INTENTIONALLY VAGUE: HOW SAUDI ARABIA AND EGYPT ABUSE LEGAL SYSTEMS TO SUPPRESS ONLINE SPEECH
The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world’s leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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Introduction

Egypt and Saudi Arabia are weaponizing vaguely written domestic media, cybercrime, and counterterrorism laws to target and suppress dissent, opposition, and vulnerable groups. Political leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia often claim that their countries’ judicial systems enjoy independence and a lack of interference, a narrative intended to distance the states from the real and overzealous targeting and prosecution of critics.1 Such claims can be debunked and dismissed, as the Egyptian and Saudi governments have had direct involvement in establishing and implementing laws that are utilized to target journalists and human rights defenders.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia were selected as case studies for this report because of their status as among the most frequently documented offenders in the region when it comes to exploiting ambiguously written laws to target and prosecute journalists, critics, activists, human rights defenders, and even apolitical citizens. The two countries have consolidated power domestically, permitting them to utilize and bend their domestic legal systems to exert control over the online information space. Punishments for those targeted can involve draconian prison sentences, travel bans, and fines, which result in a chilling effect that consequently stifles online speech and activities, preventing citizens from discussing political, social, and economic issues.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia enacted media, cybercrime, and counterterrorism laws with ambiguous language and unclear definitions of legal terms, allowing for flexible interpretations of phrases such as “false information,” “morality,” or “family values and principles.” The laws in both countries also loosely define critical terms like “terrorism,” thereby facilitating expansive interpretations of what constitutes a terrorist crime. Further, anti-terror laws now include articles that connect the “dissemination of false information” with terrorist acts. This vague and elastic legal language has enabled the Egyptian and Saudi regimes to prosecute peaceful citizens on arbitrary grounds, sometimes handing out long prison sentences or even death sentences, undermining respect for the rule of law in the two countries.

This report explores the development of media, cybercrime, and counterterrorism laws in both countries, and demonstrates through case studies how Saudi Arabia and Egypt weaponize the laws to prosecute opposition figures and control narratives online. This report examines the relationship between criminal charges tied to one's professional activities or online speech and how those charges can trigger online smear campaigns and harassment. In cases that involve women, gender-based violence is often used to harm a woman’s reputation. Though a direct correlation between judicial charges and online harassment cannot be ascertained, these case studies suggest that dissidents are likely to face online harm following legal persecution, even after they are released.

The case studies included in this report are a sampling of publicly discussed cases, which are used to analyze Egypt and Saudi Arabia's approach to legislating social media activity, but there are more possible examples that have not been raised publicly. The scale of enforcement is unknowable given the opaque nature of both countries' legislative systems.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have long maintained strategic relationships with the United States. The United States is Saudi Arabia's top defense supplier in security and military assistance, and Egypt is one of the top recipients of US military aid.2 However, the relationships between the repressive regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with their poor records of upholding human rights, and their Western allies, including the United States, have shown signs of fraying. As examined in this report, the weaponization of laws to control, censor, and criminalize online freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia and Egypt contradicts efforts by democratic allies to safeguard digital rights and freedom of speech.

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Background

Improved internet penetration and access to social media platforms enabled citizens across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to communicate to the world developments in their countries during the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, which led to the ouster of several authoritarian leaders. A decade later, digital tools and social media platforms continue to play a significant role in allowing citizens to express criticisms of their governments and expose human rights violations.

Despite repressive legislation and online restrictions, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have high internet penetration and social media usership rates. By January 2023, internet penetration in Egypt stood at 72 percent, with 80 million internet users and 46 million social media users among its 111 million population. Internet penetration in Saudi Arabia stood at 99 percent, with 36.3 million internet users and 29 million social media users among its population of 36.6 million.

The historically repressive governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia have evolved their crackdown tactics to align with their digital transformations. Understanding the crucial role of digital tools and platforms in the lives of their citizens, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are increasingly enacting restrictions to limit access to news and information, and to censor speech from critics viewed as threats to these regimes’ survival.

Since the 2013 coup d’état in Egypt and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s rise to power in 2014, Egyptian authorities have developed a reputation for imprisoning journalists and activists for their online speech. In 2017, Egyptian authorities blocked access to twenty-one news websites, including Al Jazeera and Mada Masr, claiming the websites spread false news or supported terrorism. By 2023, of the 562 blocked links and websites in the country, 132 were news websites. While virtual private networks (VPNs) may allow users to bypass the government’s online restrictions, they are not commonly used in the country, according to earlier surveys, and the government has blocked many VPNS and other proxy providers. In 2024, the US Department of Commerce blacklisted Canada-based company Sandvine, which supplied its technology to the Egyptian government to enable web monitoring, censorship, and targeting of political actors and human rights defenders.

Website blocking is a tactic long used by Saudi Arabian authorities, who cite violations of the country’s regulations when enacting website bans. Unlike usage in Egypt, VPN use to bypass online restrictions is prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia not only attempts to control the online space, but also uses it to surveil dissidents. In 2019, the United States charged Ahmad Abouammo, a US-Lebanese citizen and former

Twitter (now known as X) employee, of spying for Saudi Arabia, acting as an agent of a foreign government, and unlawfully sharing Twitter user information in 2015. In 2022, the United States found him guilty, sentencing him to forty-two months in federal prison. Two Saudi citizens—Ali Alzabarah, also a former Twitter employee, and Ahmed Almutairi, who facilitated communications between the Saudi government and the two Twitter employees—were also involved in the scheme. Alzabarah and Almutairi, however, fled the country, reportedly to Saudi Arabia. They are currently on the US Federal Bureau of Investigation’s wanted list.

Crackdowns on rights activists and government critics have escalated since Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) rose to power. Authorities regularly target Saudi activists and dissidents for their online speech, often doling out lengthy prison sentences and travel bans, which can have a chilling effect that limits even the most benign activism and expression. In the most extreme example, a man received a death sentence for his social media usage.

Egypt: political and legal context

Spreading false information has been considered a crime under different versions of the Egyptian Penal Code. A study by criminology academic Amr Marzouk demonstrated how false information was criminalized in Egypt as early as 1883, highlighting the consistency with which vague definitions have been manipulated to target dissidents. Yet, current Egyptian authorities have developed and honed the use of vague laws, ostensibly enacted to counter false information, to tightly control narratives in digital spaces and to ensure the government’s position is maintained in online conversations.

Egyptians are now experiencing what has been described by rights groups as an extended “human rights crisis.” Before the 2011 revolution, Egyptians lived for almost thirty years under the repressive regime of former President Hosni Mubarak. The Mubarak regime was responsible for widespread human rights violations in the country. The current regime led by Sisi has maintained full authoritarian control of the country through repressive measures unmatched in severity by past Egyptian dictatorships. Systemic state domination of political and social life by the Sisi regime has eliminated nearly all forms of nonviolent dissent, pluralism, and opposition.

The Sisi government justified mass arrests as a necessary measure to restore security after the 2011 revolution and the 2013 military coup that ousted Egypt’s first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi. The draconian measures resulted in a fundamentally oppressive system that imprisoned an estimated sixty thousand political prisoners. Egyptian jails house politicians, civil-society groups, journalists, and even apolitical citizens targeted for their online speech. Political prisoners have suffered from systemic enforced disappearances, unfair trials, inhumane conditions of detention, and regular torture. Reporters Without Borders labeled Egypt “one of the world’s biggest jailers of journalists.” According to the World Justice Project, the Egyptian justice system ranked 135th out of 140 countries in the Rule of Law Index.

Egypt also ranks poorly on indicators of civil liberties due to severe restrictions limiting freedom of association, assembly, and speech. Taken with the muzzle placed on media, the strict controls over the online space, the politicized judicial system, and even limitations placed on the entertainment industry, Egypt has enacted a system of control that effectively criminalizes and suppresses all non-state narratives.

Egypt's human rights abuses have resulted in tensions with its Western allies, including the United States. Various US administrations, including the Donald Trump administration in 2017 and the Joe Biden administration in 2022, leveraged the delivery of US aid to pressure the government into improving its human rights record. The US State Department in 2022 described human rights issues in Egypt as “significant” and the country’s prison conditions as “life threatening.” The European Parliament also passed a resolution in 2022 that was critical of Egypt’s human rights situation, calling for stronger measures to address violations. Despite state measures and initiatives to improve the political crisis, such as lifting the state of emergency in 2021, an improved National Council for Human Rights, and the first-ever human rights strategy, among other initiatives, Egyptian rights groups believe such efforts are “misleading” and used to “whitewash” the country’s dire record, especially as arrests and trials were ongoing. Egypt is also facing the repercussions of a significant economic crisis that has resulted in soaring inflation, austerity measures, and international pressure calling for economic reforms. At the time of writing, the war in neighboring Gaza had magnified Egypt’s existing economic challenges and raised additional fears regarding the forced displacement of Palestinians into the Sinai Peninsula. Sisi’s interest in developing legal frameworks to stifle opposition and control the political sphere began during his first year as president, which was marked by a constitutional vacuum after the country’s high court dissolved parliament in June 2012 and the senate, known as the Shura Council, in 2013. With temporary legislative power to issue laws by decree in 2014, Sisi ratified more than 175 extra-parliamentary laws and decrees in the period between his inauguration on June 8, 2014, and the election of a new parliament, controlled by members loyal to the president, in December 2015. Sisi pushed forward the 2015 counterterrorism laws that granted authorities more leniency in utilizing extreme measures usually reserved for states of emergency. Carnegie’s Middle East Center noted how, before 2011, Egyptian governments relied mainly on a continuous state of emergency to

operate outside state institutions. However, the current regime’s legislative agenda appears focused on consolidating power to legally authorize and institutionalize extraordinary legal measures that were once considered exceptional and reserved for emergency use.

CYBERCRIME LAW

Law No. 175 of the 2018 Law on Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes, known as the cybercrime law, consists of forty-five articles and was created to punish the use of the internet to conduct acts of terrorism. Before passing the law, Egypt relied on civil and criminal laws to govern cybercrimes. Drafting of the law began in 2015, with the final version submitted by the Sisi administration and approved by parliament before the 2018 presidential election. According to Masaar, a legal organization focused on the intersection of technology and human rights, the cybercrime law became the primary piece of legislation governing devices and networks, and now acts as “a legal regulation parallel, in one way or another, to the penal codes and criminal procedure, with minor modifications of a digital character, but with less clear wording.”

Rights groups have heavily criticized the law and described it as unconstitutional on the basis of several articles limiting online content and effectively legalizing censorship. Masaar explains that, instead of introducing new crimes, the law addresses the use of communication technologies, like social media, to commit traditional crimes already codified in different penal codes. The law enables prosecutors to hold accountable social media users, social media page administrators, media outlets, and technology companies, with penalties that include hefty fines and imprisonment. Mohamed Hegazy, a senior official in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, said he believes the law to be “among the best laws worldwide,” and said it would not be used to limit freedom of expression. Despite this claim and similar ones from Egyptian officials, the government has demonstrated that it consistently uses exploitable legal articles to repress Egyptian speech and restrict digital rights.

Prior to the law’s implementation, the Egyptian government had blocked around fifty websites, most of which belonged to independent and international news websites critical of the government, or to VPN providers. Egypt also blocked the encrypted messaging app Signal for a short period in December 2016. The government justified blocking some of the websites by claiming that these websites support terrorism, comparing its measures to those of other countries adopting or considering similar measures to protect their countries, such as the United States, France, China, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others.

Under Article 7 of the law, investigative authorities have the legal power to submit blocking orders to the court if a website's content is deemed criminal or a threat to national security or the economy. Internet service providers are obliged to block any website after receiving a court order to do so. At the time of writing, Egypt had blocked at least seven hundred websites, including media and human rights organizations, VPN and proxy service providers, and political and cultural websites.\(^{48}\)

**FAMILY VALUES LAW**

Article 25 of the cybercrime law, known as the “family values law,” criminalizes the use of technology “that infringes on any family principles or values in Egyptian society.” Article 26 criminalizes content that undermines “public morals.” Authorities have repeatedly invoked the two vaguely described articles to press morality-related charges, sometimes following complaints from private citizens, particularly against female social media influencers on TikTok, bloggers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.\(^{49}\) Through these articles, the state can dictate, oversee, and interpret how public morals are conveyed online. Egypt’s public prosecution justified this law in a statement following a crackdown on social media influencers by claiming that the internet needs protection from “forces of evil” using cyber warfare to “destroy our society, demolish its values and principles and steal its innocence and purity.”\(^{50}\) Masaar noted—in a legal warrant following the repeated use of Article 25 to prosecute social media users—that the law violates articles in the Egyptian constitution that require definitions within laws to be detailed and clear.\(^{51}\)

Another vague and broad article in the cybercrime law is Article 27, which Masaar describes as “one of the most used articles by the General Prosecution to charge social media users.”\(^{52}\) This article allows government prosecutors to consider anyone who commits a crime using a website, an online account, an email, or a messaging app “an administrator of a website or account.” Such administrators can then receive hefty fines and jail sentences of no fewer than two years.

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MEDIA LAW

Law No. 180 of 2018 Regulating the Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, known as the media law, entered into force following several attempts to pass the legislation dating back to 2014. In parallel, Egypt formed three media bodies in 2017 to supervise and regulate public media, which were incorporated into the law. These entities are the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), the National Press Authority (NPA), and the National Media Authority (NMA), with the SCMR granted the most authority under the media law. According to Masaar, the SCMR began its work before the law was passed by imposing penalties, such as “preventing the appearance of media professionals and individuals [in all visual, audio, print and electronic media], deleting content, and preventing writing on some topics.” It is in this context that the law, which rights groups have described as “extremely problematic,” was approved, providing the SCMR with sweeping legal power to monitor, restrict, and censor internet content.

The media law also increased administrative requirements for media entities, which made it more difficult for independent outlets to gain legal status. While the SCMR is technically independent, digital-rights organization Article 19 noted that it is strongly associated with the government given that the head of the SCMR and several of its members are appointed by the country’s president and “picked without parliamentary oversight.” The government’s overarching power is further highlighted by the significant control and ownership of media outlets in the country by businesspeople linked to the government and Egypt’s intelligence services.

An analysis by the Media Ownership Monitor, a media-mapping tool by the nonprofit Global Media Registry, reviewed forty-one popular Egyptian national media outlets and concluded that almost “half of the media landscape [in Egypt] is now concentrated in the hands of the state” in what the organization called the “Sisification of the media.”

Under Article 19 of the media law, the SCMR has the power to block websites, blogs, or the personal social media account of anyone with five thousand or more followers—as they are deemed media entities—for various reasons, including publishing false news.

The SCMR’s powers are not limited to content restrictions, as it can also take unspecified “appropriate action” against violators.

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59 “Egyptian Intelligence Services Extend Control over Media.”
by filing lawsuits. Given the presence of vague and undefined terms in the law, such as the term “false news,” the media law can be used to limit freedom of expression by citizens, journalists, and media outlets. The SCMR has actively pursued this strategy.

For example, in 2022, the SCMR announced that it closed and blocked twelve websites, social media pages, and YouTube channels for various reasons, including publishing false news, without naming the websites and pages or highlighting the alleged false news disseminated.60

**ANTI-TERRORISM LAW**

Law No. 94 of 2015 on anti-terrorism comprises fifty-four articles and was issued by presidential decree during the absence of parliament to restore stability after terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula and the assassination of a state prosecutor in a car bombing.61 The law provided a broad and politicized definition of terrorism, and also expanded what constitutes an act of terrorism, allowing Egypt to exploit legitimate security threats to prosecute peaceful dissidents, journalists, and human rights defenders and treat them as terrorists.62

According to the law, terrorism is loosely defined as any act that “undermines national unity, social peace, and national security.”63 Those tried under the law can receive heavy sentences, including the death penalty.64 Articles in the law also allow prosecutors to hold suspects without judicial review, which enables forced disappearances.65 One article also clears law-enforcement agents from criminal responsibility. United Nations experts described this vague and overreaching law as a “grave threat to the legitimacy of international counterterrorism framework and laws” and said its provisions “severely limit civic space and the exercise of fundamental freedoms in Egypt.”66

Unofficial translation of Articles 29 and 35 of the anti-terrorism law, as translated by Chawki.

Source: Chawki, “Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law, ‘Egypt’ Law No. 175 of 2018.”

Articles 29 and 35 of the law can be used to restrict freedom of expression online, as they allow prison terms and heavy fines for promoting and inciting terrorism through social media or publishing “false news” about terrorist and counterterrorism operations. In this case, “false news” is defined as news that contradicts the defense ministry’s official statements. The state has used this law many times to levy terrorism charges against dissidents, sometimes resulting in harsh prison sentences and fines.

**DISSENT UNDER ATTACK**

Under the Sisi administration, the Egyptian government uses vague laws created under the pretext of countering false information to control online narratives.

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64 “Egypt: Counterterrorism Law Erodes Basic Rights.”
In 2018, the Egyptian president stated that, in a three-month period, his government had identified twenty-one thousand false rumors aimed at spreading instability.\(^6^7\) Sisi, who has said that he follows “social media properly” and reads “people’s comments,” emphasized the dangers of false rumors on several occasions, and encouraged Egyptian youth to work with the government to fight against rumors.\(^6^8\) A government official claimed in 2019 that 4–6 million social media pages were publishing fake news about Egypt.\(^6^9\) In 2023, while assuring that the war against terrorism had successfully ended, Sisi mentioned that the “war of rumors” remains a threat.\(^7^0\)

The government’s legal battle against false information heightened in February 2018, when the prosecutor general issued a decree allowing prosecutors to monitor and identify false information on social media and take action against those spreading it.\(^7^1\) Following this decision, the government instituted hotlines for citizens to report false news and rumors.\(^7^2\) There do not appear to be any efforts to curb the government’s overzealous reach; in fact, authorities can now prosecute journalists and social media users spreading false information about the weather due to a separate draft law concerning the Egyptian Meteorological Authority, which parliament approved in 2023.\(^7^3\)

### OUTLAWED MEDIA OUTLETS: MADA MASR

The SCMR, acting as an official regulator following the implementation of the media law, began using its powers to grant licenses needed to operate legally in Egypt—or to deprive media outlets of them. One case exhibiting how SCMR abuses its power involves independent online news outlet Mada Masr, which has been blocked in Egypt since 2017.

Mada Masr is one of several outlets targeted by the government. In 2019, the media outlet had an encounter with law enforcement when security forces arrested and later released three journalists and a senior editor following a report about Sisi’s son.\(^7^4\) In June 2022, the SCMR announced the issuance of one hundred licenses for different newspapers, websites, and television channels. Mada Masr’s several requests for a license, the first made in 2018, went unanswered.\(^7^5\) In September 2022, Mada Masr learned its license request was rejected by the SCMR when Editor-in-Chief Lina Attalah was charged with operating a website without a license.\(^7^6\)

Egyptian prosecutors summoned Attalah and three Mada Masr journalists and charged them with spreading false news and defamation of members of the pro-Sisi party. Nation’s Future, among other charges.\(^7^7\)

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\(^{67}\) “Egypt’s Sisi Says False Rumours Main Threat to Arab Countries,” Reuters, July 2018, \url{https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-politics-idUKKBN1KCON9}.


\(^{69}\) “Egypt Reported to Have 6-4m Fake News Pages,” Arab News, June 2019, \url{https://www.arabnews.com/node/1511301/media}.

\(^{70}\) “President Sisi: We Are Still Facing War of Rumors,” Sada Elbalad, February 2023, \url{https://see.news/president-sisi-we-are-still-facing-war-of-rumors}.


\(^{73}\) “Egypt to Fine Creators of Weather Misinformation,” Egypt Independent, April 2023, \url{https://egyptindependent.com/egypt-to-fine-creators-of-weather-misinformation}.


\(^{75}\) “Egypt’s Supreme Council for Media Regulations Issues 100 Licenses for Newspapers, Websites, and TV Channels,” Ahram Online, June 2022, \url{https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/468136/21/1/Egypt/Society/Egypt%5E9%5B%2%5D-Supreme-Council-for-Media-Regulations-issu.aspx}.


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The SCMR’s harassment of Mada Masr continued in October 2023, when it announced a six-month ban on Mada Masr’s website—even though it had already been blocked for years—for operating “without a license” and for “publishing false news.”

In March 2024, security services detained for ten hours and then released on bail Rana Mamdouh, one of the three journalists previously charged with spreading false news, as she was on her way to report on a recent deal between Egypt and the United Arab Emirates at the coastal city of Ras Al Hekma.

Mada Masr and Attalah were subject to a smear campaign by pro-government and state media. As per Reporters Without Borders, an article by state-owned newspaper Rosa El-Youssef portrayed Attalah and human rights defender Hossam Bahgat, who previously worked at the newspaper, as “suspicious” agents working with the European Union.

Current SCMR member Nashat El-Deehy used his television show to disparage Attalah and the news outlet. Pro-government media outlet Sada El Balad also published an article accusing Mada Masr of producing fake news that benefits the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

**MUZZLING A JOURNALIST: BASMA MOSTAFA**

Egypt actively targets and jails journalists for their reporting. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Egypt jailed more journalists on charges of publishing “fake news” than any country in the world in 2017 and was rated in 2021 as the third-worst jailer of journalists. According to CPJ’s data, since 2020, at least fourteen journalists have been charged with spreading false information in Egypt, among other charges.

This was the case for freelance journalist Basma Mostafa, who was arrested in 2020 while reporting on the murder of a citizen by a police officer in Luxor. She was accused of spreading false information and joining a terrorist organization, though it was unclear as to under which law. However, authorities quickly released her following swift international condemnation. According to Reporters Without Borders, Mostafa was the target of smear campaigns in 2016 because of her reporting.

The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) identified a possible coordinated campaign on Twitter attacking Mostafa in October 2022. The campaign became particularly active after she spoke out about how her time in prison affected her. The attacks originated from a suspicious, and possibly inauthentic, network previously identified by the DFRLab for launching similar attacks on Egyptian human rights defenders Gamal Eid and George Ishak. Accounts in this network are characterized by their anonymity, high posting rates for hashtags, and attacks on dissidents via replies. The journalist, who was pregnant at the time of her arrest, spoke about the psychological and physical impact of detention, especially on pregnant women. Mostafa expressed that she was unable to continue with multiple pregnancies following her arrest and had to seek abortions. She received at least thirty-three replies to her tweets about prison and abortions that directly attacked her. Most replies contained identical or similar text, and were sometimes posted minutes apart. The accounts were hyper-focused on her seeking, seeking to reinforce cultural stigmas around the topic.

Additionally, accounts used gender-based violence and misogynistic content to denigrate the journalist. For example,
within approximately thirty minutes, five accounts used the same
text to reply to Mostafa’s tweets, insinuating promiscuousness
by misogynistically asking, “Did you even know who the
husband of these children was, Basma?” Similarly, two other
accounts used identical text twenty minutes apart to question if
Mostafa was married and accuse her of defending the rights of
sex workers and LGBTQ+ people. These replies exhibit the use
of gender-based harassment to shame Mostafa by implying
that she engaged in sexual activities outside of marriage and
associating her with persecuted groups.

screenshots of five identical replies to Mostafa by different accounts.
Source: Ahmed Sameh (@ahmad_sameh20), ”هو إنتي كنتي عارفه مين أبو العيال دي يا بسمة”.
Twitter, October 28, 2022, 3:27 p.m., https://twitter.com/ahmad_sameh20/status/1585986610294030339;
Ahmed Khaled (@kh36054957), ”هو إنتي كنتي عارفه مين أبو العيال دي يا بسمة”.
Twitter, October 28, 2022, 3:38 p.m., https://twitter.com/kh36054957/status/1585989442849873219;
Maged Mohamed (@magedmo82594093), ”هو إنتي كنتي عارفه مين أبو العيال دي يا بسمة”.
Twitter, October 28, 2022, 3:44 p.m., https://twitter.com/magedmo82594093/status/1585990097785946752;
Mayousha Ahmed (@ahm07349085), ”هو إنتي كنتي عارفه مين أبو العيال دي يا بسمة”.
Twitter, October 28, 2022, 3:50 p.m., https://twitter.com/ahm07349085/status/1585994392946761728;
Ramy Adel (@RamyAde70028215), ”هو إنتي كنتي عارفه مين أبو العيال دي يا بسمة”.
Twitter, October 28, 2022, 3:50 p.m., https://twitter.com/RamyAde70028215/status/1585992442683092992

Indicting Social Media Posts: Hossam Bahgat and Bahey El-Din Hassan

One glaring example of the use of the cybercrime law to
prosecute human rights defenders is the 2020 sentencing of
renowned and exiled human rights defender Bahey el-Din
Hassan. Hassan, who is the director and co-founder of the
cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, was sentenced to
fifteen years in prison over tweets critical of the Egyptian public
prosecutors; he was charged with “disseminating false news”
and “insulting the judiciary.”

In a similar case in 2021, leading human rights defender and investigative journalist Hossam Bahgat, who is the founder and executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and Freedoms (EIPR), was accused of using social media to spread false news in a tweet alleging electoral fraud and supposedly insulting Egypt’s election authority. Bahgat’s tweet concerned parliamentary elections in 2020, which Freedom House described as “neither free nor fair.” Bahgat’s sentence was also based on several laws, including Article 27 of the cybercrime law.

The DFRLab observed numerous attacks against Bahgat on Twitter that predated his legal case, often sent by anonymous accounts or public figures. A review of replies to Bhagat’s tweets revealed targeted and consistent online attacks over the years that included insults and, at times, death threats. In one example, Bahgat tweeted sarcastically in 2018 that Islamist extremist Hesham Ashmawy was lucky to have been arrested in Libya and not Egypt, as he was more likely to receive a trial and not be “eliminated” in “an exchange of fire”; this was likely a reference to Egypt’s apparent use of extrajudicial executions. Among the many replies to the post were death threats, with one user saying they hoped Bahgat would be “eliminated as well.”

The pro-government YouTuber Sherif Elsiry replied to the activist, saying, “You just wait, you’re next the Egyptian security will make you join the others. Don’t rush it you’re next.”

Pro-government media outlets like Youm7 and Sada El Balad, and TV presenters such as Deehy on Ten TV and Ahmed Moussa on Sada El Balad TV, also targeted Bahgat on their websites and television channels over the course of several years. Between 2017 and 2023, the YouTube channels of Ten TV and Deehy posted a total of thirteen videos attacking Bahgat. Pro-government media and personalities often portrayed Bahgat and the EIPR as traitors who receive foreign funding to destabilize Egypt, in addition to accusing the EIPR of supporting terrorist organizations like the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and persecuted groups like the LGBTQ+ community. State-owned newspaper Rosa El-Youssef made similar accusations against Bahgat in 2019, claiming that he used to work for an Israeli newspaper and focused on “LGBTQ relationships” and sexually “freeing bodies.”

The EIPR and Bahgat were targeted again, with three members arrested, in a government crackdown on the organization after members held a meeting with Western diplomats. The arrests resulted in international condemnation and the EIPR members were released after one month, but the charges remained. Coinciding with the November 17, 2020, arrests, pro-government outlet Youm7 published a total of thirteen articles on its website between November 18–20 attacking Bahgat and his organization. The articles furthered the “traitors receiving foreign funding to destabilize Egypt” narrative. In parallel, TV presenters Deehy and Moussa attacked the organization using their television shows on November 23.
In March 2023, an emergency court issued sentences, ranging from five years to life, for lawyers and activists belonging to the now-disbanded independent human rights organization Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF). The detainees said they were subjected to torture and forced disappearances for their peaceful activism. The group was charged with “using websites to promote ideas inciting the commission of terror acts, by using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube under the name of the Egyptian Coordination for Human Rights to spread” news critical of the government.

The ECRF came under government scrutiny after it legally assisted an Egyptian mother who had accused the police of torturing her daughter. Among the articles invoked by the prosecution against the organization’s members was Article 29 of the counterterrorism law.

Screenshots of four different reports by Youm7 published between November 18–20, 2020, attacking Bahgat and the EIPR.


'PROTECTING' FAMILY VALUES:
THE TIKTOK GIRLS CASE

In what appears to be the first use of the open-to-interpretation morality charges stated in Articles 25 and 26 of the cybercrime law, in April 2020, Egypt targeted female social media influencers in what later became known as the "TikTok girls case." The prosecutor general behind the case proclaimed himself to be a "guardian of social norms" who is not focused only on prosecuting criminals. The case, spurred on by complaints from other social media users, set a new precedent in Egypt's criminalization of social media activity.

Overall, nine women were arrested and charged with "violating family principles of Egyptian society." They included social media stars Haneen Hossam and Mawadda al-Adham, who were sentenced to two years in prison for publishing "indecent" content that violates "family values and principles." Prosecutors also claimed that Hossam had encouraged young women to engage in sex work via the app Likee, which compensates video creators based on the number of views their content gathers. The allegation is based on a video in which Hossam merely encourages women to join Likee to become influencers and make money, but, crucially, in the video she did not promote or encourage any sexual activities. In January 2021, the court acquitted Hossam and Adham of the "family values" charges and canceled their prison sentences, but each woman’s fine of 300,000 EGP ($18,750 at the time) was upheld. Not long after, prosecutors pursued human-trafficking offenses against the women.

Hossam and Adham were again convicted in June 2021 and sentenced to prison on human-trafficking charges, receiving a ten- and six-year sentence, respectively; Hossam’s sentence was later reduced to three years. After overturning the initial cybercrime charges, the court relied on a 2010 human-trafficking law to accuse Hossam and Adham of using social media to recruit underage girls. According to Human Rights Watch, prosecutors initially announced broad accusations on the Egyptian Public Prosecution’s Facebook page that "could be interpreted as related to sex work" to justify the arrests.

The DFRLab identified a targeted campaign on Facebook amplifying the government’s accusation that Hossam used apps to promote sex work. Days after the rulings on Hossam and Adham’s cases, identical social media posts on several Facebook pages with large numbers of followers began spreading claims that echoed the state prosecution’s accusation of sex trafficking.

The identical posts detailed how apps like the one Hossam promoted enabled sex work for underage children, and accused Hossam of intentionally promoting such activities. According to data gathered from the Facebook monitoring tool CrowdTangle, the first post to share this narrative was made on June 20, 2021, on a Facebook page with more than 120,000 followers called "عربية حقائق الأخبار" ("The Real News Newspaper") as it shared a live Youm7 video from outside the courthouse when Hossam and Adham’s sentences were announced. Two days after the first post was published, several Facebook pages duplicated the text and published the same post in close proximity.

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109 Ibid.
succession, some only seconds apart. Political scientist and presenter Moataz Abdel-Fattah, a verified user with almost five hundred thousand followers, also published the post.115 Abdel-Fattah’s page added one sentence at the beginning of the post describing it as “widely circulated information” before posting the same text on June 22.

The crackdown on dissent in Egypt has led to the strategic weaponization of laws and other legal infrastructure, such as presidential decrees, to target those who oppose or criticize the government. The presented case studies demonstrate how ambiguous legal definitions and vague language, in particular, have provided Egyptian authorities additional power to police “morals,” censor alternative narratives by labeling them as “false information,” and equate dissidents with “terrorists.” These powers, enabled by Sisi’s regime, have effectively legislated suppression and equipped the government with the legal tools needed to target and punish media organizations, journalists, activists, human rights defenders, and apolitical content creators.

115 Moataz Abdelfattah, “eler3al 3om meal yamam alwaal 3aml,” June 21, 2021, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/Moataz.A.Fattah/posts/pfbid01Wx6oZt01Np2oZu5zFKuwR7Hr6v1oCZ8pU9h30n67uYR6Pjno8t55Hg2Xn8oWpB6Fw6mGwCwxfY8sF0m6Zv6JWJ9c5mKyu9skg6pqlYujbVwA.
**Saudi Arabia: political and legal context**

Saudi Arabia's well-documented targeting of dissidents inside and outside the kingdom has taken on new proportions under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who has overseen the implementation of draconian punishments for unfavorable social media posts, among other things. The immense pressure MBS and his regime faced following their reported involvement in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has not deterred the kingdom.\footnote{Kevin Breuninger, Natasha Turak, and Spencer Kimball, “US Says Saudi Crown Prince Approved Khashoggi Killing, Imposes Visa Restrictions on 76 Saudis,” CNBC, February 2021.} Rather, Saudi Arabia extended its crackdown on civil society by targeting peaceful citizens expressing their views online. Saudi efforts to pursue recourse against dissidents online have even included the infiltration of Twitter to uncover the identities of anonymous critics.\footnote{Human Rights Watch, “Specialized Criminal Court in Saudi Arabia Is a Political Tool to Muzzle Critical Voices,” Amnesty International, February 2020.} Saudi repression has also crossed borders multiple times by directly targeting dissidents residing abroad, using online attacks and threats of arrest against family members living in the kingdom.\footnote{European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), “Saudi King Overhauls Security Services Following Royal Shakeup,” Reuters, July 2022.}

The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) blamed an uptick in human rights violations in 2022 upon MBS's rise to power.\footnote{Human Rights Watch, “Specialized Criminal Court in Saudi Arabia Is a Political Tool to Muzzle Critical Voices,” Amnesty International, February 2020.} US President Joe Biden previously vowed to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” following Khashoggi’s assassination, but MBS has remained defiant when commenting on accusations related to Khashoggi’s murder, including in a March 2022 interview in which he said, “If that’s the way we did things, Khashoggi would not even be among the top 1,000 people on the list.”\footnote{Washington Post, “Saudi Arabia’s King: Khashoggi ‘Not Even Be Among the Top 1,000 People on the List,’” March 2022.}

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and MBS have taken measures to assert control over Saudi Arabia’s legal system. In 2017, they consolidated the domestic intelligence and counterterrorism agencies into the Presidency of State Security (SSP), which falls directly under the king’s control.\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.} The same year, King Salman issued a royal decree renaming the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution to the Public Prosecution Office (PPO) and linking it directly to the king.\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.}

Since their establishment, the SSP and PPO have actively brought arbitrary charges against Saudi citizens under vague and broad provisions governing cybercrimes and counterterrorism. These arbitrary charges are then brought before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC).\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.} The SSP, PPO, and SCC play a central role in weaponizing the kingdom’s laws to limit freedom of speech and target journalists, human rights defenders, and critics of the government and monarchy.\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.}

Saudi Arabia operates under an opaque cloak that makes it challenging to comprehensively survey the legal landscape and abuses of the judicial system. Saudi rights groups monitoring and documenting human rights violations risk reprisal for their work.\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.} Such groups rely on extensive networks in Saudi Arabia and abroad to collect information about arrests, trials, and convictions not publicly available, to utilize them in targeted advocacy and awareness campaigns.\footnote{The Saudi Presidency of State Security: An Arm of Repression in the Crown Prince’s Kingdom, MENA Rights Group, June 2022.} Publicly available information indicates that there is an effort to use the legal system as a means of control over critics in the online information space. As discussed, one of the primary ways to do so is through leveraging the deliberately vague language of laws to enforce strict provisions about what can, and what cannot, be stated publicly.
The 2017 Law of Combating Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing is one of the most weaponized laws in the kingdom to crack down on free speech. The law replaced its predecessor from 2014, which also included a vague definition of terrorism that criminalized speech critical of the government and was described at the time as the country's “latest tool to crush peaceful expression.” The newest iteration of the law includes a lengthy and broad definition of what constitutes a crime of terrorism, allowing Saudi authorities to prosecute individuals for criticizing the monarchy or the government and dole out harsh and lengthy prison sentences. Saudi authorities have charged many Saudi human rights defenders for their online speech, accusing them of publishing false news with the intention of executing a terrorist crime under Article 44 of this law.

The counterterrorism law also allows public prosecution under Article 5, permitting the issuance of “a summons or an arrest warrant against any person suspected of committing any of the crimes stipulated in this law,” and, under Article 7, permitting the issuance of “a warrant to enter and search residences, offices, or premises at any time during the period specified in the search warrant; arrest persons; and locate and seize funds, properties, documents, evidence or information in any of the crimes stipulated in this Law.”

transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, or privacy, through an information network or computer.” These broad clauses provide the basis for Saudi authorities to arbitrarily target individuals and accuse them of publishing false or damaging information under the law’s calculatedly vague criteria.

Saudi authorities increasingly use these laws to silence critics. The kingdom targets peaceful activism and online speech on social media platforms by charging users with crimes involving terrorism, defamation, and spreading false information. The legal system is opaque and plagued with accusations of unfair trials, confessions extracted under duress, and arbitrary applications of lengthy prison sentences, travel bans, and even the death penalty. The conditions to which detainees in Saudi Arabia are subjected involve mistreatment, torture, and being held incommunicado. After serving sentences, Saudi authorities impose lengthy travel bans on individuals and their families to further exact control over them once they are released and to keep them living in fear of the consequences of speaking up.

In a September 2023 televised interview with Fox News, MBS claimed he was unable to interfere in the judicial system and the rule of law, and blamed “bad laws” for retired Saudi teacher Muhammed al-Ghamdi receiving the death penalty in 2023 for his online activity, a case discussed at length below. However, as pointed out by rights and advocacy groups, the law’s calculatedly vague criteria, and accuse them of publishing false or damaging information under the law’s calculatedly vague criteria. Saudi authorities consistently exploit cybercrime and counterterrorism laws to crack down on free speech, limit human rights, and curtail the spread of narratives critical of the government or the monarchy.

The DFRLab analyzed documented cases of individuals targeted by Saudi authorities for offenses related to their online speech and tried under one or more of the laws referenced in this report. These cases also demonstrate how public prosecution triggers online hate speech and disinformation against the accused and the entities advocating for their release. Together, these cases highlight a range of consequences associated with being targeted by the government for expressing oneself online.

LONGEST PRISON SENTENCE FOR ONLINE SPEECH: SALMA AL-SHEHAB

Despite social reforms adopted under MBS, like the lifting of the ban on women driving and expanding of entertainment offerings in the country, Saudi Arabia’s crackdown on women’s rights activists has continued. In particular, Saudi authorities have targeted women who speak out online against the male guardianship system, but women can also be targeted for advocating for basic human rights.

In January 2021, student Salma al-Shehab was arrested in Saudi Arabia while on holiday from the United Kingdom, where she was pursuing her PhD at Leeds University. She was sentenced in August 2022 to thirty-four years in prison, the longest sentence given to a peaceful activist in Saudi Arabia. She was charged for her activity on Twitter under the pretext of the Anti-Cyber Crime and Counterterrorism Laws. Shehab’s Twitter account included various posts and retweets about women’s and human rights issues. The charges against her included using Twitter to spread rumors and “to disrupt public order, undermine the security of society and stability of the


Shehab was tried before the SCC and was initially sentenced to a six-year sentence, which was later increased to thirty-four years on appeal. Eventually, prosecutors dropped the cyber-crime charges but upheld the counterterrorism charges, prompting Shehab's prison sentence to be reduced to twenty-seven years, followed by a travel ban of the same length.

The charges brought against Shehab encouraged online hate speech against her, which proliferated following her sentencing. In addition, her case exemplifies how female activists are prone to gender-based attacks that seek to dehumanize and defame them.

An August 30, 2019, post pinned to Shehab's Twitter account called for freedom for “prisoners of conscience and for all those who had committed criminal actions according to the counterterrorism law and its financing.”

 Acquisition of Salma al-Shehab's 2019 tweet and replies from 2022 and 2023 accusing her of being an agent of the West and supporting her prison sentence.

Source: Salma (@I_Salma1988), "أرفض الظلم، و"يا رب إن كنت ظلمت شخص في حياتي فهو عن جهلي و لا داعي و عن سوء تقدير و غريزي. يا رب تجاوز عني و اغفر لي. و اجعلني صالحاً في أمتي الحرية لمعتقلي الرأي و لكل مظلوم في العالم 💔 المحتل و أبرئ من كل هذا الجحيم يا الله على أنصر المظلوم، و أكرر.

oppressed people in the world.” In response, some replies called Shehab an agent of the West, and others supported her prison sentence.

Twitter account @Awareness2030, which frequently posted pro-Saudi and pro-MBS content on Twitter (and now on X), posted a thread in Arabic critical of Shehab on August 21, 2022, in which it referred to her as an “evil in society” who needs to be dealt with. The thread, which is pinned to the @Awareness2030’s account, included claims that Shehab spread rumors about the Saudi government and showed support for terrorists, Iran, and Hezbollah. In response to a tweet from the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies expressing solidarity with Shehab, @Awareness2030 replied with one of its own threads criticizing her.

The thread posted by @Awareness2030 received more than 250 replies, many of which included insults and attacks against Shehab. One of the replies said she should be executed for treason.

Screencap of a thread from @Awareness2030 attacking Salma al-Shehab (left) and a tweet sent in reply to @OfficialBrismes expressing support for Shehab (right).

Source: Awareness ❤️ (@Awareness2030), "You have to know that Salam big support of Hezbollah you call it #freeSalma and we call it thank you to my government to keep us save" Twitter, July 2023, 6:23 a.m., https://twitter.com/Awareness2030/status/1676703383678332929.


141 Awareness ❤️ (@Awareness2030), Twitter profile, last visited October 2023, 12, https://twitter.com/Awareness2030.

142 Awareness ❤️ (@Awareness2030), "You have to know that Salam big support of Hezbollah you call it #freeSalma and we call it thank you to my government to keep us save," Twitter, July 2023, 6. https://twitter.com/Awareness2030/status/1676703383678332929.
TERRORISM CHARGES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS: AL-OTAIBI SISTERS

Similar to the targeting of Shehab, Saudi fitness instructor Manahel al-Otaibi was arrested on November 16, 2022, for using her social media accounts to challenge the country’s male-guardianship laws.\(^\text{143}\) Saudi laws mandate that women must obtain permission from a male guardian—typically a father, husband, brother, or son—to travel, marry, work, and even access some services in the kingdom.\(^\text{144}\) Despite criticism from Saudi human rights defenders and rights groups, Saudi Arabia formalized the male guardianship system in the Personal Status Law in 2022.\(^\text{145}\)

Otaibi was referred to the SCC following accusations of not wearing “decent” clothes and inciting “Saudi girls to denounce religious principles and rebel against the customs and traditions of Saudi society.”\(^\text{146}\) In April 2024, it was announced that Otaibi had been sentenced to eleven years in prison in a January 2024 hearing after she was found guilty of “terrorism offences” under articles 43 and 44 of the counterterrorism law.\(^\text{147}\) Saudi rights groups reported that she had suffered physical abuse.

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while in detainment. One of Otaibi’s sisters, Fouz, a social media influencer, faced similar criminal charges but managed to flee the country and escape arrest. Another sister, Maryam, was previously detained in 2017 for campaigning against male guardianship; she was later released but remains under an unofficial travel ban.

Before her arrest, Otaibi received different negative replies to her tweets. In one example, she tweeted about revolting against patriarchal ideas and shared a video of herself dancing. The account @RM7KSa replied on September 20, 2021, claiming that Otaibi’s tweet was inciteful and that the video was “against public taste.” The account @RM7KSa tagged the official Twitter account of the Saudi Ministry of Interior and an account that used to serve as the official Saudi Public Prosecution’s account, according to an archived version of the account as it is now unavailable on the platform itself.

After her arrest, in addition to accounts continuing to reply negatively to her old tweets, Otaibi was targeted in replies to tweets posted by her sister, Fouz, and others. Some accounts shared identical screenshots to claim that Otaibi’s Snapchat account was the reason for her arrest. They cited a video of her and accused her of speaking in a “godly manner” and referring to herself as a deity. In one example, the accounts @ip507x and @sm47425062 used the same three screenshots in the same order as evidence that Otaibi was imprisoned for contempt of religion. In the footage, she appears to share an inspirational morning message with her followers framed in satirically religious terms, the tenor of which might be considered blasphemous in certain Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Fouz has also received many online attacks through replies to her tweets and snaps, which have included death threats, insults, and hateful content. Furthermore, many accounts used the words “عزة الله” ("There is no verification") in replies to her tweets, referencing older videos of Fouz questioning why Snapchat had not verified her. Accounts such as

Screencaps of two replies to tweets about Manahel’s case in which accounts used the same screenshots from her Snapchat account, accusing her of contempt of religion.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.
Moreover, other accounts published multiple replies to Fouz using the same graphics. For example, the account @xxzz44858 sent nine replies to Fouz, eight of which used the same graphic of a short video with only the words مافيه موثوق ("There is no verification") in red. Similarly, the account @madeny20300 sent more than thirty replies to Fouz, with many also using the graphics.

@omar1393omar, @Sule9080, and @Mohamed_Aldayel used the same graphic, which included these words in red. Some accounts claimed that the reason behind Fouz’s opposition to the government was her bitterness about not receiving Snapchat verification.

DEATH SENTENCE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE: MOHAMMED AL-GHAMDI

Criticizing the monarchy and the government remains a redline in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed al-Ghamdi represents another clear case of Saudi authorities utilizing the counterterrorism law as a pretext to target critics. The SCC tried Ghamdi for his social media use and imposed a death sentence. The charges against him included “describing the King or the Crown Prince in a way that undermines religion or justice,” “supporting a terrorist ideology,” “communication with a terrorist entity,” and “publishing false news with the intention of executing a terrorist crime.”

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155 ؛(تميم محمد) (@xxzz44858)، X، سبتمبر 2023، 6:34 مساءً، https://twitter.com/xxzz44858/status/1700895499413299233).
156 مادي نو (t@madeny20300)، "يالسحليه ياربع التوله من عقوبة الله عليكي ان الذكر اللي معها زوجكي، يعني لحد يحاول يسلك طريق انها فبركه عليها الواقع على أرض
Ghamdi is the first person to receive a death sentence over social media activity. His brother, Saied al-Ghamdi, an Islamic scholar living in self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom, expressed in a tweet on August 24 that the ruling against Mohammed was retaliation for failed attempts to get Saied to return to Saudi Arabia.158 His tweet received many replies expressing support and sympathy, but also received negative replies calling him a liar and condemning the death sentence for his brother.

The sentencing sparked an outcry from regional and international rights groups criticizing the extreme nature of the sentencing. A thread posted on September 6, 2023, to Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Arabic-language X account regarding Ghamdi’s death sentence received many negative replies about Ghamdi, calling him a terrorist and accusing HRW of being a biased organization that spreads false information.159

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159 هيومن رايتس ووتش @hrw_ar, “في #السعودية، وصل القمع إلى درجة أن مجرد تغريدات سلمية تعبّر عن رأي لا يعجب الحكومة تؤدي إلى حكم بالإعدام,” Twitter, September 2023, 6:51 p.m., https://twitter.com/hrw_ar/status/169507064556106122; مسؤول بنسخته، وورابنا وموجنا نسلمها إلى الله طول جهادنا وفرادها في حظوظه، وهربنا منكم #عشرة،” Twitter, August 10:23, 2023, 24 p.m., https://twitter.com/mrshd59196/status/169508662016366060; سلطان بن مرشد، “كل اللي تقولوا بغريباً وسعيدين للحربة،” Twitter, August 1:55, 2023, 25 p.m., https://twitter.com/mrshd59196/status/169507064556106122;
Several verified X accounts with large followings attacked Ghamdi by claiming he supported and associated with terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. The posts also expressed support for Saudi Arabia providing safety and stability to citizens and combating crimes.

Ghamdi’s death sentence, which is open to appeal, is worrisome and raises fears that citizens can be executed in Saudi Arabia for their speech online. Saudi Arabia holds one of the worst rates of death sentences and executions in the region, with more than one thousand death sentences issued since King Salman came to power in 2015. In 2022 alone, Saudi Arabia executed 196 people, eighty-one of whom were executed in a single day.

Charges under the cybercrime and counterterrorism laws associated with attempts to destabilize the state and publish false information directed at Shehab, Otaibi, Ghamdi, and many others demonstrate Saudi authorities’ ongoing efforts...
to weaponize legislation to curtail dissent and limit speech critical of the kingdom and its government. Moreover, targeting citizens for using social media to voice their opinions and criticism of the Saudi government and its actions reflects the ongoing systematic effort to silence criticism.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DIGITAL RIGHTS ABUSES

Cybercrime, media, and counterterrorism laws are systematically weaponized by repressive regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to arbitrarily harass, target, and prosecute activists and human rights defenders. This, in turn, creates a chilling effect that curtails freedom of speech online and has drastic consequences on human rights and freedom of expression for citizens in the two countries. Additionally, weaponizing such laws to serve the interests of authoritarian regimes can undermine their intended purpose and steadily erode public trust in the justice system. The case studies highlighted above demonstrate how even seemingly apolitical speech online can trigger not just legal action by these repressive regimes, but also malicious online attacks and smear campaigns.

By prosecuting individuals and sentencing them to harsh and lengthy prison sentences—or even executions, as is the case in Saudi Arabia—these authoritarian regimes attempt to make an example of prosecuted individuals to deter others from criticizing the government and political leaders. Online attacks and smear campaigns documented in this report against individuals targeted with weaponized legislation reflect that malicious online attacks can be motivated and emboldened by the governments’ actions.

Crackdowns against media and human rights defenders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have regularly drawn condemnation from international rights groups and Western allies. Yet, despite diplomatic efforts from Western allies to hold these regimes accountable for their human rights violations, there has been no significant improvement in either country. Nevertheless, as both countries continue to use oppressive laws to control online expression, and even propose new laws focused on digital communication that can be similarly weaponized, it is
critical that Egypt and Saudi Arabia's international partners continue to pressure the two governments.\textsuperscript{164} Partners should insist on protecting the flow of information online, and echo calls by rights groups to review and reform such repressive laws and respect freedom of expression.\textsuperscript{165} This is particularly important as Saudi Arabia prepares to host the 2024 Internet Governance forum in December 2024, despite objections from rights groups.\textsuperscript{166}

Moreover, as Egypt and Saudi Arabia continue to invest in new technologies and digital tools that allow them to monitor online activity and surveil dissidents, the risks facing journalists and human rights defenders and threats to freedom of expression will continue to increase. Such tools have been instrumental in both governments' efforts to target and harass citizens—in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and abroad—over their peaceful speech.\textsuperscript{167} The use of vaguely written laws meant to protect citizens from new threats in the digital era, but instead applied to restrict their freedoms, reflects authoritarian governments' approaches to utilize technological advances to their benefit. In February 2024, the US Department of Commerce took a step forward by imposing restrictions on Canada-based computer networking company Sandvine for its role in providing tools to the Egyptian government to block websites, including Mada Masr's, and to target human rights defenders.\textsuperscript{168}

The governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia represent some of the worst offenders in the region when it comes to the systematic abuse of legislation. Both countries lack accountability measures to hold the leaders of these repressive governments responsible for the abuses of power. The lack of accountability and gross and deliberate misuse of these laws also signals an escalating pattern in the region that is not limited to these two countries, with other governments in nearby countries replicating and adopting similar laws to oppress their citizens and limit their freedom of speech online.\textsuperscript{169}


