**REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS**
**FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION**

Reporters Without Borders
Contact : Soazig Dollet
Head of the Maghreb and Middle East Desk
Tel : (33) 1 44 83 84 78
E-mail : moyen-orient@rsf.org

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**Contribution by Reporters Without Borders, an NGO with special consultative status,
about freedom of information in Saudi Arabia**

Maintaining the al-Saud royal family at the head of the state and upholding the supremacy of Wahhabi ideology is achieved by relentless control over news and information. The struggle against terrorism and regional political unrest are still used as a pretext to restrict basic freedoms.

Tentative reforms introduced in 2005, immediately after King Abdallah Ibn Abdulaziz al-Saud came to the throne, were accompanied by a relative slackening in media censorship. However pressure on the kingdom's journalists is still at a very high level and the tug of self-censorship particularly strong. Even though the publications law allows for imprisonment of journalists it is rare for any of them to end up behind bars. Although a journalists' union has been in existence since 2003, several of them have been forced out of jobs after writing articles seen as overly critical of the government. Since the kingdom has no written criminal code, the security forces and courts rely on vague and somewhat elastic concepts of criminal legislation.

Moreover any easing of censorship is more often the result of clashes at the highest political level between reformists and conservatives with their different social agendas than of any struggle for greater freedom on the part of Saudi journalists. Foreign journalists visiting the country are systematically accompanied by official minders who report on the content of their work.

Since 2011, the regime has been doing everything possible to dissuade the population from supporting the arab revolutionary movement. Its rigid opposition to the simmering unrest on the Web caused it to tighten its Internet stranglehold even more to stifle all political and social protests.

**Harsh censorship**

Intolerant of criticism, in the last few years the government has been enforcing harsh censorship through the use of extended filtering bolstered by repressive legislation and widespread online surveillance (see the Saudi Arabia chapter of the 2011 "Enemies of the Internet" report).

The authorities in March 2007 set up a special government commission to filter the Internet to "protect Saudi society" from "terrorism", "fraud", "pornography", "defamation" or "violation of religious values". More than 400,000 websites were officially blocked as a result. Bloggers voicing any criticism are immediately accused of offending morality – a highly dissuasive policy in a country that arrests the authors of "offensive content or violating the principles of the Islamic religion and social norms". Within this framework, steps were taken at the start of 2008 to make providers or distributors of computer equipment liable under the law for any breach of these rules. This means that a cybercafé manager can be sent to jail for any article posted on its premises violating these "moral values".

The authorities resorted to blocking websites created in the aftermath of the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt early 2011 which relay the protestors' demands, such as Dawlaty.info and Saudireform.com. An online petition was circulated to openly call for the King to initiate political reform. Despite the censorship, it was signed by several hundred people – activists, writers and academics – and posted on Twitter, thanks to the hashtag #saudimataleb.

The authorities intensified their crackdown on forums and social networks, anticipating demonstrations held in several of the Kingdom's cities on 11 March 2011, redubbed the "Day of Rage." Facebook's "Revolutionary Nostalgia" page, which echoes the calls for reform, was added to the long list of URLs rendered inaccessible in the country. NGO Amnesty International's website was blocked after publication of an anti-terrorist draft law aimed at repressing even more severely criticisms of the royal family.

**Attempt to impose a blackout on protests in eastern Saudi Arabia**

The authorities tried to impose a total media blackout on protests in the governorate of Al-Qatif in eastern Saudi Arabia, which has a majority Shiite population, raising the spectre of religious unrest to justify the repression. Several demonstrators were shot and killed. Even foreign journalists with visas were stopped and questioned while covering protests in the town of Hofuf, also in the eastern part of the country. It was netizens – sometimes at the risk of life – who circulated news about these events online. Bloggers **Mustafa Al-Mubarak** and **Hussein Al-Hashim**, known for their Web-based activities, were arrested in April 2011 and their computers confiscated. They were later released. However, writer **Nazir Al-Majid**, who in April had published an article entitled "I protest, therefore I am a human being" on the news website rasid.com, spent a year in solitary confinement before being released on 26th July 2012. **Fadil Al-Manasef** and **Hussein Al-Youssef** are still detained.

**Avoid any risk of "social destabilisation"**

Special measures have been taken to avoid any risk of "social destabilisation" in a troubled regional conjuncture, despite promises made by the King in March 2011 to grant billions of dollars in subsidies to improve the Saudis' working and housing conditions, as well as their health coverage. Three online TV journalists were arrested in October 2011 and held for several days after the "Malub Aleyna" show broadcast a report on the living conditions of the poorest inhabitants of the Saudi capital. The programme's online video has been viewed over 500,000 times. Radio Nederland's Internet website was blocked after it featured an article on the poor treatment of immigrants in Saudi Arabia.

Another evidence of Saudi Arabia's implacable intolerance of freedom of expression : Hamza Kashgari, a young journalist, was arrested after expressing his personal views online. He became the subject of a controversy after he was accused of insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad in three short messages published through the Twitter social networking service. King Abdullah ordered that Kashgari be arrested "for crossing red lines and denigrating religious beliefs in God and His Prophet". Kashgari left Saudi Arabia, trying to seek political asylum in New Zealand. On February 12, 2012, he was extradited from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, back to Saudi Arabia and a Malaysian High Court injunction against his extradition was issued.

**Saudi Arabia is one of the 10 countries that Reporters Without Borders has identified as "Enemies of the Internet". And King Abdallah Ibn Al-Saud is one the 41 predators of Press Freedom.**


**Recommendations by Reporters Without Borders**

- Reporters Without Borders urges the authorities to give "supralegal" force to the international conventions that have been ratified by Saudi Arabia.
- The Saudi constitution, which is based on the Koran and the Sunnah, should guarantee freedom of expression, not just as a fundamental right but also as the pillar of other rights. The leading principles concerning the media – the guaranteeing of freedom of expression and information, right of access to information, media pluralism and media independence – should be enshrined in the constitution.
- All references to the criminalization of blasphemy should be eliminated from laws and judicial practices.
- All prisoners of conscience should be released.
- The authorities must dispense with all legislative and technical mechanisms for Internet surveillance, including:
* The prior registration of websites with the Ministry of Culture and Information
* Disproportionate penalties (prison sentences and exorbitant fines) for contraventions.