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HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR



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Our Human Rights Monitor is a monthly press review of regional news concerning human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Human Rights Monitor is provided by the Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (ACHRS).

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Bahrain

Due Process Violations Lead to Mass Sentencing

Bahraini courts sentenced 13 people to prison in what human rights organisations described as an unfair mass trial “marred with due process violations and torture allegations”. The defendants were charged with counts of violent actions against prison staff. They had been engaged in a largely peaceful protest in Bahrain’s Jau prison, complaining about detention conditions.

In a trial where even the defendants were not allowed to participate, allegations of torture and ill-treatment were ignored by the Court even as the protest erupted following the death of an inmate, “likely due to medical negligence.” The violence used to break up the sit-in protest was even condemned by a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who called for an investigation.

Human Rights Watch carries more details of the trial and the allegations, including credible information regarding the insufficient accountability mechanisms present in Bahrain; the Ombudsman and Special Investigations Unit have repeatedly neglected their duties, per the UN Committee Against Torture.

Egypt

Al-Sisi Re-elected in Egypt

The recent reelection of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to a third term is clouded by serious concerns regarding election participation and freedom of speech, as pointed out by Human Rights Watch. The government's measures, including arrests, intimidation, and stringent candidate requirements, have effectively stifled any meaningful competition, compromising the right to political participation. The targeting of perceived opponents, such as Ahmed

Tantawy, along with curtailed protests and media restrictions, raises doubts about the democratic integrity of the process and underscores challenges to free expression in Egypt.

Additionally, during the months of October, November, and December 2023, the El-Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture reported a disturbing total of 446 cases of human rights violations in Egypt. The documented violations include murder, torture, and forced disappearances against both prisoners and civilians. The Center highlighted one case of extrajudicial killing in October, with a total of nine deaths occurring within detention facilities and prisons during this period. Instances of torture numbered 35 cases, and cases of harassment reached 35, escalating in December.

Iraq

Yazidi Activists Sue for Accountability

Yazidi activists have filed a lawsuit against Paris-based concrete conglomerate Lafarge for their complicity in the crimes and genocide perpetrated against the Yazidi community in Iraq by ISIL. The 2018 Nobel Peace Laureate Nadia Murad is leading the legal claim seeking financial compensation from the group, which was found guilty in a NY court of making “payments to groups designated as terrorists” by US law, but was not forced to make any compensation to victims of the terrorist groups’ crimes.

Now, the legal claim seeks to draw a clear connection between Lafarge’s activities in Iraq and Syria with the persecution of Yazidis, specifically relating to their provision of concrete which ISIL used to construct

infrastructure such as tunnels. The lawsuit seeks to hold the group accountable for “its admitted criminal conspiracy with ISI and to obtain justice for Yazidi people,” said the plaintiff’s lawyers, and to further the cause of accountability against the world’s largest concrete manufacturer.

Yazidis are a religious minority which has faced centuries of persecution, and whose treatment by ISIL was recognised by US and UK institutions to constitute a genocide. Their culture and religion dates back to Mesopotamian times and Yazidis mainly reside in North Western Iraq, as well as in parts of Syria and Türkiye.

The quest for accountability against a corporate entity which avowedly collaborated with terrorist organizations to continue its profit-making operations is a critical dimension of delivering justice for Yazidi communities and all

individuals who faced ISIL violence. We underline the importance of human rights advocacy and jurisprudence which considers private actors in addition to states as potential perpetrators of abuse.

Jordan

Human Rights Challenges in Jordan's Crackdown on Activists

Human Rights Watch has raised concerns about the systematic targeting of rights activists in Jordan, who have been subject to an unlawful crackdown on free expression and assembly related to gender and sexuality issues. General Intelligence Department (GID) and the Preventive Security department of the Public Security Directorate in Jordan have reportedly interrogated activists involved in advocacy work around gender and sexuality. These activists have faced intimidation tactics, including threats of violence,

arrest, and prosecution. As a result, several activists have been compelled to close their organizations, halt their activities, and, in some instances, seek refuge outside the country. The reported violations of freedom of expression and human rights in Jordan raise significant concerns about the treatment of activists advocating for gender and sexuality issues. The suppression of these voices poses challenges to the broader landscape of human rights in the country, demanding attention and scrutiny from international observers

Lebanon

Violent Escalations with Israel

In the aftermath of the Israeli war on Gaza, December witnessed a disturbing surge in Israeli targeting of Lebanese civilians, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the

region. As of December 26, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health has reported a total of 118 killed and 536 people wounded due to the Israeli airstrikes. At least 20 confirmed civilian deaths have been reported, underscoring the escalating human cost of the conflict. On December 5, an Israeli airstrike reportedly aimed at a poultry farm in Southern Lebanon resulted in the tragic death of a Syrian worker, while two of his family members were injured.

The situation further escalated on December 9, when Israeli raids decimated an entire neighborhood in the town of Aitaroun, leaving numerous houses completely destroyed and a significant number of others severely damaged. A report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs shows an increase in internally displaced persons, stating that 74,471 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are

seeking refuge across Lebanon. On the 26th of December, a targeted Israeli strike on a residential house in Bint Jbeil resulted in the tragic loss of two civilian lives.

Education and the well-being of children are severely affected, with 24 schools closed in Nabatieh, impacting 4,753 displaced students. In the South, six schools are closed, affecting 446 displaced children. Additionally, security concerns have forced the closure of three primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Marjayoun and Bent Jbeil districts.

The conflict's collateral damage extends beyond physical destruction, encompassing psychological distress among recently displaced children in shelters, manifesting as heightened fear and sleep disorders. Livelihood opportunities are dwindling due to widespread fires caused by the incendiary effect of projectiles, impacting

agricultural land. Residents face increasing difficulties in meeting basic needs due to restrictive measures such as curfews and rising rental prices.

The situation outlined above underscores the escalating humanitarian crisis in Lebanon as a result of the War. ACHRS urges the international community to promptly respond to the deepening humanitarian challenges in Lebanon and advocates for a ceasefire in Gaza, recognizing its exacerbating impact on the already critical situation in Lebanon.

Libya

UNSMIL Urges Human Rights Protection for Libya's Democratic Transition

UNSMIL, marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, urges protecting human rights to help address Libya's political crisis. They condemn the crackdown on civic

space and arbitrary detentions across the nation, which obstructs political dialogue, reconciliation, and fair elections.

Abdoulaye Bathily, Head of UNSMIL, emphasizes the necessity of an open civic space for Libyans to engage constructively. Despite global threats to the Declaration's values, Bathily stresses the urgency of defending these principles. UNSMIL reports numerous politically driven detentions, demanding the immediate release of those held based on political affiliations.

The Mission voices alarm over threats and illegal detentions faced by politically active Libyans, urging authorities to safeguard freedom of speech and end arbitrary arrests. They highlight the vital roles of academics, journalists, and civil society members in upholding transparency in the political process and call for their protection against intimidation.

Bathily emphasizes that stifling these voices weakens Libya's democratic transition and empowers rights violators. With efforts to steer the country toward elections, UNSMIL asserts that human rights and the rule of law must guide Libya's future.

Morocco

Imprisonment of Sahrawi activists

Front Line Defenders expresses deep concern over the prolonged imprisonment of Sahrawi human rights defenders detained by Moroccan authorities since November 2010 during the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recently declared the imprisonment illegal and called for the immediate release of the detainees, including journalists and activists, who have reportedly faced inhumane treatment since their non-violent protests in 2010. The

Gdeim Izik prisoners sentenced by a Moroccan court in 2017, include prominent human rights defenders given life sentences, such as Ahmed Sbaai, Sid'Ahmed Lemjaïd, and Brahim Ismaili. Front Line Defenders joins calls for their release, highlighting serious violations and urging Morocco to conduct an impartial investigation, provide reparations, and ensure the protection of human rights defenders in Western Sahara.

In a [press release](#) by UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the 8th of December 2023 the UN Committee welcomed Morocco's 2013 National Immigration and Asylum Strategy but expressed concern over allegations of racial profiling and excessive use of force by Moroccan police and law enforcement officials against migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees. It specifically highlighted arbitrary arrests, detentions,

and forced relocation disproportionately impacting black migrants from sub-Saharan countries. The Committee urged Morocco to prohibit racial profiling in its legislation, take measures to end arbitrary arrests, detentions, forced relocations, and excessive use of force, especially concerning migrants from sub-Saharan countries. Furthermore, it called for investigations into racial profiling, ill-treatment, and abuse of authority by law enforcement, prosecution of those responsible, and ensuring victims have access to effective remedies.

Saudi Arabia

[Human Rights Crisis: Saudi Arabia's Escalating Executions and Legal Concerns in 2023](#)

In 2023, Saudi Arabia's rapid escalation in executions, totaling 61 within three months, sparked international alarm. Concerns mounted over

the fairness of trials and legitimacy of charges, particularly cases involving online activities and minor offenses. This surge in executions reflected deep flaws in the Kingdom's legal system.

Of significant concern were instances where individuals faced the death penalty based on vague charges, such as alleged disrespect toward the ruling family, following unfair trials. Notably, cases like Mohammed Al-Faraj's underscored discrepancies between sentencing and the public prosecutor's recommendations, raising questions about judicial independence.

The European Saudi Organization's efforts extended beyond documentation; they actively advocated for detainees facing execution. Correspondence with UN-appointed special rapporteurs and media dissemination aimed

to spotlight cases like Saud Al-Faraj's hunger strike in protest of his treatment while detained.

Beyond advocacy, the organization focused on cases representing severe legal discrepancies. Hussein Abu Al-Khair's execution, after years of detention and an unfair trial, led to efforts to reclaim his body, along with 140 others held since 2016.

Further distress arose over Saudi Arabia's sentencing of minors to death, prompting engagement with UN groups to seek legal opinions on arbitrary detentions and juvenile cases.

These challenges highlighted the urgent need for international intervention and reforms within Saudi Arabia's legal system. The organization's detailed documentation and engagement with global bodies emphasized the prevalence of arbitrary detentions and flawed trials, emphasizing the critical

necessity for fair, just, and rights-aligned judicial processes in the Kingdom.

Sudan

Addressing Human Rights Violations in Sudan: Urgent Calls for Action

In Sudan, the US government's recent acknowledgment of atrocities committed by warring parties is a crucial step in shedding light on severe human rights violations. Secretary Blinken highlighted war crimes and ethnic cleansing by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), underscoring the urgent need for action.

The situation is dire, with indiscriminate attacks on civilians, destruction of vital infrastructure, and a staggering number of displaced individuals and casualties. The RSF and allied militias have specifically targeted non-Arab

civilians, leading to ethnically motivated killings, pillaging, arson, and sexual violence.

Despite this acknowledgment, the US response lacks concrete measures. It's crucial for the US to collaborate with global bodies like the United Nations, African Union, and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to protect civilians and hold perpetrators accountable. Additionally, imposing targeted sanctions on those responsible for serious crimes is imperative.

Drawing from past responses to similar atrocities, the US should consider policy shifts and increased support to address the crisis in Sudan effectively. Specifically, backing the ICC's investigation and supporting the UN Fact-Finding Mechanism are critical steps toward ensuring justice and protection for civilians in Sudan.

.The gravity of the situation demands immediate and resolute action from the US government to prevent further atrocities and secure justice for the victims in Sudan.

Syria

Deaths and Torture Persist in Syrian Prisons Despite ICJ Ruling

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights continued to document killings resulting from torture in Syrian prisons during the month of December, mostly in the Sednaya Prison. This military facility near Damascus is nicknamed “the Human Slaughterhouse” for its reputation as a site of cruel and inhumane treatment of detainees.

In December, SOHR cited at least half a dozen cases of killings in prison as a result of torture. Many of the detainees had been held in Sednaya for upwards of two years before

their deaths.

Last month, the International Court of Justice ruled against the Syrian government in relation to its violation of the Convention Against Torture, and issued an injunction demanding it to immediately cease the ill-treatment and arbitrary killing of detainees in its facilities.

The torture and death of Syrians at the hands of the state in December underscores the continued abuse of human rights in the Syrian criminal justice system and the urgent need to address these systematic, purposeful violations of international law through stringent enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

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need to address these systematic and targeted violations of international law through stringent enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

New Social Contract Ushers in Image of Direct Democracy

Regional authorities in North East Syria approved a new 'social contract' which enshrines human rights values in the governance of the region, setting forward a blueprint for a democratic Syrian constitution in the process.

The General Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria unveiled this groundbreaking text after deliberations by a 30-member drafting committee. This charter has entered into force with formal ratification and will serve as a constitution for the de-facto autonomous region made up of the areas bordering Iraq and Turkey.

The contract has been

described as “a blueprint for a radical bottom-up democracy” in line with principles of democratic confederalism, and enshrines fundamental principles such as “ecological democratic society,” “justice and equality among all peoples” and women as a “fundamental pillar” of society. It structures the orderly conduct of governing entities at all levels, from the most local to the regional, while decentralizing power and granting more control to local communes and people.

However, the radical ideas of this charter are not matched with clear and enforceable structures for ensuring the implementation of its values, a reality with which the governing entities of the region will have to contend with as they undertake the administration and governance of this diverse region.

The strength of local democracy based on principles of rights and equality depends

on strong implementation and accountability, as well as checks on sources of power and pluralistic participation.

Civil War Death Toll for 2023

Syria's civil war monitoring organizations reported that the ongoing internal conflict claimed 4,360+ lives in 2023. 307 of these casualties were children; 1,889 were civilians. In 2023, the government forces regained territory but large parts of northern Syria remain out of its control. A cease-fire brokered by Russia and Turkey in these regions has been repeatedly violated as air strikes have continued to claim lives, as ACHRS has reported in previous months.

Protests Persist

Protests continued in the Syrian city of As-Suwayda for the 18th week in a row, as anger over economic conditions broadened to include condemnation of the Assad

regime. Protesters gathered in the town square of the Southwestern city demanding regime change.

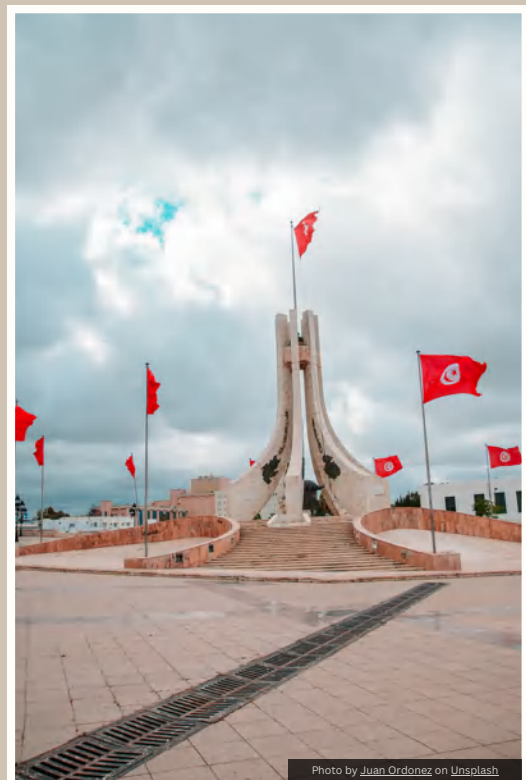
The demonstrations began in August of this year with anger from the Druze minority regarding economic conditions tied to inflation and insufficient government interventions to help with the cost of living. This showed Syrians "that economic decrees from the presidential palace will not improve their lives," per Erik Yavorsky at the American think-tank The Washington Institute. Since then, protesters have taken increasingly direct aim at the regime, tearing down images of Bashar Al-Assad across the region and shuttering local offices of his ruling Ba'ath party. Foreign powers who have intervened in Syrian affairs, from Turkey to Russia, Iran, and the United States, have also been denounced by the demonstrators.

Protests have spread to other parts of the country, reaching

the outskirts of the capital, Damascus. The Druze community has remained instrumental in organizing these anti-regime demonstrations, and given this group's historical importance to the Syrian state and Assad regime, this increase in popular anti-government sentiment remains noteworthy as its momentum carries it into the new year. Some of the community's religious leaders have thrown their support behind the protests, while one remains squarely in the government's camp.

Observers note that, “As acts of dissent increase in the regime's historically important minority areas” such as As-Suwayda, “Assad may be more willing to make significant concessions.” So far, he has seemed intent on ignoring the protests and insisting on economic stability. However, he has also been reluctant to use significant force to silence the Druze, likely given their importance in his hold on power.

Country in Focus *Tunisia*



Tunisia

Tunisia is a presidential republic in North Africa, on the Mediterranean Sea.



Politics & Society

Capital: Tunis

Population: 11,7 Million

Area: 163,610 km²

Languages: Arabic (Official) and Tunisian Arabic (Spoken)

President: Kais Saied

Prime Minister: Ahmed Hachani

Government type: Until 2022 Unitary semi-presidential republic – since the adoption of the new constitution presidential system of government with bicameral legislative system (Parliament and Council of Regions and Districts)

Economics, Education & Health

Tunisia is one of the countries that went to the most significant change following the revolution of the Arab Spring, transforming from dictatorship to democracy. The economy has however not profited from that, as the country's public debt raised from 40% of the GDP in 2010 to 79% in 2022. In that year the GDP amounted to 48.12 Billion USD and a GDP per capita of 3.700 USD (MENA average: 8.900 USD). Due to the persistent political instability and the aftermaths of the Covid-19-Pandemic the World Bank describes Tunisia's economic situation as remaining highly uncertain. 2022 ended with an overall unemployment rate of around 16 percent, while it is almost double that high amongst the highest educated citizens (MENA average: 9.6 %).

The dire economic situation following the 2011 Jasmin Revolution certainly eased the way for Kais Saieds power grab in 2021, followed by the dismissal of Parliament and the Supreme Judicial Council in 2022. In

the same year a referendum led to the adoption of a new constitution, which is heavily criticized for removing checks and balances in favor of the President.

The health situation in Tunisia has improved over the last decades. Apart from its collapse during the pandemic it has contributed to life expectancy rising to 75.3 years (MENA average: 73 years) There is a public healthcare system which for instance includes national programs to battle infectious diseases and lower healthcare costs for the citizens. However, many challenges such as rural and urban differences remain.

Civic and Political Space metrics

- Freedom House Global Freedom Score - **56/100 Partly Free (-8)**
- Freedom House Internet Freedom - **59/100 Partly Free (-2)**
- Civicus Civic Space - **Repressed**

Women's Rights Metrics

- World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2023:
 - Global Gender Gap: 128th
 - Economic Participation and Opportunity: 138th
 - Educational Attainment: 117th
 - Health and Survival: 81st
 - Political Empowerment: 77th
- 97th in the UN Gender Development Index (High development)

Recent HRM Headlines

Families of jailed opposition members seek ICC investigation
November 2023

Tunisia Places Senior Ennahda Party Official Abdel Karim Harouni Under House Arrest Amid Political Tensions
September 2023

Defending Justice: Tunisian Judge Anas Hmedi Faces Retaliation for Advocating Judicial Independence
August 2023

Tunisia's expulsion of Sub-Saharan African Migrants to remote border areas despite recently signed MoU with the EU
July 2023

NGOs alert Human Rights Council to deterioration of human rights in Tunisia
June 2023

Lawyers and activists added to larger conspiracy criminal investigation
May 2023

>. Rights of migrants need to be protected, say human rights groups

> Associations call for the protection of an independent judiciary

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Our 5 Priorities In Focus**

Our Five Priorities in Focus



The Right to Life

The death penalty is still legal in Tunisia, but has been under moratorium since 1999. Despite this, over 110 detainees remain on death row and the government has not made moves to abolish the death penalty as support for its return has grown politically. This has been accompanied by the creation of new capital offences, such as through the 2015 anti-terror law. Those on death row face “great physical, psychological and emotional distress” and “bear the brunt of the reduction in public spending on prisons”. With regards to torture, the UN noted in 2022 that significant progress was made with the establishment of an oversight body but that police violence remained a concern in the country. The UN visit also underlined the overcrowding of prisons which impacts detention conditions and the treatment of prisoners.



Right to Think

Tunisia’s constitution enshrines academic freedoms in article 45 of the most recent constitution, which states “Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research are guaranteed.” However, per Freedom House, self-censorship in academia remains a problem and some students indicated restrictions on research topics relating to religion and sexuality politics. *Scholars at Risk* organisation also reported the firing of an emeritus professor in 2023 for his planned participation in an international conference with Israeli scholars.



The Right to Participate

The right to participate in Tunisia has been seriously undermined by President Saïed’s 2021 coup against the parliament and 2014 constitution. Prior to these events, Tunisia had a relatively strong electoral democracy with “generally competitive and credible” balloting and a pluralistic political scene. Tunisians could assemble in diverging political parties and both legislative and executive power peacefully changed hands several times. The oversight mechanism for elections was deemed effective and able to guarantee the free and fair nature of political participation at the ballot box.

In 2021, Saïed unilaterally dissolved the parliament and installed a new government, ruling by decree ever since. The parliamentary elections organised under the new constitution had extremely low turnout at 11% due to the restrictions placed on candidates and political parties, the boycott of elections by major opposition parties, and a steep drop off in candidates - some parliamentary seats only had one listed candidate on the ballot. Saïed has also passed a presidential decree changing the operation of elections, “eliminated public funding for campaigns, removed a ceiling on private fundraising, barred anyone ever charged with a legal violation from candidacy, and revoked prior laws promoting gender parity and youth representation on electoral lists.”

This has undermined Tunisian democracy and turned it into a fully presidential system with no division of powers and limited popular participation in national and local politics. This concentration of

power in the presidency was consolidated by the 2022 constitution drafted by Saïed himself.



The Right to Speak

Freedom of expression has likewise been significantly curbed since 2021. A culture of intimidation leading to self-censorship is widespread in the press and society more broadly, and anti-terrorism and “fake news” laws have been passed to silence, prosecute, and intimidate. This year, Decree Law 54 was passed which aims to crack down on fake news, but this law relies on ill or vaguely defined terms such as “false news” and “false statements,” and shields public officials from negative speech by doubling charges for statements made against such officials. In addition, journalists, activists and commentators on social media have recently been harassed for “insulting the president and defaming the military,” and two prominent journalists, Salah Attia and Ghassen Ben Khelifa were arrested, the latter on charges of supporting terrorism. It was reported that they were harassed in detention following these arrests. Trials are sometimes held in military courts. Freedom House indicates that while arrests are often directed at individuals with a large following and that ordinary Tunisians are mostly unimpacted, the strategy of targeting prominent voices creates a culture of self-censorship where individuals restrict their speech out of fear. These are effectively mass intimidation tactics.

While speech and expression in private are usually unhindered, taboo topics remain difficult to broach in public as they are often policed by official reprisal or social stigma.

Our Five Priorities in Focus



Women's Rights

While Tunisia has historically been considered a leader in women's rights in the MENA region, the lack of implementation and cultural entrenchment of legal changes undermines the solidity of the rights situation for women. While several legal documents enshrine equal rights and parity the reality is often more grounded in persisting unequal social norms. President Saïed reversed the gender parity provisions of the electoral law ahead of the previous elections; only 16% of parliamentarians are women. Likewise, the illiteracy rate is climbing - especially in rural areas - driven by the 41% of women in rural areas who are illiterate. Norms surrounding education and unpaid work by women to support family life persist, especially

in the informal agricultural sector. Studies suggest that half of Tunisian women have experienced gender-based violence of some kind in their lifetime. The 2017 law aimed at eliminating GBV was radical for the region, but "failures in its implementation have let many assailants and perpetrators off the hook." Global Gender Gap Report placed Tunisia 128th worldwide, and highlighted the very low labour force participation rate (41% points difference between men and women). This contributes to income inequality which is likely even higher, considering that informal work is often not counted in statistics, often unpaid, and usually undertaken by women. Politically, Tunisia is one of only three countries in the MENA region with more than 20% female ministers.

Tunisia was the first country in the region to legalise abortion in 1973 and operates a family planning programme. However, studies

indicate that despite the improvements in health outcomes for Tunisian women, several indicators and legal provisions remain cause for concern. Family and marriage laws perpetuate gender inequality, and health policies discriminate against unmarried women and sexual minorities. Regional inequalities in access to care persist, as several rural or highly populated areas in the capital had significantly higher infant mortality rates than the rest of the country. One study "estimated that 75.3% of maternal deaths in public hospitals between 1999 and 2004 were avoidable." This has been accompanied by a reduction in government spending on health in the past decades in line with Tunisia's package of internationally-dictated structural adjustment programmes consolidated by the 2022 constitution drafted by Saïed himself.

Renewed arrests in Tunisia

In the beginning of the new year Tunisian authorities have arrested Al Jazeera journalist Samir Sassi and seized his computer, phone and the phones of his wife and children. He was released two days after that, potentially because his arrest caused a massive public and international outcry.

As Samir Sassir was arrested on

terrorism charges, he was interrogated under terrorism law, not having a lawyer present during the interrogation. According to Mahdi Jlassi, president of the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists, this "violation of fair trial conditions", "along with the disregard for procedures, the right to defense, the right to a fair trial (...) are characteristics of political trials based on opinion

in Tunisia for over two years.”

The case of Samir Sassir lines in with the step-by-step restriction of freedom of press in Tunisia after president Kais Saieds power grab in 2021. Back then, Al Jazeera's bureau in Tunisia had been closed by the Tunisian authorities, without providing reasons for this act. Furthermore, in 2023 alone over 30 journalists have been arrested, amongst them other prominent voices such as radio journalist Zied el-Heni, who had criticized Tunisian Commerce Minister Kalthoum Ben Rejeb on his radio programme.

This shows how critical journalistic work is becoming increasingly dangerous in Tunisia and represents the dismantling of the freedoms achieved through the Arab Spring.

United Arab Emirates

Freedom of Speech Restricted in COP-era UAE

The United Arab Emirates is traditionally a country where spaces for political criticism, free speech and activism have been deeply suppressed. With the 28th annual United Nation Climate Change Conference being held in the UAE this December, human rights organizations were therefore already worried about how this event would affect the already repressive system. With the event now over, several human rights violations in the country are justifying these initial worries.

Michael Page, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights, reports how “The UAE has ramped up its assault on rights and freedoms despite calls to uphold its human rights obligations around the COP28 climate conference.”

Amnesty International additionally explains how more than 80 Emiratis including human rights defenders are now facing terrorism charges. UAE authorities maintain a zero-tolerance policy toward criticism and enforced that policy by invasive surveillance measures throughout the COP. It can generally be concluded that the COP28 has not had a positive impact on human rights – quite the opposite. Authorities have rather been using the event to bolster its power and grip on civil activism.

Western Sahara

Western Sahara Opposes Morocco UNHRC Bid

Civil society in Western Sahara is urging the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to reject Morocco's candidacy for the presidency of the Council in 2024 due to its alarming human rights record as a military occupier of Western Sahara. Over 20

Sahrawi human rights associations emphasized that Morocco, aspiring to oversee global human rights complaints in this role, is unqualified due to its refusal to cooperate with UN bodies and the severe human rights violations committed in the occupied Sahrawi territories since 1975.

The statement underscores Morocco's failure to meet basic criteria, citing intensified intimidation of journalists, opponents of its colonization policy, and human rights activists since becoming a Council member in 2022. The document highlights the dramatic proportions of the humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories, and emphasizes the Moroccan opposition to visits by international human rights observers over the past eight years.

Yemen

"Human Rights Defender Faces Unjust Sentencing: The Case of Fatima Saleh al Arwali in Yemen"

In December, Fatima Saleh al Arwali, a 35-year-old human rights defender and former head of the Yemen office of the Arab League's Union of Women Leaders, was sentenced to death by the Houthi authorities in a sham trial. The charges against her include espionage and "aid[ing] the enemy." Ms. Arwali was apprehended in August 2022 at a Houthi-controlled checkpoint in the Taizz district. Notably, she lacks legal representation during the trial, and her family has only been able to contact her twice from detention since her arrest.

The Yemeni court has a well-documented history of conducting unfair trials and levying spurious charges. Amnesty International has reported that Ms. Arwali's case

exemplifies how the Houthi authorities have instrumentalized the Specialized Criminal Court, employing it as a tool for repressive measures. This misuse of legal proceedings underscores broader concerns regarding human rights in Yemen.

Amman, Jordan
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Bahrain

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ACHRS is an independent non-governmental think tank and research center advocating for the enhancement of democracy and human rights in Jordan and the MENA region. The center's five priorities are the right to life, the right to speak, the right to think, the right to participate and women's rights. ACHRS has special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). In 2023, the Centre was awarded the United Nations' Human Rights Prize.

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