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THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN KUWAIT

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During the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle in January 2015, Kuwait accepted 182 out of 297 recommendations.¹ The Government accepted 13 recommendations on civic space, specifically on the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs), and the protection of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Yet, HRDs face severe restrictions, with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and Bedoon² (stateless) activists facing heightened threats. Legal and policy limitations placed on the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly put HRDs at a continuous risk of detention, defamation, citizenship revocation and other forms of reprisals as a direct result of their work. This restrictive environment is enabled by repressive legislation such as the 1979 Public Gatherings Act, the National Security Law of 1970, the Cybercrime Law of 2015, and the 2006 Press and Publications Law, all of which place undue restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms.

RISKS FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

1. HRDs, journalists, bloggers, and writers face arbitrary detention, interrogation, judicial harassment, prison sentences (including following trials *in absentia*), travel bans, defamation campaigns, torture and other forms of inhumane and degrading treatment, as well as being stripped of citizenship.³
2. In November 2017, the Court of Appeal sentenced 67 individuals to prison sentences for allegedly “storming the Parliament” during a peaceful protest in 2011. HRD Sulaiman Bin Jassim was among those prosecuted and sentenced. In February 2018, the Court of Cassation issued a decision to release him. The legal process was lengthy and cumbersome, as it involved numerous verdicts, which were then upheld and overturned, leaving the defendant in legal uncertainty for over seven years.⁴
3. In April 2016, the national police force arrested WHRD Rana Al-Sadoun for reciting a speech originally written by an opposition leader, which critiqued the electoral law. She was sentenced *in absentia* to three years in prison with hard labour. In December 2016 she was acquitted on the condition that she signs a “pledge of good conduct” and pay bail of 1,000 dinars (approx. USD\$3280).⁵
4. In December 2017, journalist Abdullah Al-Saleh was sentenced *in absentia* to five years’ imprisonment and hard labour for “abusing Saudi Arabia and insulting the United Arab Emirates (UAE)” under the Cybercrime Law. In January 2018, he was sentenced to a further ten years sentence in a separate trial for “insulting Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE”.
5. On 2 January 2019, journalist Aisha Al-Rasheed was arrested on the basis of the Cybercrime Law following online posts in which she denounced the corruption of government officials. She was released on bail four days later; however, charges against her were not dropped.⁶
6. In June 2018, the Kuwait Al-Huriah (Liberal) Society was dissolved without prior notification or justification, and one of its members was imprisoned. The organisation works to defend freedom of opinion and freedom of expression. One month later, on 2 July 2018, blogger Anwar Dashti, another member of the organisation, surrendered himself to the Central Prison Administration in order to serve a six-month prison sentence for a tweet he posted⁷ to support the “#tweeting is not a crime” campaign, which began after some bloggers were arrested in February 2018.⁸

OFFICIAL RESTRICTIONS ON THE SPACE FOR HRDS

7. The right to peaceful assembly without prior authorization or notification is guaranteed by Article 44 of the Constitution, however, the 1979 Public Gatherings Act has been arbitrarily used to ban public assemblies. Unauthorised gatherings have been dispersed by police using excessive force, including with the indiscriminate use of tear gas and sound bombs against peaceful protestors.
8. Law No. 24 of 1962 on Clubs and Public Welfare Societies gives the executive excessive powers to restrict the work of CSOs. The latter must register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, but the ministry has full discretionary power to deny registration, without prior motive, to CSOs considered as “critical” of the State.
9. The Cybercrime Law adopted in June 2015 restricts freedom of expression and online activism. Article 7 provides for up to 10 years in prison for “the publication of incitement to overthrow the regime in the country.” Article 13 allows the authorities to close down news and media outlets, or even cyber-cafes if any of the acts criminalised under the law are found to have been committed there.

It also denies bloggers and other Internet users the means to disseminate opinions or to access information.⁹

10. The 2006 Press and Publications Law criminalises the publication of information deemed “offensive to God or Islam”, “calling for the overthrow of the regime”, as well as the release or dissemination of “secret material”, and “criticism of the Emir”.¹⁰
11. Under Article 4 of the National Security Law of 1970, anyone convicted of “committing a hostile act against a foreign country that disrupts Kuwait’s political relations with that country or exposes Kuwait to a risk of war” is liable to at least three years in prison.

INTIMIDATION AND REPRISALS FOR ACCESSING INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL MECHANISMS

12. HRD Nawaf Al-Hendal, founder of Kuwait Watch, has been relentlessly targeted since he began his human rights activities in 2008.¹¹ In January 2015, an arrest warrant was issued against him due to a tweet he posted criticising Saudi Arabia. At the time, Al-Hendal was in Geneva to attend the UPR of Kuwait. He was detained upon his return to Kuwait and interrogated.¹² In March 2015, Al-Hendal delivered a statement at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council two months after Kuwait’s UPR, condemning the arrest and imprisonment of HRDs. After his return to Kuwait, he was assaulted and detained in connection with a peaceful demonstration that he was monitoring and documenting. On 26 March 2015, Al-Hendal was released but a travel ban was imposed against him (which was later lifted).¹³ Al-Hendal continued to face harassment by the authorities for his activism including police summons of his family members to pressure him. Lastly, he was subjected to harassment at his workplace, where he was given a lower salary than his peers, and denied promotion.
13. As a result, Kuwaiti HRDs are hesitant to engage with UN mechanisms due to fears of reprisals.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACING PARTICULAR RISKS

14. Bedoon rights’ defenders face targeting and discrimination by the authorities including by blocking or postponing the renewal of essential

national identity documents unless activists and their families declare, in writing, that they would cease political activities.¹⁴ Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli, was arrested and detained on a number of occasions, and tortured.¹⁵ In 2016, Al-Fadhli was arrested and later expelled from Kuwait on allegations of taking part in an “illegal gathering.”¹⁶ In February 2019, he and HRD Hamed Jameel were summoned by the Electronic and Cybercrime Combatting Department in Kuwait to investigate their Twitter comments. Al-Fadhli called for a demonstration in front of the Central Apparatus for Illegal Residents’ Affairs, and Jameel was accused of setting up a fake Twitter account to attack supporters of the government. The two HRDs were released on a bail of 200 dinars each on the same day.¹⁷

15. Two of Kuwait’s leading human rights groups, the Kuwaiti Bedoon Gathering and the Kuwaiti Bedoon Committee, are regularly subjected to harassment and intimidation.
16. WHRDs face increased risks a result of their work, such as defamation, stigmatisation, social pressure, gender and sexual-based violence, as well as marginalisation and discrimination.¹⁸ In October 2018, the twitter account of WHRD Abeer Al-Haddad was hacked¹⁹ due to a tweet she published about her plans to sue the head of the Central Apparatus for Illegal Residents Affairs. She is still targeted for her ongoing defence of the human rights of the Bedoon community.²⁰
17. On 10 April 2019, academic and human rights defender Dr. Ebtehal Al-Khateeb delivered a speech at the symposium organised by the Kuwait Democratic Forum on Bedoon rights. As a result, she was the target of a defamatory Twitter campaign that published personal information about her and her family.²¹

THE RESPONSE OF THE STATE REGARDING THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

18. Kuwait established a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) by Act No. 67 of 2015; however, it was later amended by Act No. 15 of 2018 to restrict the NHRI’s powers. It is currently not in line with the Paris Principles and has been granted Status B by the Sub-Committee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI).²²

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF KUWAIT:

- Refrain from restricting and criminalising the legitimate activities of HRDs, including WHRDs and Bedoon HRDs.
- Ensure a safe and enabling space for civil society and HRDs, by ending all forms of harassment against defenders, including judicial and administrative harassment, and put an end to all acts of reprisals against those who engage or seek to engage with the UN human rights mechanisms.
- Repeal all laws and policies that restrict HRDs' activities offline and online, including the Cybercrime Law of 2015 and the Press and Publications Law of 2006.
- Amend the National Security Law of 1970 to fully guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and opinion in line with international standards.
- Amend the 1979 Public Gatherings Act, and the 1962 NGO Law to fully guarantee the rights of freedom of association and peaceful assembly in line with international standards.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all HRDs detained in relation to the exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association or peaceful assembly, whether online or offline, in line with international standards.
- Demonstrate strong, high-level political support for HRDs through public statements by State officials recognising and supporting their vital and legitimate work.
- Publicly recognize the legitimate role of women HRDs and those working on women's rights. Adopt measures ensuring their full protection from violations by state and non-state actors.
- Facilitate the visits of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.
- Take all necessary measures to bring the National Human Rights Institution into full compliance with the Paris Principles.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING PAPER

ISHR, GCHR, CIVICUS and MENA Rights Group encourage States to consult UPR submissions by local activists and make recommendations to Kuwait regarding the protections of HRDs. This paper is a result of compiling public information and direct contact and experience in the protection of HRDs. Readers should consult sources provided for additional information.

¹ OHCHR "UPR of Kuwait - Second Cycle Thematic list of recommendations"

<https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session21/KW/KuwaitMatriceRecommendations.pdf>

² Bedoons are a stateless Arab minority in Kuwait who were not included as citizens at the time of the country's independence or shortly thereafter. The government recognises them as "illegal residents" and they face systematic discrimination including access to education, work, and health care. See Minority Rights Group for more information: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bidoon/>

³ CIVICUS, "Kuwait: Law of Associations", <https://bit.ly/2WnOD6E>

⁴ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Court of Cassation releases human rights defender Sulaiman bin Jassim among dozens of prisoners" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1789>

⁵ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Prison sentence overturned for human rights defender Rana Al-Sadoun" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1438>

⁶ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Journalist and writer Aisha Al-Rasheed detained under Cyber Crimes Law" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2028>.

⁷ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Gulf Centre for Human Rights expresses solidarity after Al-Huriah Society closed and Anwar Dashti arrested" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1902>

⁸ See: https://twitter.com/Tweet_notAccrime?lang=en

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ CIVICUS Monitor, "Expression" <https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2017/01/01/expression-kuwait/>

¹¹ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Discrimination of Bedoon Community" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1654>

¹² UPR info, "Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemns continuing reprisals against civil society engaging with the UN" <https://www.upr-info.org/en/news>

¹³ ISHR, "Ending reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN in the field of human rights" <http://www.ishr.ch/>

¹⁴ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "The Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Kuwait" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1486>

¹⁵ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Discrimination of Bedoon Community" <https://bit.ly/2uC1s1v>

¹⁶ CIVICUS, "Kuwait; Law of Peaceful Assembly" <https://bit.ly/2WnOD6E>

¹⁷ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Human rights defenders Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli and Hamid Jameel summoned for cyber-crime investigation" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2061>

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Twitter account of human rights lawyer Abeer Al-Haddad hacked after she sued the head of the Central Apparatus for Illegal Residents' Affairs" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1966>

²⁰ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Human rights lawyer Abeer Al-Haddad faces threats due to her ongoing defense of Bedoon rights" <https://www.gc4hr.org/>

²¹ Gulf Centre for Human Rights, "Kuwait: Prominent advocate of Bedoon rights, Dr. Ebtehal Al-Khateeb, targeted by twitter campaign" <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2157>

²² MENA Rights Group, Country Profile of Kuwait, available online: <https://menarights.org/en/countries/kuwait> (last accessed on 18 June 2019). See also : GLOBAL ALLIANCE OF NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS Report and Recommendations of the Session of the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) Geneva, 9-13 MAY 2016