



International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
ALQST
Ligue des droits de l'Homme (LDH)
Gulf Center for Human Rights

Press Kit

**Saudi Arabia's Dakar Rally:
A race to distract us from human rights?**



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Introduction

The Dakar Rally, an emblematic race and trophy of choice

The Dakar Rally, which will be held from 5 to 17 January 2020 in Saudi Arabia, is a sporting event like no other. Seventy television channels will broadcast the Dakar Rally in 190 countries, for 1,200 hours of programming broadcast around the world. According to the Rally, 1,900 journalists have been accredited.

The Rally, initially organised from 1978 to 2007 on the African continent, later migrated from 2009 to 2019 to South America, ending up in Saudi Arabia for five years, starting in 2020. The signed contract is believed to have reached the sum of 80 million euros over five years. The race will last a dozen days. The beauty and richness of the scenery crossed will be an essential aspect of the race, as it is during the Tour de France.

Most of the images produced, and then broadcast worldwide, will be produced by the France Télévisions television group. In April 2019, the FIDH and its member in France, the League for Human Rights (LDH) were public in their consternation at the participation of the public group in broadcasting the rally¹.

At a time when peaceful dissent is silenced in Saudi Arabia, when its human rights defenders are exiled, murdered, tortured, or put in prison, how can we imagine that the usual in-depth reports broadcast in the magazine formats of France Télévisions that usually accompany the race, will be anything other than a series of beautiful images and words about the history, geography and culture of the country, to the great satisfaction of the Kingdom's leaders?

This outpouring of images, far from being neutral, will be part of the Saudi regime's whitewashing strategy to distract people from its disastrous human rights record.

A frenzy of purchasing cultural and sporting events... to whitewash a dire human rights record?

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a major campaign to purchase and finance cultural and sporting events. Since the murder of journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi, the Kingdom has flooded the sports world with its dollars, similar to the model of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, organisers of the 2022 Football World Cup.

The Kingdom has thus hosted major events in basketball (NBA), baseball, Formula 1 and E, golf, tennis, horse racing, Italian and Spanish Super Cups, football and wrestling. On 7 December, the "boxing match of the year", known as Clash on the Dunes, between Andy Ruiz and Anthony Joshua, was held in Riyadh. In January 2020, the final of the Italian Super Cup will be held between Juventus of Turin and AC Milan.

On the cultural front, Saudi Arabia is also launching sizable projects, as a part of the "opening", real or supposed, of the regime and its ambitious Vision 2030 to modernise the country. The stated objective is to open, over the next 10 years, more than 200 public and private museums, double the

1 <https://www.fidh.org/fr/regions/maghreb-moyen-orient/arabie-saoudite-1721/rallye-dakar-en-arabie-saoudite-france-televvisions-doit-denoncer-un>

number of archaeological sites that can be visited, have nearly 2,000 cinemas, and increase the number of prestigious cultural events. According to officials, thousands of concerts and festivals are already taking place yearly. While international stars are now flocking to the Saudi Kingdom (50 Cent; Janet Jackson), this strategy of cultural openness may prove to be a double-edged sword, as when the cancellation of Nicki Minaj's concert was announced, in "support of women's rights, the LGBTQ community and freedom of expression".

France, a strategic, diplomatic and military partner, is a prime target in this event purchasing strategy.

In recent years, the Kingdom has purchased the costly services of several major French communications agencies (Publicis, Havas, Image 7) to improve its image and ensure that its positions are relayed in the French media. It has then multiplied its funding and partnerships with prestigious institutions, generally public ones, including the Paris Opera (a project to create a national orchestra and an opera in Jeddah), the Cannes Film Festival, the Palais de Tokyo, FEMIS, INA, etc...

Several projects are being studied around the Nabatean city of Al-Ula since Riyadh turned the ancient city into a diplomatic and cultural resource, even before it became a source of tourist income. Al-Ula is currently the subject of a vast exhibition at the Arab World Institute, a cultural institute that hosted the press conference in France for the Dakar Rally on 20 November.

What is this reality that the Saudi authorities want to make us forget, for which they buy sporting and cultural events at great expense, and which will be forbidden to journalists who come to cover the Dakar Rally?

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1. INTERNAL SITUATION

1.1. Grave human rights violations

Torture and ill-treatment in detention, with numerous allegations of the use of torture to extract false confessions, and no credible investigation or accountability for perpetrators:

* At least six of the [women human rights defenders](#) arrested in 2018, including Samar Badawi, Shadan al-Onezi, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Loujain al-Hathloul, and Nouf al-Dosari, and male activist Mohammed al-Bajadi, were subjected to brutal torture, including electric shocks, beatings, sexual assault and severe psychological torture.

* Many of the people detained in the Ritz Carlton hotel in November 2017 were subjected to coercive interrogation, incommunicado detention and often brutal [physical torture](#).

* Prisoners of conscience are commonly ill-treated, including being placed in solitary confinement, given narcotics, and denied family contact and visits.

* There is routine brutality toward prisoners and detainees by junior security and prison officers, including beatings and maltreatment.

Use of the [death penalty](#):

* Saudi Arabia retains its position as one of the world's leading executioners - with utmost impunity, executing approximately 150 people in 2018 and at least 180 in 2019.

* On 23 April 2019, 37 individuals, most of them from the minority Shia community, were put to death in the country's largest mass execution since 2 January 2016, when 47 were executed.

* The Public Prosecution is currently calling for the death penalty for clerics and scholars including Salman al-Odeh, Awad al-Qarni, Ali al-Omri, and Hassan al-Maliki.

* The Public Prosecutor called for the death penalty for [Israa al-Ghomgham](#), an activist arrested in 2015 with her husband and three others, marking the first time a woman could be put to death for protesting. She no longer faces the death penalty but the four others may be sentenced to death as the trial continues.

* The new Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, promulgated in 2017, allows the death penalty to be applied for certain hazily defined "terrorist acts".

* The death penalty is often applied on the basis of "ta'zir" – at the discretion of a judge without reference to any legal text prescribing the death penalty.

* The methods of execution are barbaric: beheading, crucifixion or stoning for cases of adultery.

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances:

* There has been a rise in the practice of enforced disappearance, including of Yemeni writer and journalist [Marwan al-Muraisy](#), cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaish](#) and humanitarian worker [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), all disappeared for at least a year.

* Detainees are routinely held for more than six months without charge.

* Detainees are often denied access to a lawyer and family contact and visits.

1.2. Attacks against all forms of freedom of expression, assembly and association

Situation of journalists, human rights defenders, political opponents, writers

* Leading human rights defenders, lawyers and [journalists](#) are serving prison terms of between six and 30 years, including members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association ([ACPRA](#)) such as Mohammad al-Qahtani, Abdullah al-Hamid and Abdulkarim al-Khoder, human rights defenders [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#), Fahad al-Fahad and [Essam Koshak](#), blogger [Raif Badawi](#), journalist Alaa Brinji, cleric Mohammed al-Hudaif, and economist Essam al-Zamel.

* Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. The [UN Special Rapporteur](#) on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Dr Agnes Callamard, called it a “premeditated extrajudicial killing” for which the state of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is responsible. The Saudi authorities still have not accepted calls to comply with the independent UN-led investigation into the extrajudicial killing of Khashoggi. On 23 December 2019, five people were sentenced to death for the murder, and three were handed prison sentences.

* In November 2019, the Saudi government [arrested 10 individuals](#), seven of whom are journalists and bloggers. Noticeably, many of those targeted are intellectuals and some have previously been working in collaboration with the government.

Situation of women human rights defenders

* [Leading women human rights defenders](#) were arrested between May and July 2018, including Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sadah; they have faced months of detention, being subjected to torture, solitary confinement and ill-treatment, and several are now facing trial on charges relating to their human rights activism.

* At least 14 more [men and women, including writers, a lawyer, a lecturer, and activists](#), were arrested in March and April 2019 in connection with their support or links to the women human rights defenders detained since May 2018.

1.3. National legal framework established inequalities and are used to crush dissent

Repressive laws used to harass, prosecute, and convict anyone peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association or assembly

* The [Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing](#), promulgated in 2017 and replacing the previous law of 2014, defines terrorism so broadly as to criminalise a wide spectrum of peaceful activism.

* The Law on Associations and Foundations (2015) gives the authorities tight control over civil society.

* The Anti-Cybercrime Law (2007) criminalises freedom of expression online.

* The Press and Publications Law (2000) severely limits press freedom.

* Royal decrees define criticism of religion or official figures as acts of terror worthy of legal punishment, with atheism punishable by death.

* The judiciary lacks independence, and the Specialised Criminal Court, set up in 2008 to hear terrorism cases, is regularly used to prosecute human rights defenders and dissidents under the counter-terrorism law

* This consistent use of repressive laws to crush dissent has been highlighted by the former [Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights](#), Ben Emmerson was invited to conduct a visit to Saudi Arabia from 30 April to 4 May 2017 and has initially raised many concerns, particularly about the “use of the 2014 counter-terrorism law and other national security provisions against human rights defenders, writers, bloggers, journalists and other peaceful critics.”

The male guardianship system establishing women as life-long minors

* There are [numerous laws and practices](#) that discriminate against women and fail to provide them with adequate protection against violence.

* The [male guardianship system](#) prevents women from fully enjoying their basic human rights: they need permission from a male guardian to work, travel, study, marry or even access health care. In August 2019, women were finally permitted to travel without consent of a male guardian, and the ban on women driving was lifted only in June 2018.

* However, there is the legal practice of accepting cases of "disobedience" or absence from homes by male guardians, which are used to restrict women's access to resources or choices, even in cases where women are allowed by the state, for example, to travel or rent an apartment.

* There are weak protective measures for individuals and women in particular who express non-conforming religious beliefs or sexual identity, that lead them to seek asylum in other countries to be protected.

* In 2019, there have been some well-publicised cases of women fleeing the country and their families, such as Rahaf Mohammed and the al-Subaie sisters, as the number of asylum seekers from Saudi Arabia has tripled, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Discrimination against minorities, migrant workers and stateless persons

* Shia religious rituals are banned and there is a prevalence of anti-Shia rhetoric in the education system, media and religious sermons.

* The kafala system that makes millions of migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation.

* Saudi Arabia does not take in refugees as refugees but rather mostly as migrants.

* There are large numbers of stateless persons (Bidoon), who enjoy none of their basic rights, including generally being unable to work, access medical treatment and register marriages.

2. EXTERNAL SITUATION

2.1. Role of KSA in the Yemen war

Saudi Arabia is also a destabilizing actor at the regional level, notably through its leadership role in the coalition of Arab countries which has been bombing [Yemen](#) since 2015, fueling [the world's largest humanitarian disaster, according to the UN](#). The coalition has contributed to the [death toll of over 100,000](#) people as a result of the conflict, in addition to an almost equal number of people who have died of famine or illness as a result of the humanitarian crisis caused by the blockade.

Arms sales to Saudi Arabia from France

* French military weapons and equipment are being used in Yemen, in the service of a coalition headed by Saudi Arabia that perpetuates war crimes.

* Published in April 2018, the [joint report](#) of the Observatory of Armaments (Obsarm) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) provides several "presence indicators" (photos published on specialized Twitter accounts, extracts from specialized documentation) of French equipment: Leclerc tanks sold in the United Arab Emirates in the 1990s that were reportedly used during the "Battle of Aden"; 4 x 4 tanks sold in 2016 to Saudi special units and deployed in the field; use of Caesar (Nexter) guns; Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft, etc.

* The transfer of this weaponry to Saudi Arabia and the Coalition forces has been confirmed by the Sipri database, the specialized press and our industrial sources.

* Other NGO reports have confirmed the [demonstrated used of French arms in Yemen and are now trying to push the International Criminal Court \(ICC\) to open investigations](#) on this issue.

2.2. International role weakening the global system of human rights

* Saudi Arabia is also an important destabilising actor at the global level, organising from within - and with a great deal of international funding - to undermine the UN human rights system.

* Saudi Arabia has repeatedly been elected as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, despite its poor human rights record. Despite the bombing of Yemen, Saudi Arabia was re-elected to the Council in 2016. In March 2019, Saudi Arabia was rebuked at the Council for the first time by 36 other nations, who called for a full investigation into the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the release of women human rights defenders. Generally speaking, the lack of meaningful international mechanisms to intervene and combat human rights abuses has contributed to the increased scale and brutality of the system in Saudi Arabia in recent years.

* In 2016, Saudi Arabia was briefly listed in report about children's rights violations in 2016 because the Saudi-led coalition bombing was the leading cause of children's deaths and injuries in Yemen. Saudi Arabia then [pressured](#) the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to remove it from the list or they would halt funding to the UN.

* In a [report](#) published in 2017, FIDH has evidenced that the fight against terrorism has become the centerpiece of the Kingdom's foreign policy engagements questioning the Kingdom's genuine desire to fight against terrorism. This was the focus of the 2017 Riyadh Summit where Saudi Arabia and the United States' Trump Administration announced the creation of a joint ["Terrorist Financing Targeting Center"](#) and opened, along with Egypt, the Kingdom's new

“[Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology](#),” served by the new UN Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FIDH and its member organisations ALQST in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and in France, the League for Human Rights make the following recommendations:

Urgent appeal to the Dakar community (Dakar Rally organisers, [participants](#), and official broadcasters)

- To urge Saudi authorities to drop all charges against Saudi human rights defenders and immediately release those detained.
- To help increase awareness and show solidarity by wearing a *#FreeSaudiHeroes* pink armband during the event.
- For Official Dakar Rally voices and drivers - both male and female – to raise their voices to pressure Saudi authorities to act.
- For fans of the Rally using the hashtag *#StandWithSaudiHeroes*, to follow campaign developments online, and reach out to [competitors](#) representing your home country to participate.

Urgent appeals to the international community

- For the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution that establishes a monitoring mechanism over the human rights situation in the country.
- For States to end surveillance technologies and arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Actions required of the Saudi authorities

- Immediately and unconditionally release all individuals, including women human rights defenders, detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms, and to drop all charges against them.
- Cooperate with the independent UN-led inquiry into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and bring to justice those responsible for masterminding the murder.
- Establish a moratorium on the use of the death penalty with the aim of working towards its abolition.
- Immediately abolish the male guardianship system, repeal laws and end practices that discriminate against women