

Saudi Arabia – contextual human rights issues



The purpose of this summary is to provide a high-level overview of documented human rights issues in a particular country and how they could intersect with TV production. It aims to prompt further consideration and planning by production teams where appropriate. Not all issues will be relevant for all TV productions and, conversely, there may be aspects not yet covered that are relevant.

Human rights issue	Description of context	How this could intersect with TV production	Suggested mitigations	Resources
Discrimination – LGBTQI+, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homosexuality is criminalised with a (stoning to death) penalty in place. Religious discrimination is rife - Members of the Kingdom’s Shi’a minority face entrenched discrimination that limits their access to services and employment Saudi Arabia is ranked as the third worst country for racial equality in the World Population Review 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team members who are female, LGBTQI+ or of differing religions or ethnicities may not feel safe Crew and talent may experience or witness homophobia, racism, antisemitism, incl. threats or violence Local LGBTI crew may be hiding their identities or living in fear Local crew may exhibit homophobia, racism or antisemitism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive security practices Establish culture where everyone can raise concerns Wellbeing and support resources Minimise time spent by international crew in country 	<p>Aide Memoire for Inclusive Personal Safety on Location</p> <p>Inclusive security risk management</p> <p>Toolkit: Getting the culture right</p>
Discrimination – Women’s rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a system of male guardianship, requiring women to seek permission from male guardians for some activities Women and girls remain subject to discrimination in law and practice, with laws that ensure they are subordinate citizens The WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report ranks Saudi Arabia 147 out of 156 countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female crew may experience discrimination and denied access to some spaces or be unable to travel around freely Female local crew/ contributors/ extras may have experienced discrimination in their careers; they may also be experiencing issues at home 		<p>FATV Charity: The Whole Picture Toolkit</p> <p>Safety training for female journalists</p>
Rule of law - Cultural sensitivities and risks to local crew	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saudi Arabia has not signed the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights or on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and abstained from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Saudi Arabia’s legal system is based on Sharia law with no separate civil legal code. Local sensitivities, customs and dress codes are likely to be very different to those that international crew are familiar with. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behaviour that might seem entirely reasonable elsewhere, may invite police attention in Saudi Arabia; the longer a crew is in country, the higher the risk that someone transgresses. If any perceived poor behaviour by the international team, this could adversely impact local crew involved in the project who may be targeted by state security in their stead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive & regular ongoing crew briefings on cultural sensitivity and behaviour Formal agreement for duty of care towards local crew Follow up support to local crew in case of adverse impacts after the international team has left 	

Behaviour of public security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are the regular police, a secret police, <i>Mabahith</i>, and a 'religious police', <i>Mutawa</i>. • People can be arrested for no clear reason (Amnesty). HRW has documented arrests of peaceful dissidents, intellectuals, and activists with some sentenced to long prison terms for posting on social media. • There are pervasive abusive practices in detention centres, including torture and mistreatment, prolonged arbitrary detention and asset confiscation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productions that depend on public security services may end up associated with any human rights abuses committed by them. • Should a member of the crew be arrested, there are limited legal protections to ensure due process, fair treatment and freedom from torture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and document risks of encountering or being required to work with public security forces • Be careful about filming/showing/ reporting identifying features of protesters • Invest in appropriate crisis plans for worst case scenarios 	DCAF/ICRC Toolkit: Addressing Security and Human Rights Challenges in Complex Environments Security and human rights knowledge hub and toolkit
State surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government maintains an extensive system of social media surveillance and uses bot accounts to influence content • Saudi Arabia has been strongly linked to the Pegasus Spyware which is used to hack and survey devices of human rights defenders and journalists • The Saudi government has a well established record of attempting to infiltrate technology platforms (HRW) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a chance that international and local crew may be the subject of state surveillance • For local crew, there are limited options to avoid ongoing state surveillance should the production become a target for any reason 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use burner devices and delete all sensitive information before arrival • Brief all crew before travelling on risks related to cyber surveillance • Ensure that access to corporate networks is not left 'open' on devices that may be stolen/confiscated 	Committee to Protect Journalists: Safety Kit Digital self-defence for journalists Digital security for journalists
Conflict and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saudi Arabia leads a coalition in active conflict in Yemen and has carried out attacks that have resulted in large numbers of civilian deaths – some of which are being investigated as war crimes • A missile fired from Yemen landed in Saudi Arabia shortly before the F1 race in 2022 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and security risks to teams operating in a country that has been attacked in the recent past • The use of military equipment in filming (e.g. leasing vehicles) carries risks under international human rights law if there is overlap with activity that could constitute war crimes or if leasing equipment funds such activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess risks of engaging with Saudi military • Conduct conflict assessment 	Heightened Human Rights Due Diligence for Business in Conflict-Affected Contexts: A Guide
Reputation laundering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saudi Arabia has a very poor human rights record, epitomised by the apparently state sanctioned murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in 2018. • Since then, leaders have sought to launder that reputation through hosting major sporting, cultural and entertainment events and positioning Saudi Arabia as a global tourism and filming destination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a risk that a production becomes complicit in the reputation laundering of the Saudi regime and its human rights abuses, obscuring a dramatic curtailing in civil and political rights in recent years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find alternative locations to film wherever possible 	

<p>Vulnerability of migrant workers to exploitation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy relies heavily on c.6.3m migrant workers comprising >80% of the private sector workforce, using a kafala system that ties visas to employers. • Many workers become undocumented because employers can report them, sometimes falsely, for “absconding” or when they flee abuse. • There are regular arrests and deportations of undocumented migrant workers. Migrants have no right to contest their detention and deportation. • Sectors that are higher risk for migrant worker exploitation include: hotels and general hospitality, drivers, security, other informal roles and construction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productions may encounter migrant workers as part of local ancillary services (e.g. hospitality, cleaning, security) – some may be undocumented and at risk of deportation; others may be documented but poorly treated or exploited • Productions may also encounter exploited workers in hotels and venues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due diligence on suppliers of ancillary services • Direct engagement with and checks on ancillary workers during production 	<p>Production pack: protecting the most vulnerable workers</p> <p>Toolkit: Vetting suppliers appropriately</p> <p>Toolkit: Supporting ancillary workers directly</p> <p>Toolkit: Category Management Due Diligence</p>
<p>Freedom of the media (including local media and local producers supporting international teams)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saudi authorities have targeted campaigns against the press, including with spyware • There are no independent media outlets - the government controls both domestic and regional media • Criticism of senior government officials and affiliates is criminalised • Authorities have banned the formation of new political parties and independent human rights organisations • Ranked 170 out of 180 countries for press freedom (Reporters without Borders) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authorities may object to certain parts of filming or insist on censorship • The presence of international camera teams may invite protests by dissidents, putting crews and demonstrators at risk • If a broadcaster has multiple productions crossing genres, behaviour of one may impact on others and invite threats or retribution - there is uncertainty about how the authorities might react in different scenarios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal agreement for duty of care towards local media support workers • Enhanced training, risk assessment and resources for teams covering controversial or politically sensitive issues • Social media monitoring • Adequate legal support including for local media workers 	<p>ACOS Alliance resources and training</p> <p>Committee to Protect Journalists: Safety Kit</p>
<p>Environmental issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water access is limited and water available is from desalination plants that are highly carbon intensive and produce toxic waste that goes into the marine environment. • The outdoor thermal discomfort index exceeds 28°C, ie the threshold for human discomfort, in all summer months (June to September) due to both consistently high temperatures and relative humidity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productions may not be able to access enough water for their needs or may end up taking water from communities that need it. • Crew and talent may experience heat stress from the high temperatures – particularly those building sets or involved in other physical activities. • The environmental footprint of a production may be particularly high 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong plan for water management (minimise, recycle and re-use where possible) • Build heat risks into risk assessments and factor in all workers involved in providing support services 	<p>albert production toolkit</p> <p>BFI: Screen new deal route map to sustainable film production</p>

Specific human rights issues related to filming in Neom

Human rights issue	Description of context	How this could intersect with TV production	Suggested mitigations	Resources
Impacts on local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 20,000 members of the Al-Huwaitat tribe have faced forced evictions and land seizures, with no information about where they will live or any form of adequate compensation. Risks of detention/ imprisonment/ death sentences to those resisting eviction. A prominent activist speaking out against the project was killed in 2023 by Saudi security forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Production could occur on lands inhabited by or seized from indigenous communities or in ways that have additional adverse impacts on communities already displaced by the development. Local crew or extras used by the production may be individuals who have directly experienced adverse impacts; some may feel they have no choice but to take work as extras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage directly with appropriate Al-Huwaitat representatives to understand land access issues for filming requirements and how to work sensitively with local crew or extras Ensure adequate compensation if issues are identified Be sensitive to the issues in case extras or local crew have been directly or personally affected 	Guidance: Meaningful stakeholder engagement
Exploitation in construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major construction projects are undertaken by migrant workers who are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, incl withheld wages, heat stress and other health and safety concerns, restricted mobility, lack of access to grievance mechanisms, and substandard living conditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Productions may end up filming in locations built by exploited workers Crew may encounter exploited workers involved in construction while filming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Location due diligence / due diligence on location services supplier Response plan in place to address issues encountered 	Toolkit: Vetting suppliers appropriately Toolkit: Responding to and remedying issues identified
Digital surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plans for “The Line,” a vertically layered city within NEOM, will heavily use AI and ‘human-machine interface’ technology, including drone and facial recognition, raising concerns about widespread surveillance of future residents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International and local crew may be surveilled in Neom in particularly intrusive ways and find their personal data taken, stored and used (potentially against them) without their consent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief all crew before travelling on risks related to cyber surveillance 	Digital self-defence for journalists Digital security for journalists
Greenwashing and environmental impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neom is being promoted as a sustainable ‘car-free carbon-free’ city but Saudi Arabia’s commitment to continue to increase fossil fuel extraction is incompatible with a 1.5 degree aligned future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A production’s involvement with Neom may be incompatible with good environmental practice or public environmental commitments There is a risk that a production becomes complicit in presenting Neom as good for the environment 		albert production toolkit BFI: Screen new deal route map to sustainable film production

Have further insights? Please share suggested issues, intersections with TV, mitigations and resources with amelia.knott@tvhumanrights.org