

# OPERATION DECISIVE STORM STRIKES FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN YEMEN & THE GULF



# **Operation Decisive Storm Strikes Freedom of Expression in Yemen & the Gulf**

## **Introduction**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 500 days have passed since the beginning of a military intervention into Yemen launched by Saudi Arabia alongside a nine-member coalition of allied countries, known as "Operation Decisive Storm" against the forces of Abdul Malik al-Houthi and those loyal to former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

500 days since the beginning of military operations, after thousands of victims fell, we are entitled to wonder about the importance, usefulness and impact of such operations on democracy and human rights in the Arab region in general and in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in particular.

On March 26, 2015, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz ordered the beginning of "Operation Decisive Storm" under the pretext of supporting legitimacy and standing against the coup that took place on September 21, 2014, against President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who took power thanks to the GCC Initiative of 2012.

The SPA, the Saudi state news agency, announced the participation of Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, Egypt and Pakistan, along with the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar), with the exception of Oman. The White House issued a statement in conjunction with the beginning of the air strikes in Yemen, in which President Barack Obama has authorized the provision of intelligence-sharing and logistical support for military operations in Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

Operation "Decisive Storm" came after 4 years from the beginning of the revolution in Yemen, as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) decided to put an end to the revolutionary movement by hard power, after failing to control it by soft power.

The revolutionary movement in Yemen began in January 2011, against the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is supported by the GCC. The young protesters staged the first demonstrations in squares on February 11, 2011, to mark the beginning of the Yemeni Revolution of February 11. The protests continued demanding the departure of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who decided to call for a referendum to stay in power amid an ongoing conflict between the forces of the revolution; especially the young people on one side, and the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who enjoyed Saudi support at

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<sup>1</sup> - <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2015/03/26/saudi-usa-houthi-airstrikes>

An article on CNN website "Who's in Saudi Arabia's anti-Houthi coalition? & What's behind the position of the US? - Published on 26 March, 2015 - Last visit on July 2016.

that time. In the squares of change in several Yemeni cities, after the delays of Saleh and the persistence of the youth of the revolution on his departure, Saleh signed the Gulf initiative on November 23, 2011. The initiative offers him immunity from prosecution, he is to transfer power to his deputy Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and he is to remain honorary president for a period of ninety days. A national unity government was formed, in February 25, 2012, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (with the approval of most political forces in the parliament) came to power, through an election in which he did not have any opponents.

Thanks to the GCC initiative, "Saleh" was able to stay in Yemen as head of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party. He was also able to form new alliances with the rebels, his "former enemies," against President Hadi Mansour. On 21 September 2014, Houthi rebels and Saleh's followers managed to take control of the capital Sanaa, then expanded to the south and east after long clashes with armed resistance from the tribes loyal to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and political opposition to the authority of Houthi and Salafi groups.

The Saudi-led coalition launched thousands of air strikes, hitting some targets and missing others, hitting homes, factories and media and press institutions in a number of Yemeni provinces. 19 out of Yemen's twenty-two governorates faced severe food insecurity. The coalition made it on the United Nations blacklist of states and armed groups that committed grave violations against children in the United Nations annual report on Children and Armed Conflict of 2015.

Political analysts disagree among themselves about the nature of the war launched by Saudi Arabia and its allies, some analysts see that Operation Decisive Storm brought out in the open the war between Shiites and Sunnis. For example, on 30 March, 2015, Dotmasr website published an article "[Confrontation| Decisive Storm Sparks War among The Shiites and Salafists in Egypt](#)", While others see, including "Marc Lynch," Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University that "the sectarian narrative radically inflates both the cohesion of the Sunni side of the conflict and the long power struggle with Iran, it is best understood as a justification for internal repression and regional powers maneuvers rather than as an explanation for the behavior of Middle Eastern regimes." <sup>2</sup>.

Apart from the political analysis of the war, its motives and its impact on the situation in the Arab region, and apart from the polarization attempts that that have been going on in full swing in the Gulf region, these military operations have been accompanied by a

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<sup>2</sup> - <http://thenewkhalij.org/ar/node/12939>

A news article entitles: "Washington Post": Kuwait is threatened by tyranny and authoritarianism... No fear of sectarian tensions. Published on 16 April, 2015 - Last visit 19 July, 2016.

wide crackdown against critical voices of the war, whether in Yemen or in the countries taking part in military operations. It varied in intensity from one country to the other, it was also accompanied by campaigns of fueling sectarian and religious feelings in order to crackdown on political opposition, human rights defenders and the Shiite sect of the in the Gulf countries, and for cracking down against journalists who oppose the control of Houthis and the followers of Saleh in Yemen.

This study attempts to monitor and document the impact of the military operations in Yemen on freedom of expression and belief in the countries that took part in military operations and in particular in (Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates) through monitoring and documentation of some of the victims of violations of freedom of expression against journalists, online activists, human rights defenders, religious preachers, artists and political opponents, who have been arrested or interrogated in these countries against the background of declaring their opinion towards the war.

## **Study Plan**

### **The questions we are trying to answer in this study are:**

Did the authorities in Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies in the war allow the citizens to express their views on the war?

Did the Gulf countries commit violations against those who hold opposing views about the war? What are these violations?

How did Houthis and the followers of ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh deal with freedom of expression after seizing power in Yemen?

## **Space**

The study mainly covers the Gulf countries involved in "Operation Decisive Storm" (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates).

## **The process**

A- Collecting data, news and reports on the war in Yemen and on freedom of expression issues in the countries that took part in the war: (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) mainly from the website of The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), and other credible websites.

B- Defining the regime in Saudi Arabia as it is the country which leads the coalition, and has the greatest influence in the Gulf region.

C- Defining the war in Yemen and the countries that joined the Saudi-led coalition and the consequences of such a war.

D- Showing cases of violations of freedom of expression and belief that resulted from refusing the war, including the name of the victim, the date in which the violation took place, the type of the violation and the country in which the violation took place.

E- The impact of the war in Yemen on relations between the Gulf countries on one hand and Iran and Lebanon on the other.

## **Saudi Arabia**

The decision to begin "Operation Decisive Storm" was made in KSA without any reference to the citizens through any democratic process to find out about their views on the war in which their children are fighting. Saudi Arabia does not know political parties or independent centers for studies and public opinion polls, and does not know free press nor any press critical of the regime's performance or the executive decisions. A referendum to know the opinion of the citizens in this war was not held.

We did not document any violations against freedom of expression directly linked operation "Decisive Storm" in Saudi Arabia during the period covered by the study, and there was no opinion opposed to the military operations, due to several reasons, including:

**First -** The sharp sectarian polarization between Shia and Sunni, giving operation Decisive Storm a sectarian dimension inside KSA.

**Second -** The violent repression against political opposition, human rights defenders and online activists, as the Saudi authorities tightened their grip on the means of social communication, and chased relentlessly whoever criticizes the political or social conditions. A source at the Saudi Ministry of Justice confirmed that the death penalty is the most severe of punitive penalties against those who spread sedition inciting rumors through the means of social communication, including (Twitter) to inflame public opinion and cause confusion among society. He also made reference to the other punitive penalties (penalties decided by the ruler) such as banning the one who spread the rumor from using social media (Twitter), for example, as an alternative to prison or house arrest, in addition to imposing travel bans and physically or financially restricting freedom. He pointed out that such punitive sanctions exist in Islamic fiqh (Islamic law).<sup>3</sup>

And as much as the Saudi authorities in particular and the authorities in the Gulf countries in general, want to get the latest means of communication and information, their huge fear of its political impact is the main course to consider. The Saudi Communication and Information Technology Authority must obtain finger prints to issue SIM cards, it shut down as as many means social communication means as it could, and re-blocked "WhatsApp" voice calls feature only a few hours after it was released on February 6, 2016 morning.

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<sup>3</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=152134>

**Third** - Threatening the Shiite community and accusing them of treason with Iran, made the Shiite sect refrain from making any reaction to operation "Decisive Storm". Washington Post described the fear of the Saudi Shiites of the legitimacy "Decisive Storm" would give for the attacks against them in KSA. <sup>4</sup>

"Decisive Storm" cast its shadow over the Gulf countries, as the embassies of Saudi Arabia filed many lawsuits against those who oppose the war in the Gulf countries, prosecuting many writers, intellectuals, human rights defenders and online activists on charges of "Insulting Saudi Arabia".

At the level of Saudi Arabia's relations with neighboring countries, it halted the Saudi aid to arm the Lebanese army by the French Republic, which is estimated at three billion US dollars, and suspended the remainder of the aid estimated at one billion US dollars which was allocated to the Lebanese internal security, because of the Lebanese position which is not in line with that of KSA, as the decision to suspend aid came as a response to Beirut's failure to condemn the attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Iran by angry protesters protesting against the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, and the abstention of the Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil from voting on a statement by the League of Arab States condemning the attack on the embassy, because the statement mentioned the Lebanese Hezbollah and accused it of terrorism. Saudi Arabia has also cut ties with Iran after this incident. <sup>5</sup>

**Moreover**, since November 19, 2015, the satellite company "Arabsat" decided to stop hiring broadcast services from the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications, and moved to Amman the Jordanian capital, because Saudi Arabia, which owns 36% of the shares, was opposed to the broadcasting of "Al-Mayadeen" TV channel, as it airs material opposed to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries from its offices in Beirut. On December 4, 2015, the company stopped broadcasting "Al-Manar" TV, the official TV channel for the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as "Al-Mayadeen" TV channel on the grounds that both channels launched several media attacks on Saudi Arabia with regards to operation decisive storm. <sup>6</sup>

## Yemen

The revolution of February 11, 2011, came after the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt within the Arab Spring. It called for political reform and democracy, but the absence of a

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<sup>4</sup> - <http://www.watan.com/archive5/2015/04/09/واشنطن-بوست-ترصد-تخوف-شيعة-السعودية-من-الاشنطن-بوست>

A news article entitled: Washington Post monitors the fear from reprisals of Saudi Shiites after (Decisive Storm) - Published on 9 April, 2015 - Last visit: 30 July, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> - [http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2016/02/160219\\_lebanon\\_saudi\\_aid](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2016/02/160219_lebanon_saudi_aid)

A news article entitled: KSA stops its military aid to Lebanon. Published on 9 February, 2016 - Last visit: 2 August, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=154354>

political alternative to the Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh backed by the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, and the cohesion of the Houthi forces in the conflict with Abdullah Saleh, made the revolution take some steps backwards.

Since the alliance was formed between the Houthi and Saleh, and the invasion of the capital Sanaa on September 21, 2014, they began seizing media outlets and firing journalists and media professionals who are not loyal to them. They imposed party leaders on these institutions who were not from the press community. They shut down, looted and confiscated headquarters and equipment of many media institutions, whether television, radio or newspapers. Journalists have been kidnapped, detained and threatened, and most websites were blocked.

For example, on Tuesday morning, January 6, 2015, Houthi gunmen stormed the home of the chairman "Al-Thawra" for Press, Printing and Publishing editor in chief Faisal Makram, and forced him to resign.

A day before operation Decisive Storm began, The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, which was dominated by the Houthis, warned that it will work against any media outlet that oppose its policies, and that "the measures may amount to shutting down any media outlet that foments unrest."

With the beginning operation Decisive Storm in March 26, 2015, Houthi-Saleh forces divided journalists, online activists and human rights defenders into "patriotic" or "traitor". Houthi forces launched incitement campaigns against those who work for Arab and international media outlets, and hung posters with pictures and the names of journalists charged of treason, several journalists and media professionals were detained, many of the media outlets were shut down, in order to spread a climate of fear and revenge, and have complete dominance over all the media. Many academics were also arrested and threatened to force them to stop making any comments to the media. In a televised speech on November 23, 2015, the Houthi leader incited against political opponents, saying, "The intellectuals, politicians, and media mercenaries and traitors are more dangerous to this country than the mercenary fighters on the side of the enemy," he added "The army and people committees must stand up to them firmly."

The number of violations of the right to freedom of expression during the first half of 2015, amounts to about 200 cases, involving murder, imprisonment, threats, banning media outlets, and blocking news websites. The Houthi are responsible for the largest number of violations, yet the security forces and the Saudi-led coalition are not blameless when it comes to committing violations against press freedom. Which prompted the Secretary General of the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate Marwan Damaj, to say that the situation of press freedom is "extremely serious, and unprecedented in 25 years."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> - <http://www.ifj-arabic.org/page-ifj-530.html>

## **Examples of violations against journalists, activists and media in Yemen**

### **The targeting and raiding of media outlets**

Yemeni media outlets were targeted both by the Saudi-led coalition and by the Houthi-Saleh alliance. On the evening of March 29, 2015, Brigadier General Ahmad al-Asiri, a spokesman for operation Decisive Storm said at a press conference that the channels affiliated with former President Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis are among the targets of the air strikes by the coalition forces, in an implicit reference to the "Al-Yaman Al-Youm" (Yemen today), Azal, and "Al-Maseera" channels.

On April 20, 2015, Yemen Today channel correspondent Mohammed Rajeh Shamsan was killed and cameraman Abdullah Alhakeri was wounded because of shrapnel on duty in Sanaa during an air strike on mount Attan by Decisive Storm forces.

On the other hand, on March 26, 2015, armed Houthi forces stormed the Sanaa headquarters of the newspaper "Al-Masdar" (The Source) and held journalists Sami Noman, Ahmad Wali and Murad Arifi at gun point inside the headquarters of the newspaper for hours and threatened to kill them, accusing them of treason and affiliation to ISIS "Daesh". Houthi forces seized their computers before releasing them later. On April 25, 2015, late during the night, they stormed Balqis channel's office in Sanaa and looted the equipment. On Monday, June 22, an armed group raided the headquarters of the newspaper "Al-Nas", after confiscating the last edition of the newspaper and arresting two of its distributors. During the month of June 2015, Houthi-Saleh forces raided "Al-Nas" FM and "Al-Haya" FM radio stations.

"Al-Elam Al-Ektesady" Magazine has also been looted by the Houthi militias two months after storming its headquarters and garrisoning in it during the raid on the Center for Studies and Economic Media, where they broke into the magazine's offices on April 11, 2015, and looted all of the equipment, devices and archives.

A bombing targeted the Yemeni News Agency (SABA) building in the capital Sanaa on Wednesday, June 24, 2015 during the evening, which resulted in the death of one of the building guards and wounded two other soldiers.

### **Kidnapping of journalists**

In the evening of 2 April 2015, Houthi and Saleh militias kidnapped journalist Mahmoud Taha in Amran city after incitement by some people under false pretenses and malicious charges. Journalist Ali Saleh Sanhan, director of Yemen News Agency (SABA) office in Hajjah province, was also abducted on Friday night, 29 May 2016, in Nusayri city entrance point, as he was accompanying his family on his way to the village after the Saudi-led coalition air strikes hit the city. Sanhan was abducted in front of his wife and

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A news article entitled: The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate releases a report on the violations against press freedom during the first half of the year. - Published on 8 September, 2015 - Last visit: 30 July, 2016.



children, who were left on the side of the road. On 6 April 2015, journalist Waheed al-Sufi, editor-in-chief of Al-Arabiya Online website, was kidnapped by unknown gunmen from Al-Tahrir post office in the capital Sana'a. The men took al-Sufi in a white Land Cruiser with no license plates and drove away. Moreover, on 21 July 2015, the Houthis-backed forces kidnapped journalist Ali Hubaishi from Khawlan street in the capital Sanaa, while he was filming a report on the black market in Yemen. Journalist Ibrahim Majzoub, the chief editor of Al-Sadda News, had also been kidnapped since July 2015. The American journalist working for TIME magazine "Casey L. Coombs" had also been kidnapped from a checkpoint on March 2015. The U.S. Department of State announced his release on the first of June 2015.<sup>8</sup>

On 25 February, 2016, Mohamed al-Muqri, a reporter for Yemen Today TV channel, affiliated to the former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, was kidnapped by some armed assailants belonging to al-Qaeda in the city of Mukalla. His fate remains unknown to this day.

## **Detention of journalists**

Many journalists had been arrested by the Houthi-Saleh forces. In the evening of Wednesday 29 April, 2015, Mohamed Aida, a cameraman working for US-based AlHurra TV, was detained while he was shooting an interview with one of the citizens discussing the humanitarian situation, and had been held in al-Humairi Prison in Sanaa since then. On 11 April 2015, journalist and media worker Taher Shamshan was arrested and taken to unknown location.

On 9 June 2015, the Houthi-Saleh forces detained nine journalists and took them from one of Sanaa hotels to Al-Ahmar and Al-Hasba stations, from where they were taken to an unknown location. The detained journalists are: Abdel-Khaleq Omran, Tawfiq al-Mansouri, Harith Hamid, Hesham Tarmoum, Hesham al-Yousifi, Akram al-Walidi, Essam Balghaith, Hassan Attab and Haytham al-Shahab. Journalist Fouad al-Sameai was arrested, as well, from the province of Eb in early June 2015.

## **Raiding journalists' homes**

On 12 April 2015, an armed group raided the home of journalist Ahmed al-Sharabi in the city of Eb and kidnapped activist Ahmed Abdallah al-Latif during the raid. They also broke into the house of journalist Galal al-Sharabi who was kidnapped in a late hour of April 23, 2015. During the detention and arrest process, the assailants opened fire at Galal's car and his driver was seriously injured.

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<sup>8</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=147739>

## **Physical assault against journalists**

Physical assault against journalists was part of the violations committed by the conflicting parties in Yemen. In the afternoon of 25 April 2015, a black car carrying a group of gunmen intercepted the car of journalist Shihab al-Ahdal, editor-in-chief of Al Nehar and Al Nehar Press newspaper, bumping into it several times, and heavily fired rubber bullets, while he was leaving the home of a colleague at Khamsin Street. The two Yemeni journalists Abdallah Kabil and Yousef Alaizry, reporters for Yemen Shabab and Suhail TV at Dhamar province, were also killed on 26 May 2015 after being kidnapped by the Houthi rebels on Wednesday 20 May 2015, against the backdrop of their coverage of a festival held by al-Hada tribe. Before being murdered, both correspondents were arrested and held in a seismic monitoring center in Mount Oran, which had previously been attacked during the current conflict.

The family of Kabil and Alaizry accused Houthis of using their sons as human shields during the assault, like many detainees who were opposing them and whose bodies had been discovered under the rubble.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, lawyer Nabeel al-Mohammadi, the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate (YJS) advisor, was violently assaulted by a group of assailants while returning from his office to his home at 2:30 AM on Monday 29 June 2016 at Zubairi Street. Al- Mohammadi was surprised with a thick stick hitting him above his left ear, when he found that someone was about to hit him again while he was shouting insults, Mohammadi rushed towards his attacker forcing him to run away towards a black car.

## **Violations against political and human rights activists**

Journalist and human rights defender Samia Al-Aghbari have been receiving threats and subjected to harassment campaigns and offensive language. She had also been accused of belonging to Daesh (Islamic State) after expressing her opinions criticizing Houthi actions. The security forces at the Houthis-controlled airport confiscated her passport while traveling to Jordan on July 31, 2015 and they gave it back to her later.<sup>10</sup>

On Wednesday 5 August, 2015, Yemeni political activist and academic Dr. Abdul Qader Al-Junaid was attacked by Houthi militants in Taiz province (256 km south of Sanaa) after he was kidnapped from his home on account of his critical views and posts on "Twitter", the last post was "A Complaint - Houthi militants in my home."<sup>11</sup>

In August 2015, the Houthi group detained The Yemeni Human Rights Network staff, the local coordinator of the Yemen Emergency, the IP communications solution provider and

<sup>9</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=147713>

<sup>10</sup> - <http://www.yemenmonitor.com/Manage/Archive/ArtMID/905/ArticleID/1240>

A news article entitled "Journalists in Yemen barred from traveling" - Published on July 31, 2015  
- Last Visit: August 1, 2016

<sup>11</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=148790&lang=en>

the administrative staff of the Yemeni Observatory for Human Right (YOHR) nearby the United Nations headquarters in Sana'a. Houthis closed the external gate of YOHR and put four guards at the building refusing to allow the rest of the Yemeni Human Rights Network staff to enter and carry out their daily work, the situation which lasted for two hours and a half. <sup>12</sup>

On 12 November 2015, some Houthi officials barred women rights defender Dr. Shafiq al-Wahsh, the director of "The semi-government Women's National Committee of Yemen", from traveling as she tried to attend the preliminary Yemeni peace talks in the region. "The Houthi authorities" asserted the travel ban had been imposed on al-Wahsh under alleged security grounds claiming she would endanger "the security situation of Yemen". <sup>13</sup>

On Tuesday 12 October 2015, the Houthi-Saleh forces kidnapped political activist Nabil al-Shafq along with journalist Mahmoud Yassin, activist Antar Alambarzi, and others who organized the Water March on 10 October 2015 demanding to break the Houthi-Saleh siege of Taiz province. The demonstrators called for a humanitarian truce in order to enter food supplies, water and medicine to the besieged city. <sup>14</sup>

## **Bahrain**

Bahrain took part in Operation Decisive Storm in response to the calls of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. Bahrain's National Guard Commander Colonel Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, son of the King of Bahrain, has deemed his country's participation in Operation Decisive Storm - in a poem dubbed "O' Saudi Arabia"- repaying debts of gratitude to Saudi Arabia which always defends its Arab and Gulf sister countries; in reference to the Saudi intervention in Bahrain in operation "Peninsula Shield Force" to quell pro-reform protests in 2011. <sup>15</sup>

In March 2015, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa ordered 12 fighter aircrafts to participate in Operation Decisive Storm.

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<sup>12</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=149166>

<sup>13</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=154813>

<sup>14</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=154488>

<sup>15</sup> - <http://www.hasanews.com/6275301.html>

A news article entitled: The son of the King of Bahrain in a poem "Anything but Saudi Arabia": Look for us Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques - published on 31 March, 2015 - Last visit: 20 July, 2016.

More importantly, on 26 March 2016, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior issued a statement warning against the issuing of any “statement against the approach Bahrain has taken” and that it would take the harshest measures against “violators”.<sup>16</sup>

#### Cracking down against Operation Decisive Storm opponents

A few hours after the statement of the Bahraini Ministry of Interior, exactly on 27 March, journalist, author, member of the Bahraini Journalists Association and the Secretary General of the National Democratic Rally Unionist Bahrain, [Fadel Abbas](#) was arrested for allegedly "spreading false news and harming military operations" against the backdrop of the national assembly issuance of a statement condemning the military strikes carried out by Saudi Arabia and its allies against Yemeni targets, in the operation "Decisive Storm"<sup>17</sup>.

In the same context, the security forces arrested the well-known human rights defender Nabeel Rajab from his home at Monday dawn, 13 June 2015, against the backdrop of expressing his opinion about Bahrain's involvement in the Saudi-led coalition waging a military operation in Yemen.

On 6 August 2015, the Bahraini Information Affairs Authority (IAA) suspended "Al-Wasat" newspaper for one day in connection to a news article's headline about those killed in military operations in Yemen. The authority attributed the newspaper's suspension to “its violation of the law and its repeated publishing of information that affects national unity”.<sup>18</sup>

However, two days later (on August 8), IAA reversed its decision and ordered the newspaper's activity and circulation to be resumed, following the newspaper's confirmation of its commitment to work “in accordance with the law”, as stated by IAA.

The security forces arrested a Bahraini tweep, the owner of “[Boukhamis](#)” Twitter account, for purportedly “insulting the martyrs of the nation through social media” in reference to some comments he published denouncing the Bahrain's involvement in the military operations waged on the city of Marib in Yemen.<sup>19</sup>

On 7 of September, 2015, Bahrain's Interior Ministry arrested the owner of “Haji Ahmad” account on charges of offending Operation Decisive Storm coalition forces and propagating information that would harm and intimidate people during wartime. The

<sup>16</sup> - <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/975089.html>

A news article entitled: "Ministry of Interior" warns against issuing any statement or position other than the approach of Bahrain - Published on March 26, 2015- Last visit: July 25, 2016

<sup>17</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=142781&lang=en>

<sup>18</sup> - [https://twitter.com/mia\\_bahrain/status/629394586780041216](https://twitter.com/mia_bahrain/status/629394586780041216)

Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Public Information - Bahrain - tweet posted on August 6, 2015 - last visit July 15, 2016

<sup>19</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=150895>

court thus sentenced him to five years in prison and ordered the confiscation of his cell phone. The news was published in one of the local journals.<sup>20</sup>

On 28 March 2014, lawyer Mohammed Al Mutawa was arrested after his home was raided in the town of Al Musalla.

Mutawa is the Deputy Secretary-General of the Democratic Unity Gathering Society (Al Wahdawi) and the attorney of the institution's Secretary-General Fadhel Abbas, which are believed to be the same reasons behind his detention. On Friday the 27th of March, 2014, he was on a TV interview with Loalqa TV talking about Abbas detention indicating that banning the objection to the Saudi aggression in Yemen constitutes a violation of the freedom of expression. He also addressed Yemen's internal situation in the aftermath of the attack. Mutawa was released on the second of April 2015.<sup>21</sup>

These consecutive violations have been brought to the UN's attention. The United Nations Office for Human Rights expressed sorrow over the Bahraini government seeking to undermine the country's civil and political rights, instead of pushing for the implementation of recommendations passed by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) that was established by the King of Bahrain in 2011.

The Bahraini authorities added a sectarian dimension to the war in Yemen and the internal opposition to it. In other words, Bahrain's government has taken a sectarian turn trying to accuse the opposition as being driven by some Iranian interests in the Gulf, a matter which gave it the chance to expand its sectarian mobilization and to impose further repression on political opposition, human rights defenders in the country and whoever could question or discredit the country's political and military stance on the war in Yemen.

During a meeting held on the 24th of February 2016 with the Chairman of the High Authority for Information and Communication (HAIC), the Minister of Information Affairs and the Minister of the Shura and Parliament Affairs, along with some Mps and newspapers' chief editors, King of Bahrain emphasized "the heavy responsibility the media sector has, particularly at the present time when the country is confronting some rapacious foreign bodies that seek to undermine the security and stability of the Arab gulf".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> - <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1081239.html>

A news article entitled: "Boukhamis" and "Haji Ahmad" sentenced to 5 years in prison because of Twitter - Published on 19 February 2016- Last visit: 18 July 2016

<sup>21</sup> - <http://burathanews.com/arabic/bhrain/262569>

A news article entitled: "Lawyer detained after raiding his home in Bahrain"- Published on March 30, 2015 - Last visit July 28, 2016

<sup>22</sup> - <http://www.mia.gov.bh/ar/Media-Center/MSIA-Press/Pages/article24021601.aspx>

A News article entitled: "The King meets with the Head of the High Authority for the Media and Communication, Information Minister, Shura Council Minister, MPs and newspaper editors" - Published on

The authorities also proceeded to confuse defending human rights and political opposition on one hand and terrorism on the other, in order to strip opponents and human rights activists of the trust and sympathy of the public, to make it easier for the government to prosecute dissidents, stifle opposition, and carry out its human rights encroachments amid social silence. The Minister of Information Affairs announced “there are a group of activists who see themselves as human rights activists, but in fact they are politically-driven and have political agendas”.<sup>23</sup>

He also accused opponents of being terrorists, as he told BBC News: “Bahrain is confronting terrorism like your country. Terrorist cannot be referred to as opposition”.<sup>24</sup>

The authorities also continue to use the revocation of citizenship and the deportation of dissidents as a tool to fight opposition, which prompted the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on 18 March 2016, to express concern at the spate of stripping the Bahraini citizens of their nationality.

On the level of international relations, on 5 January 2016, the Kingdom of Bahrain announced it is cutting off all ties with Iran, recalled its ambassador from Tehran, and ordered the acting Iranian charge d'affaires to leave within 72 hours. The Minister of Information also called on Iraq to dismantle all the Iran-backed extremist organizations.

<sup>25</sup>

## **Kuwait**

Operation Decisive Storm forced opposition movements to freeze their activities, halt their demands for political reform and dissolve the House of Representatives. The Kuwaiti opposition ended its political activism, and the anti-government rally set every Monday night at the popular Irada Square- downtown Kuwait City- was also dispersed, in conjunction with the launching of the military operation in Yemen which the Kuwaiti army is involved in.

The Kuwaiti opposition movements- both religious and secular- have been used during recent weeks to organize a sit-in every Monday evening in front of the National Assembly (parliament), which the opposition is calling for its dissolution. They call for the overthrow of the current government besides other demands that include fighting corruption.<sup>26</sup>

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February 24, 2016 – Last Visited July 29, 2016

<sup>23</sup> - [https://twitter.com/mia\\_bahrain/status/613084610092609537](https://twitter.com/mia_bahrain/status/613084610092609537)

Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Public Information - Bahrain - tweet posted on June 22, 2015 - last visit July 16, 2016

<sup>24</sup> - [https://twitter.com/mia\\_bahrain/status/609778336953319425](https://twitter.com/mia_bahrain/status/609778336953319425)

Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Public Information - Bahrain - tweet posted on June 13, 2015 - last visit July 16, 2016

<sup>25</sup> - [https://twitter.com/mia\\_bahrain/status/608977666096496640](https://twitter.com/mia_bahrain/status/608977666096496640)

Official Twitter account of the Ministry of Public Information - Bahrain - tweet posted on June 11, 2015 - last visit July 16, 2016

<sup>26</sup> - <http://www.worldakhtar.com/gulf/kuwait/25868.html>



## **Kuwait the most repressive country against Twitter**

The Kuwaiti authorities have intensified their pursuit of Operation Decisive Storm opponents, particularly social media activists. On the first of April 2015, lawyer “Khaled al-Shatty” was arrested by State Security personnel, he was charged with insulting the Emir, undermining the morale of the military, offending Saudi Arabia and endangering the two countries' relations; against the backdrop of some tweets criticizing the war in Yemen. On the same day, State Security Investigations summoned academic Salah al-Fadhli and referred him to the Public Prosecution; for allegedly “committing a hostile act against KSA, weakening the state of the Operation Decisive Storm forces and misusing the phone” in reference to some comments posted on his personal account addressing Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. Al-Fadhli was acquitted by the Criminal Court on 21 March, after proving that these comments had been written before launching Operation Decisive Storm and that they don't include any sort of insult to the country's governor or to KSA.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Pilot [Ahmad Ashour](#) was arrested by the State Security forces on Thursday 16 April 2015, and was later interrogated by the Public Prosecution over allegations of “insulting Saudi Arabia”. The case had been deliberated in hearings until the Court of Appeal sentenced- on the 13th of April 2016- the pilot to two suspended years of imprisonment as well as bail of 100 dinars (US \$ 331).

One of the most important cases deliberated by Kuwaiti courts with regard to Operation Decisive Storm opposition moves was the case of MP Abdul Hamid Dashti. On 30 April 2015, the Saudi Embassy in Kuwait filed a memo to the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry demanding to bring Kuwaiti Parliamentarian “Abdul-Hamid Dashti” to trial; as it stated that “the member of Kuwaiti National Assembly Abdul-Hamid Dashti repeatedly insulted the kingdom in media outlets”, in light of his criticism of “Operation Decisive Storm” military operations waged against Houthis in Yemen, which he made during a TV interview with one of satellite channels considering these operations as a war that “will destroy all the Gulf countries”.

Then, on the 27th of July, 2016, the Kuwaiti Criminal Court sentenced- in absentia- Dashti to 11 years and six months in prison for allegedly insulting Saudi Arabia.

Not only this, but also the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have extended their measures to the point that they withdrew citizenships and deported citizens outside the country replacing them with non-Arab people in an attempt to impose a demographic sectarian change.<sup>28</sup>

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A news article entitled: Kuwait| Operation Decisive Storm stops the political activities of Kuwaiti opposition - Published on 30 March, 2015 - Last visit: 19 July, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=160932>

<sup>28</sup> - <http://www.alrai-iq.com/2015/05/20/123002/>

A news article entitled: Disagreements spark among GCC countries over the war in Yemen - Published on 20 May, 2015 - Last visit: 22 July, 2016.

## United Arab Emirates

In the United Arab Emirates, the Omani young man [Thamer Al Balushi](#) has been held in detention at al-Wathba Prison in Abu Dhabi since March 2016, on a charge of “mocking the UAE’s policies”; when he voiced his opinion before a border security personnel in the course of the war being waged by a number of Arab nations in Yemen against the Houthi forces and the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

## Jordan

On Thursday 23 April 2015, the Jordanian security bodies arrested columnist “Gamal Abdel-Naby Ayoub” over the accusation of “disturbing relations with a foreign state” against the backdrop of publishing an article that criticizes “Operation Decisive Storm” and the war on Yemen. <sup>29</sup>

## Egypt

As for Egypt, The Head of ERTU 6 Delta Channel (Central Delta TV) Mohamed Hilal ordered the suspension of anchorwoman Abeer al-Fakhrani, on 6 April 2015, and referred her to the Legal Affairs Authority of the Regional Channels Sector, under the pretext that “she stands against the state stances” after airing criticism against “Operation Decisive Storm” before her guests in “Masr al-Mahrousa” program to hear their opinion. <sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Neither the Saudi authorities nor their Operation Decisive Storm allies allowed the dissenting voices to express their opinion in any of the media outlets. These voices have been suppressed either through deterring opposition, disbanding its peaceful organizations and intimidating minorities against voicing their opinion as is the case of KSA, or through prosecution, trials, travel bans and revocation of nationality as in Kuwait and Bahrain, or also by the abduction and the enforced disappearance of opponents and using them as a human shields like what is happening in Yemen. The authorities of the Gulf states have not had enough with all of that, they also renewed their relationship with neighboring countries based on their position towards these military operations.

Operation Decisive Storm parties have used human rights violations as a means to achieve their political aims. They raised the slogan “A National Unit During the War”,

<sup>29</sup> - <http://anhri.net/?p=143766&lang=en>

<sup>30</sup> - <http://www.dotmsr.com/details/خاص-مذبةة-الدلتا-الموقفة-عن-العمل-هدفي-الصوره-الكامله-المسئولين-شغالين-عجن-وهعرف-أخذ-حقي>

A news article entitled: Abeer al-Fakharany after being referred to investigation: My goal is raising awareness not "Flattering". Published on 11 April, 2015 - Last visit 27 July, 2016.



which is a specious slogan that hides the real nature of these repressive authorities. The existence of opposition and its freedom to voice its views is a guarantee to rectify any wrong political decision that may have been made. Countries like Japan, America, Britain had opened the door for demonstrations opposing the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to fill the streets of London, Tokyo and San Francisco; whereas the conflicting states in al-Hazm Storm haven't given the chance for any opposition power to express its condemnation of the war.