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Global indifference to human rights violations in MENA fuelling atrocities and impunity

- *Report reviews human rights in 19 MENA states during 2018*
- *International arms trade and lucrative business deals fuel cycle of abuse*
- *Lack of accountability drives widespread repression and civilian suffering*
- *Small advances on women's rights and efforts to tackle past abuses due to civil society campaigns*

The international community's chilling complacency towards wide-scale human rights violations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has emboldened governments to commit appalling violations during 2018 by giving them the sense that they need never fear facing justice, said Amnesty International as it published a review of human rights in the region last year.

The report *Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: A review of 2018* describes how authorities across the region have unashamedly persisted with ruthless campaigns of repression in order to crush dissent, cracking down on protesters, civil society and political opponents, often with tacit support from powerful allies.

Jamal Khashoggi's shocking killing in October 2018 sparked an unprecedented global outcry, spurring a Saudi Arabian investigation and even prompting rare action from states such as Denmark and Finland to suspend the supply of arms to Saudi Arabia. However, key allies of the Kingdom, including the USA, UK and France, have taken no such action and, as a whole, the international community has failed to meet [demands by human rights organizations for an independent UN investigation](#) capable of delivering justice.

"It took Jamal Khashoggi's cold-blooded murder inside a consulate to prompt a handful of more responsible states to suspend arms transfers to a country that has been leading a coalition responsible for war crimes and has helped create a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen. Yet even the global outcry over the Khashoggi case has not been followed by concrete action to ensure those responsible for his murder are brought to justice," said Heba Morayef, Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“Across MENA throughout 2018 thousands of dissidents and peaceful critics have been victims of shameless government violations on a shocking scale, amid deafening silence from the international community.”

Amnesty International’s report reveals that the crackdown on dissent and civil society intensified significantly in Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia during 2018. These three states are emblematic of the inadequacy of the international response to rampant government violations.

In Iran, a [wave of mass protests](#) was violently suppressed, with [thousands arrested](#) and detained throughout the year. However, the response from the European Union, which has an ongoing human rights dialogue with the country, was muted.

During 2018 Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway suspended arms sales to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. In contrast, the USA, UK and France are among states that have continued to export weapons that have enabled the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to target civilians, schools and hospitals [during the conflict in Yemen](#) in violation of international law. On a domestic level, Saudi Arabia continued its clampdown on civil society activists and [women human rights defenders were detained and tortured in custody](#).

States including France and the USA have also continued [to supply Egypt with weapons used for internal repression](#) amid a widespread crackdown on human rights. Today Egypt has become a [more dangerous place for peaceful critics than at any other time in the country’s recent history](#).

The USA has also committed to provide Israel with US\$38 billion in military aid over the next 10 years despite the impunity that Israeli forces enjoy and the vast number of human rights violations they continue to commit in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces killed at least 180 Palestinians last year, including 35 children, [during protests for the right to return of refugees](#), according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. While a UN Human Rights Council commission of inquiry was set up to look into the killings, Israel has refused to co-operate with the inquiry and has faced little to no pressure to do so.

“Time and again allies of governments in the region have put lucrative business deals, security co-operation or billions of dollars’ worth of arms sales before human rights, fuelling abuses and creating a climate where MENA governments feel ‘untouchable’ and above the law,” said Philip Luther, Research and Advocacy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“It’s time the world followed in the footsteps of states such as Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway, which have announced suspensions of

arms sales to Saudi Arabia, sending a clear message that flouting human rights has clear consequences.”

Amnesty International is calling on all states to immediately suspend the sale or transfer of arms to all the parties to the conflict in Yemen, on the one hand, and to Israel, on the other, until there is no longer a substantial risk that such equipment could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international human rights or humanitarian law. The organization is also urging all states to give greater support to international mechanisms aimed at securing justice for victims, such as the UN inquiries into the Gaza killings, and into violations in Yemen and Syria, as well the International Criminal Court.

Unbridled repression of dissent

The vacuum of accountability throughout the region has meant that authorities in MENA have had free rein to imprison peaceful critics, restrict the activities of civil society or use arbitrary arrest, detention and excessive use of force against protesters demanding their rights.

In Iran, 2018 was [designated by Amnesty International as a “year of shame”](#), during which the authorities arrested more than 7,000 protesters, students, journalists, environmental activists, workers and human rights defenders, many arbitrarily. Women’s rights defenders [protesting against the discriminatory and abusive practice of forced hijab \(veiling\)](#) were among those who paid a heavy price for their peaceful activism.

In Saudi Arabia, authorities arrested and prosecuted government critics, academics and human rights defenders. In a wave of arrests in May 2018 at least eight women human rights defenders who had campaigned against the ban on women drivers and the guardianship system were detained without charge. Virtually all human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia are now behind bars or have been forced to flee the country.

In Egypt, authorities intensified their [crackdown on dissent in the run-up to the presidential elections](#). They arrested at least 113 people solely [for peacefully expressing critical opinions](#); and enacted new laws to further silence independent media. Two women were arrested for speaking out against sexual harassment on Facebook. One of them, Amal Fathy, had a [two-year prison sentence against her upheld](#).

In Iraq security forces shot beat and arrested protesters. In Morocco dozens were sentenced to lengthy prison sentences for participating in protests.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain prominent activists [Ahmed](#)

[Mansoor](#) and [Nabeel Rajab](#) were punished with heavy prison terms of 10 and five years respectively for their social media posts.

In Algeria activists and [bloggers](#) came under fire for comments critical of the government posted on Facebook.

Jordanian, Lebanese and Palestinian authorities also arbitrarily detained activists and others for voicing criticism of the authorities or peacefully taking part in demonstrations.

“Across MENA with virtually no exceptions governments have displayed a shocking intolerance for the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly,” said Heba Morayef.

“Protesters who took to the streets to defy oppression and peaceful critics who dared to speak out have paid a heavy price. Some are facing years behind bars simply for expressing their opinions as governments impose ludicrously harsh sentences to intimidate activists into silence.”

Civilian suffering in armed conflict

The international community’s continued supply of arms to MENA governments and their repeated failure to push for accountability for war crimes and other violations of international law has had devastating and far-reaching consequences.

In Libya, Syria and Yemen, war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law continued to be committed in 2018. Even as armed hostilities decreased in Iraq and Syria the levels of civilian suffering remained high.

[Israel’s military occupation](#) continued to inflict suffering on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Its policies of expanding illegal settlements and its relentless blockade on Gaza are grave violations of international law.

In [Syria](#), government forces continued to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity, while Russia and China have helped obstruct accountability for these crimes.

Amnesty International’s research has also revealed how hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands injured by the US-led coalition forces during its [Raqqa offensive](#) to oust the Islamic State armed group, including in attacks that violated international humanitarian law. In both Syria and Iraq coalition forces have been slow to acknowledge and explain civilian deaths caused during their operations.

In Yemen, while some European countries have suspended arms transfers to coalition members Saudi Arabia and the UAE, other countries, including the USA,

UK and France, have continued to supply billions of dollars' worth of military equipment, some of which have been used to commit violations of international humanitarian law during the conflict.

In Libya, the international community's failure to push for [effective accountability mechanisms in forums such as the UN Human Rights Council](#) has emboldened parties to the conflict to continue to commit abuses with complete disregard for international law.

“For too long the lack of international pressure to ensure that warring parties committing war crimes and other violations of international law are held to account has allowed perpetrators of atrocities across MENA to escape unpunished. Accountability is essential – not only to secure justice for victims of these crimes, but to help prevent an endless cycle of violations and yet more victims,” said Philip Luther.

Glimmers of hope for human rights

Amidst the widespread repression and violations that marked 2018, there were some limited improvements for the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people.

Across the Maghreb laws including provisions to combat violence against women came into effect and the State of Palestine repealed a provision that allowed suspected rapists to escape prosecution by marrying their victim, following in the footsteps of a number of other MENA states.

In Saudi Arabia authorities [finally lifted a ban on women drivers](#) – even as they imprisoned women human rights defenders who had campaigned for this very right.

While same-sex sexual relations remain criminalized across the region, there were two small victories for LGBTI rights in countries where there has been strong civil society mobilization on the issue: in Tunisia, where a draft law was submitted to parliament decriminalizing same-sex sexual relations, and in Lebanon, where a court ruled same-sex consensual sex was not a criminal offence.

In a region dominated by entrenched impunity these two countries also took steps towards accountability for past violations. In Lebanon, [parliament passed a law creating a commission to investigate thousands of enforced disappearances](#) during the civil war after years of campaigning by Lebanese civil society. In Tunisia, the [Truth and Dignity Commission overcame](#) repeated attempts by the authorities to [hamper](#) its work.

“Against a backdrop of overwhelming repression some governments have taken small steps forward. These improvements are a tribute to courageous human rights defenders across MENA and serve as a reminder to those who regularly risk their freedom to stand up against tyranny and speak truth to power that they are planting true seeds of change for the years to come,” said Heba Morayef.

For more information, embargoed copy of the report or to arrange an interview please contact:

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