confession to sentence him. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued legal opinions finding Youssef to be arbitrarily detained, along with several other child defendants and called for their release.<sup>20</sup> Saudi Arabia has ignored these recommendations.

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<sup>16</sup> Saudi Human Rights Commission account on twitter, 18th of January 2021

[https://mobile.twitter.com/HRCSaudi\\_EN](https://mobile.twitter.com/HRCSaudi_EN)

<sup>17</sup> Saudi Gazette, Full transcript of Crown Prince interview on reforms, religious, future of Saudi Arabia and relations with US, 3 March 2022, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617738>

<sup>18</sup> See United Nations Web TV, Saudi Arabia Review - 45th Session of Universal Periodic Review (22 January 2024), available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1q/k1q9kuguv>

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Web TV, '26th Meeting - 56th Regular Session of Human Rights Council' (4 July 2024), minute 52:15, available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1t/k1tt6njldu>; This was also repeated in January 2024 - United Nations Web TV, 'Saudi Arabia Review - 45th Session of Universal Periodic Review' (22 January 2024), available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1q/k1q9kuguv> and Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 89<sup>th</sup> session (7-25 October 2024): [2093rd Meeting, 89th Session, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\) | UN Web TV](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session101/a-hrc-wgad-2024-71-saudi-arabia-advance-edited.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session101/a-hrc-wgad-2024-71-saudi-arabia-advance-edited.pdf>