

The Dark Side of Neom:

Expropriation, expulsion and
prosecution of the region's
inhabitants



ALQST for Human Rights

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NEOM

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1. Executive summary

Neom, the futuristic megacity being built on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, is the flagship project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, a programme to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and reduce its dependence on oil revenues. The Saudi authorities are seeking billions of dollars in foreign investment and technical expertise in order to develop Neom, yet in getting started on the project they have already committed a wide range of serious human rights abuses of which all potential partners, investors and consultants should be aware.

ALQST has made a detailed investigation into these violations, based on first-hand testimonies from victims and witnesses as well as open-source data. In this report, it presents its findings and urges businesses involved, or thinking of becoming involved, to look closely into their corporate responsibilities and avoid becoming complicit in the Saudi authorities' human rights abuses.

Despite official claims to the contrary, the area earmarked for the Neom project, totalling 26,500 km², is not unpopulated land – it has been inhabited for centuries, primarily by members of the Huwaitat tribe. In order to proceed with the construction of Neom, the Saudi authorities have committed a wide range of serious human rights abuses. ALQST's investigation has concluded that to realise this project, Saudi authorities have illegally displaced local tribes without adequate compensation or offering alternative housing, and violently cracked down on members of the tribe who peacefully opposed or resisted eviction. Since the notorious killing of local resident Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti in a raid by special forces on his home in 2020, ALQST has documented the arbitrary arrests and unfair trials of other members of the tribe, several of whom have recently been sentenced to lengthy prison terms or even execution.

Much of the information in this report is new, and paints a deeply disturbing picture of the ongoing prosecution and punishment of dozens of members of the Huwaitat tribe for their peaceful opposition. ALQST has been able to verify the sentencing of 15 members of the tribe to date, including one woman, to prison terms of between 15 and 50 years. At least five more have been sentenced to death for peacefully resisting the forcible displacement of their tribe and speaking out against the injustices inflicted on them by the Saudi authorities.

Furthermore, the issue of illegal land seizures and forced displacement go well beyond the Neom megacity project. These are longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, and we are seeing similar expropriations, with accompanying human rights violations, taking place elsewhere in the kingdom, notably in Jeddah, within the framework of Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030.

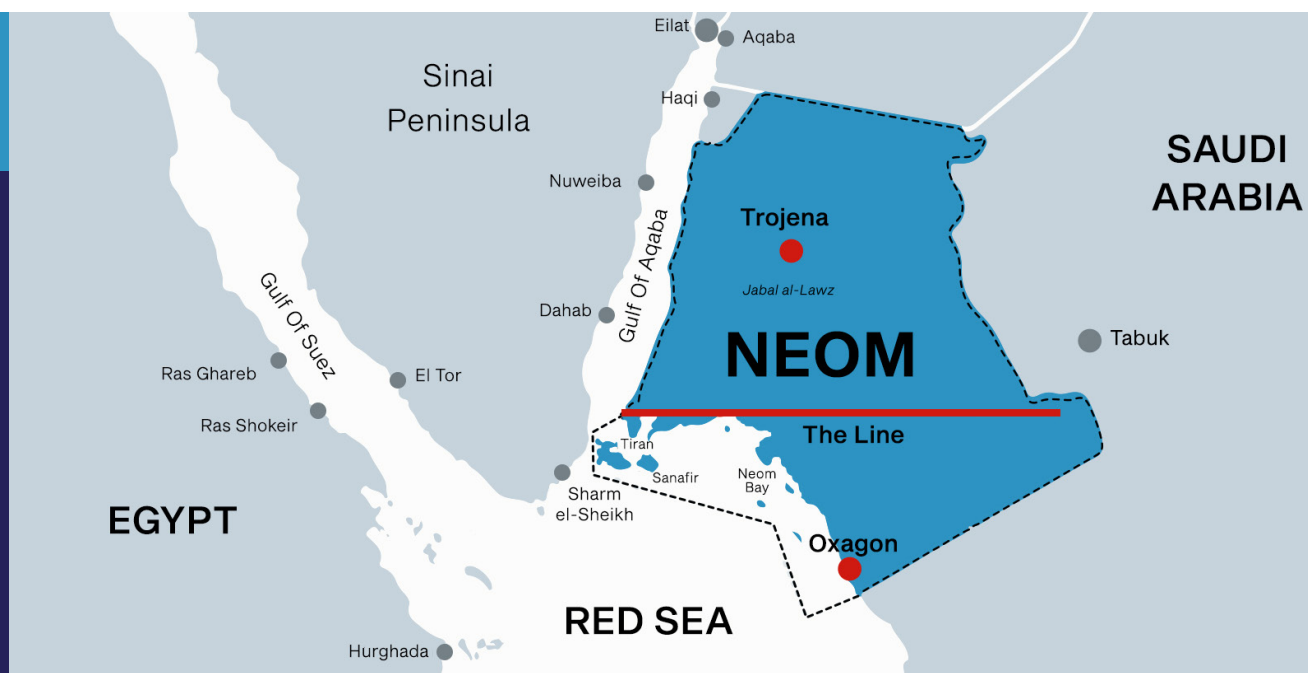
2. About Neom

In 2017 Saudi Arabia announced the launch of “Neom”, a \$500 billion futuristic megacity project covering 26,500 km² along the Red Sea in the province of Tabuk in northwest Saudi Arabia. Self-described as the “world’s first cognitive, smart city” and “a vision of what the future could be”, the project was to be the centrepiece of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s “Vision 2030” economic development programme. Some of the grandiose ideas reportedly under consideration include a giant artificial moon, flying taxis, and robot maids.

In January 2021 more details about Neom were unveiled, as Mohammed bin Salman announced “The Line”, a 170 km-long, 200 metre-wide linear city, surrounded by mirrors, that promises “zero cars, zero streets and zero carbon emissions” for its projected 9 million inhabitants. Drone footage released in October 2022 has shown work gradually commencing on The Line, which so far consists of a trench.

Other projects planned for Neom include “Oxagon”, a 7 km-wide floating industrial complex to be built on the sea as a “gateway to advanced and clean industries”, and “Trojena”, a year-round tourist destination to feature a ski slope, mountain biking, and a nature reserve. In October 2022 Trojena was selected as the venue for the 2029 Asian Winter Games, a sporting event normally held every four years but which has not taken place since 2017 due to difficulties in finding hosts.

When Neom’s promotional videos and spokespeople describe the area earmarked for the project as “virgin” land, they are trying to create the false impression that it is unpopulated. In fact it has been inhabited for centuries, primarily by members of the Huwaitat tribe, made up of approximately 20,000 members.



3. Human rights violations committed in the context of Neom's construction

Even before the Neom project was announced, the Saudi authorities had quietly acquired title to the land they wanted, while denying rumours to that effect. Government officials and security forces then applied coercion and intimidation to secure the eviction of local residents, during which dozens were arrested and a leading protester, Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, was shot dead in his home. The authorities have since added insult to injury with malicious and discriminatory resettlement and compensation policies.

Massive land grab by stealth, then forced evictions

Local communities living in the area chosen for the Neom development had been concerned about their land since April 2017, when land transfers and licence renewals were suspended. This was because the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) had acquired title to the whole area, ahead of the Neom project's public announcement on 24 October 2017. In response to action by local residents, including going to the regional authorities, launching a campaign and submitting petitions, the authorities told them that rumours of evictions were unfounded, while in fact construction work was already under way, in utmost secrecy, and emergency acquisition orders were being issued for privately owned land.

The concerns of local inhabitants were realised on 1 January 2020, when local authorities informed residents of the villages of al-Khuraiba, Sharma and Gayal that they were to be compulsorily evicted, as their land was required for the Neom megacity project. Despite local people expressing their opposition to the decision, including at a public conference held on 7 January, committees from the Social Development department arrived in the area within two weeks of the eviction order being announced. They put up signs in the streets asking residents to report to the committees to identify their holdings on the land registry, and relinquish them. Meanwhile, local people met with representatives of the Social Development committees and once again expressed their opposition.

In March 2020, the authorities began pressuring people by sending in Special Forces, sometimes in groups of more than 40 vehicles at a time, to raid the homes of those resisting eviction, aiming to intimidate people and coerce them into reporting to the committees and agreeing to being unfairly evicted from their homes. At least twenty residents were arrested, some of whom, according to sources, were arrested for coming to the defence of a kidnapped child, Salem bin Rashid al-Taqiqi. The child was driven away in a civilian car, but when family members pursued the kidnappers to try to free the child, it transpired that the kidnappers were from the Mabathet secret police. They said the child had been taken to be detained after he wrote on walls the slogan "We Will Not Be Moved".

The killing of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti

Most people declined to visit the committees and give details of their landholdings and houses, so the committees started visiting people in their homes, escorted by security forces, to list and measure properties by force. On 12 April 2020 Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, a 43-year old resident of al-Khuraiba village, government employee at the Ministry of Finance, and member of the Huwaitat tribe, refused to allow a land registry committee into his home. When the authorities arrived at his house, he filmed them and posted videos on social media, criticising the forced eviction of his tribe and describing it as “state terrorism”.



*Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti.
Photograph: YouTube*

Early the following morning, on 13 April 2020, dozens of Special Forces surrounded his house, accompanied by several armoured trucks. According to witnesses, at 5:40 am the Special Forces attacked al-Huwaiti’s house with heavy weapons, without warning or provocation. Al-Huwaiti returned fire, briefly, before he was killed. Video footage of the house shows that the Saudi security forces used excessive force and live ammunition whilst raiding the property.



Al-Huwaiti’s home following the raid. Photographs: Twitter

After his death the authorities held on to Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti's body for a week, insisting he should be buried in Tabuk, on the grounds that the death took place in "criminal circumstances" and that it was first necessary to verify the circumstances. When his family refused, and as pressure mounted in the media, the authorities agreed to hand the body over to his family for burial in al-Khuraiba amid heavy security measures. The authorities' failure to return the body in a timely manner meant that the family were unable to perform their burial rites in the time prescribed in Islamic tradition.

Arbitrary and dishonest compensation policy

No investigation was conducted into the actions of the Special Forces. Instead, the authorities offered financial incentives to some government-appointed tribal sheikhs and other notables of the Huwaitat tribe, on condition that they publicly condemn Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti's resistance to eviction. Indeed, while al-Huwaiti's funeral was taking place, the Tabuk emirate called a meeting with some of these government-appointed tribal sheikhs and Huwaitat notables, and urged them to organise an event at which they would publicly condemn Abdul Rahim's actions. During the meeting at the emirate offices, those who attended were given 100,000 Saudi riyals (US\$27,000) each, and each sheikh was given 300,000 Saudi riyals (US\$80,000), to buy their agreement. In exchange, they took part in a propaganda exercise involving a small-scale public celebration at which they formally disowned Abdul Rahim and other members of the tribe who had resisted eviction.

The authorities also rejected local inhabitants' requests to be resettled at a site nearby, and instead offered 620,000 Saudi riyals (US\$165,000) in compensation for inhabitants to resettle on their own, and at locations much further away. However, it has been reported that some of those offered this compensation have received as little as 17,000 Saudi riyals (US\$4,500).

The Saudi authorities are still pursuing their discriminatory and dishonest compensation policy. People have been lured into surrendering their property by seeing well-known figures being given compensation in the millions, while rumours were spread that the committee would compensate people for trees, wells and even home furnishings. It is important to note that individuals accepting compensation have to sign a waiver paper absolving the government of any charge of forced displacement.

Houses were demolished immediately after the residents left, and in some cases before they had received the compensation. The majority of the Huwaitat resettled between Tabuk and Dubai, many being forced to buy into the poorer neighborhoods of Tabuk because of the inadequacy of the compensation they received. A few individuals with stable, salaried jobs were able to take out loans, while others resettled in villages such as al-Disa, Shuwaq, al-Amud, al-Khuraiba and al-Muwaila. They are now haunted by the possibility of being evicted again: in July 2022 the residents of Maqna, a coastal village inhabited by members of the Huwaitat, Bani Attia and Juhayna tribes, were deported to the cities of Haql and Tabuk.

4. Legal analysis of forced displacement at Neom: Clear violations of international law

Besides the most serious violations – of the right to life and liberty of persons, already touched upon, and described in more detail below – the authorities' expropriations in the context of the Neom project are also in direct violation of Saudi Arabia's engagements under both treaty and international customary law. Under international law, the state has to prove a public interest; the expropriation must be conducted in a non-discriminatory fashion; and due process – which includes ensuring a fair hearing and an independent and impartial adjudicator – must be respected. ALQST has found the Saudi authorities to have acted in a discriminatory fashion against the Huwaitat, and not to have respected due process during the legal proceedings.

Article 17 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and Article 15 of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, both of which Saudi Arabia has ratified, protect individuals against arbitrary expropriations. The provisions of these instruments are also considered part of customary international law and are therefore binding. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the GCC Human Rights Declaration, Article 27 of which also provides protection from arbitrary expropriation.

Saudi Arabia is also one of the ten states to have ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights, Articles 21, 26, 27, and 31 of which respectively protect the rights to private life and the sanctity of one's home, the right to decide where one wants to live within one's own country, and the right to private property. ALQST has determined that the Saudi authorities systematically and methodically violated each of these Articles in their handling of the expropriation of the Huwaitat.

The framework of the [UN's Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-Based Evictions and Displacement](#)¹ clearly establishes the importance of respecting the aforementioned rights during any expropriation process. It clearly states that state authorities must offer both fair compensation and resettlement to all those affected without discrimination, and provide them with appropriate notice and give them enough time to review and object to the project. None of these rights were respected in the process of the Huwaitat's expropriation.

These violations stem from shortcomings in Saudi Arabia's Law of Eminent Domain and Temporary Taking of Property of 2003, which provides the legal framework for expropriations in Saudi Arabia. The law is vaguely worded and states only that fair compensation must be

¹ United Nations, Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Housing/Guidelines_en.pdf

paid for expropriated properties, without making reference to market value. The appraisal and compensation process is entirely dominated by the state and the possibilities for appealing are limited. Indeed, Article 7 of the Law stipulates that an Appraisal Committee, composed of five state officials and two individuals effectively nominated by the state (through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry) will assess the compensation to be paid. It thus fails to grant direct representation or consultative powers to the expropriated individuals. Finally, Article 24 states that stakeholders may appeal to the Board of Grievances, thus depriving them of the possibility of a further appeal to the Supreme Court. Hence flawed national legislation has been at the core of the authorities' policy of illegal eviction and forced displacement in the case of not only Neom but also other development projects, and shows the authorities' patent disregard for their international legal obligations.

5. Ongoing prosecution of members of the Huwaitat tribe

ALQST is aware of some 47 members of the Huwaitat tribe who have been arrested and detained, some as recently as September and October 2022, for speaking out against or peacefully resisting illegal evictions associated with the Neom project. Many of them are being prosecuted under the Saudi Counter-Terrorism Law; so far at least 15 members of the al-Huwaitat tribe have already been sentenced to prison terms of between 15 and an extraordinary 50 years, and at least five have been sentenced to death.



Pictured at an equestrian race in al-Khuraiba, May 2018: Abdullah Dakhil Allah Saleh al-Huwaiti (far left); Abdullilash Rashid Ibrahim al-Huwaiti (third from left, on the horse); Rashid Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti (fourth from left, holding award); Abdullah Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti (sixth from left, bearded, holding an award aloft).

Arrests

In addition to being forcibly displaced from their homes, often without compensation or the provision of alternative housing, many Huwaitis, including several women, who spoke out against or peacefully resisted the illegal eviction from their homes, have been arrested by state security forces and are facing legal prosecution. In a similar fashion to the silencing of human rights defenders and peaceful dissidents, the Saudi authorities have branded these members of the Huwaitat tribe as “terrorists” posing a threat to national security, and are trying them under the country’s draconian Counter-Terrorism Law.

Even before the April 2020 killing of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, other members of the Huwaitat tribe had been arrested for refusing to be evicted from their homes, and others have been arrested since. The following is a list of members of the tribe whose arrest and detention ALQST has been able to verify:

Sentenced to prison

1. Ahmed Abdel Nasser Ahmed al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 21 years
2. Abdullah Dakhil Allah Saleh al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 50 years
3. Muhammad Saqr Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 30 years
4. Abdullah Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 30 years
5. Abdulilah Rashid Ibrahim al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 50 years
6. Mustafa Abdul Rahim Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 38 years
7. Abdel Nasser Ahmed Hammoud al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 27 years
8. Maha Suleiman al-Qarani al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 23 years
9. Mahmoud Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 35 years
10. Rashid Ibrahim Maqbool al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 45 years
11. Abdullah Saleh Hayes al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 30 years
12. Ahmed Atallah Salameh al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 15 years
13. Thamer Tayseer Ibrahim al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 20 years
14. Mahmoud Salem Salama al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 22 years
15. Attia Suleiman Hamad al-Huwaiti	sentenced to 35 years

Sentenced to death

16. Shadli Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti
17. Ataullah Musa Muhammad al-Huwaiti
18. Ibrahim Saleh Ahmed Abu Khalil al-Huwaiti
19. Suleiman Mohammad Moussa al-Huwaiti
20. Eid Hmoud al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti

Detained, with no further information (at the time of writing this report)

21. Suleiman Muhammad Musa al-Huwaiti
22. Mohammed Dhahi al-Huwaiti
23. Ibrahim Atallah Salem al-Huwaiti
24. Daifallah Salama Midaan al-Huwaiti
25. Salem Diab al-Fayed
26. Sami Halil al-Azami al-Huwaiti
27. Suleiman al-Azami al-Huwaiti
28. Abdullah Suleiman Hamed al-Huwaiti
29. Abdullah Marzouq al-Qarani al-Huwaiti
30. Adel Bakheet al-Huwaiti
31. Mohamed Zayed al-Amiri al-Huwaiti
32. Hadi Salem Afnan al-Huwaiti
33. Abdul Hadi Mohammed al-Huwaiti
34. Abdullah Ahmed al-Huwaiti
35. Abdullah Atallah Salameh al-Huwaiti
36. Muhammad Eid al-Dabour al-Huwaiti
37. Muhammad Odeh al-Mashhuri al-Huwaiti
38. Mohammed Rashid al-Dhibani al-Huwaiti
39. Muhammad Mahmoud Suleiman al-Huwaiti - facing military trial

Released

40. Atallah bin Afnan Saleh al-Taqiqi al-Huwaiti
41. Sultan bin Ibrahim Hussain al-Taqiqi al-Huwaiti
42. Aoun bin Abdullah Ahmad al-Taqiqi al-Huwaiti
43. Khaled bin Abdullah Ahmad al-Taqiqi al-Huwaiti
44. Saleh bin Selim Ali al-Riqabi al-Huwaiti
45. Suleiman Salem al-Jarn al-Dhiabi al-Huwaiti
46. Muhammad Suleiman Atallah al-Huwaiti
47. Nawaf Suleiman Atallah al-Huwaiti

Prosecutions

In early 2022, when many of these individuals had already spent more than two years in arbitrary detention, ALQST received information about a wave of sentences being handed down on them. Over the course of 2022, ALQST learned of a number of extreme sentences being passed on detained members of the Huwaitat ranging from five years to the death penalty. This was at a time, mid-2022, when the Saudi courts were also handing down harsh sentences on peaceful activists, following Mohammed bin Salman's rehabilitation in the international community for the first time since the state-sponsored murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Many of these sentences were dramatically lengthened on appeal, which could be expected to deter individuals from appealing against wrongful convictions. Below are details of some of the cases we have been able to verify; the fate of other detained Huwaitat members remains unknown.

In August 2022, ALQST learned that the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal had sentenced both **Abdulilah Rashid Ibrahim al-Huwaiti** and **Abdullah Dakhil Allah al-Huwaiti** to 50 years in prison, followed by a 50-year travel ban, for supporting their family's refusal to be forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for the Neom project. Abdullah Dakhil Allah is a former employee in the al-Khuraiba municipality, who was dismissed from his job in 2005 due to an accusation of being in communication with London-based dissident Saad al-Faqih. He was arrested on 24 November 2020 together with Shadli Ahmed Mahmoud and Mahmoud Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti.

The charges against Abdullah Dakhil Allah included "adopting a terrorist approach by attacking the symbols of the state through social media, namely Twitter, Signal and Telegram, with the intention of destabilising the security and stability of the society and the state"; "supporting people with a terrorist ideology who seek to disturb public order and endanger its national unity, by possessing video clips of them and publishing them via the social networking site Twitter" and "possession of an unlicensed gun", which the authorities claimed he was going to use in terrorist operations.

In his defence statement, his lawyer pointed out that Abdullah Dakhil Allah had inherited the gun from his family and was in the process of licensing it. Regarding the charges related to his social media activity, the lawyer affirmed that his client felt a deep sense of loss for the homes of his parents and grandparents, which would cause him and his family harm and render him homeless; he was only looking for a way to voice his point of view to those responsible for the [Neom] project through the social media apps. He further claimed that the admissions made by his client during interrogation (he admitted to having been in contact with Human Rights Watch and having relayed information to them) were made against his will and under threat and intimidation. While Abdullah Dakhil Allah did not oppose the Neom project, he had hoped for relocation nearby rather than removal to a faraway location. He was initially sentenced on 31 January 2022 to 16 years in prison, which was later increased by the court of appeal to a 50-year term in prison followed by a travel ban of the same length.

Housewife **Maha Suleiman Al-Qarani al-Huwaiti** was arrested at her home in Dubai on 2 February 2021 when state security and emergency forces raided her house. They arrested her in front of her five children, the youngest of whom was four months old at the time. The reason for her arrest was a Twitter post about the cost of living and publicly mourning Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, the man shot dead by the security forces during the 2020 evictions. Maha was initially sentenced to one year in prison, then the sentence was increased to three years on appeal. However, she was later retried on the same charges, in violation of Saudi law, and in August 2022 was finally sentenced to 23 years in prison. She is currently being held in Dhahban Prison in Jeddah. While several women of the Huwaitat tribe were arrested and interrogated, we currently only know of Maha's prolonged arbitrary detention and sentencing.

Ahmed Abdel Nasser al-Huwaiti, a nephew of Abdul Rahim, the man shot dead by security forces, was a 19-year-old university student when he was arrested on 1 October 2020 on the campus of Prince Fahd bin Sultan University in Tabuk City. The charges brought against him included "preparing and sending information through his Twitter account that would harm public order"; "seeking to destabilise and disrupt the social fabric and national cohesion" and "expressing sympathy for dead terrorist [Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti]". According to his lawyer, Ahmed Abdel Nasser al-Huwaiti did not know that his uncle was classified as an opponent of the state and merely wanted to mourn his relative. He was initially sentenced to five years in prison, but his sentence was increased to 21 years on appeal. He too is currently being held in Dhahban Prison.

Members of the Huwaitat tribe have even been sentenced to death

Saudi Arabia's courts have also sentenced five members of the Huwaitat tribe to death. On 2 October 2022 the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) handed down death sentences on Shadli, Ibrahim and Atallah al-Huwaiti. **Ibrahim Saleh Ahmed al-Huwaiti** was one of the delegation of local residents who in 2020 met the official commission charged with securing government title to the lands required for the Neom project. **Atallah Musa Muhammad al-Huwaiti** was seen in several video clips talking about the misery his family and all the other displaced residents were facing as a result of the decision to evict them.

Shadli Ahmed Mahmoud al-Huwaiti is the brother of Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, who was shot dead by security forces in April 2020. Shadli was director of agriculture in the governorate of Al-Bidaa before being appointed as a manager of agriculture in the governorate of Dubai. He was arrested at his farm together with another brother, Mahmoud Ahmed Mahmoud, and his brother-in-law Abdullah Dakhil Allah on 24 November 2020. He was disappeared for two months before the authorities confirmed that he was being held at al-Tarfiya Prison in al-Qassim. During interrogation Shadli was subjected to various types of torture, including electrocution, beating on the soles of the feet (*falaqa*), exposure to extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation and prolonged periods of solitary confinement.

He went on trial on 15 March 2022, on charges that included “establishing a terrorist organisation to rebel against the ruler” and “creating a Twitter account to tear apart national cohesion”. On 23 May 2022, Shadli went on hunger strike in protest against ill-treatment and being placed in solitary confinement, and after two weeks the Dhahban Prison administration inserted a tube into his stomach to force-feed him, a form of torture.

Most recently, Suleiman Mohammad Moussa al-Huwaiti and Eid Hmoud al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti were also handed death sentences. Both had been subjected to enforced disappearance following their arrest, and were transferred to military court. At the time of writing this report, ALQST does not have any further information about their sentence.

These harsh punishments inflicted on members of the Huwaitat tribe are part of a wider trend that began in the summer of 2022, of individuals being sentenced to lengthy prison terms – of up to 50 years – simply for social media activity calling for social and political reform. The authorities have at the same time drastically increased their use of the death penalty and executed more than twice as many people in 2022 as they put to death in 2021. These developments, taken together, represent a sharp deterioration in the human rights situation following the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Mohammed bin Salman. They mark a return to the authorities’ former practice of targeting anyone expressing a desire for reform or criticising previous violations, regardless of whether they have any influence or social following.

In June 2020, ALQST and MENA Rights Group submitted an allegation letter to the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in relation to the death of Abdul Rahim Al Huwaiti. On 13 January 2023, ALQST and MENA Rights Group submitted the cases of Suleiman Mohammad Moussa al-Huwaiti and Eid Hmoud al-Mashouri al-Huwaiti to the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances. At the time of writing this report, both NGOs are preparing further submissions on behalf of members of the al-Huwaitat tribe to the UN Special Procedures.

6. Expropriations and associated violations in the context of Vision 2030: A consistent pattern

Land seizures and forced displacement are longstanding practices of the Saudi authorities, including the unlawful acquisition of land and properties without compensation, often on sites earmarked for state development projects. While the reasons for such actions vary, they are all marked by numerous rights violations on the ground, including unlawful demolition of homes and buildings, use of force and coercion, and failure to provide basic services or adequate compensation. In this context, it is important to note that Saudi Arabia has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which requires states parties to respect the right to adequate housing.

ALQST has been documenting demolitions in various parts of the country since 2014. Prior to the announcement of Vision 2030, there had already been [several cases](#) of expropriation of lands and displacement of the inhabitants. Examples include the displacement, from 2017 on, of hundreds of residents in the city of Awamiya following unrest in the area, as well as the deportation of inhabitants of Kharkhir governorate following administrative changes. Yet given the sheer scale of the massive projects envisaged in Vision 2030, the issue of forced displacements and their accompanying human rights violations have gained new relevance in recent years and will affect many more residents in the years to come.

Jeddah evictions and home demolitions

Another key feature of the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 programme is the \$20 billion Jeddah Central development project, which plans to remodel several neighbourhoods in the historic port city of Jeddah and construct, among other things, a museum, an opera house and a sports stadium as well as recreational and tourist areas. The large-scale evictions and demolitions that have taken place have affected more than half a million people. Demolitions in relation to this project began in October 2021, with videos of the destruction surfacing on social media, and continued until May 2022.

The authorities claimed, without providing evidence, that the purpose of the demolitions was to allow the redevelopment of run-down urban areas plagued by crime and lawlessness and to improve the quality of life for citizens. However, ALQST carried out a [survey](#)² in April 2022 that painted a very different picture, showing their devastating impact. Over 90% of the respondents had had either residential or commercial properties demolished. Although the authorities said residents of the demolished houses had no proof of ownership, 85% of those surveyed said they did possess documents proving their ownership. The other 15%

² ALQST, ALQST survey documents the devastating impact of Jeddah evictions and home demolitions, April 2022, <https://www.alqst.org/en/post/alqst-survey-documents-the-devastating-impact-of-jeddah-evictions-and-home-demolitions>

talked about how difficult it was dealing with the administrative issues involved, and how little interest the authorities had shown in producing, or issuing copies, for them of title deeds or equivalent documents.

The authorities also claimed that all the residents were given advance notice of the demolitions. 60% of our survey participants said they had received notification of the demolition in advance, though some said the time between notification and demolition had been extremely short. Meanwhile, almost 40% said they had not received any notification at all. Others said they were driven out of their homes when the electricity and water were cut off. Indeed, more than half of those surveyed said they were forced out with the threat of being sent to prison if the eviction order was not carried out.

Although the Saudi authorities had launched a compensation scheme by January 2022, almost two-thirds of the survey respondents said they had not been given clear information about the procedure for claiming compensation for the demolition of their properties, nor been helped to find alternative accommodation. Over 70% said they had not been told financial compensation was available, and they had not been given any money. This may have been partly because the compensation scheme only applied to Saudi nationals, excluding and discriminating against the large number of foreign nationals living in the area.

The small proportion of survey participants who said they had been provided with alternative accommodation said this consisted of a two-bedroom flat shared with another family. Many struggled to find alternative schools for their children in the areas they had moved to, some of which were remote and beyond the reach of public services. Some of those who had been forced out of their homes said they had gone a whole month without finding alternative accommodation, while rents had shot up to unaffordable levels. Others said they had found alternative housing that was very expensive and had had to pay their own deposit, after the authorities broke their promise to pay them compensation on the grounds that they earned high enough salaries to cover their outgoings.

Such examples represent only a fraction of the demolitions that have taken place without prior warning or consultation, and many other properties and inhabitants may well be at risk. This repeated pattern of forcible evictions, with their associated violations and lack of transparency, shows a consistent and systematic approach by the authorities in their dealings with homeowners. It routinely fails to respect their rights to housing and provides no means of obtaining justice for those who submit complaints. This is particularly relevant in view of the ongoing realisation of Vision 2030 as it foresees many more development projects, which may well be accompanied by similar abuses if these matters are not brought to the world's attention.

7. Corporate responsibility of businesses involved in Neom and similar Saudi projects

The Neom project, which has been mired in secrecy from the start and marked by serious rights violations, shows the extent to which the Saudi authorities are prepared to proceed with planned projects at the expense of local inhabitants. Yet foreign companies and investors, without whom the realisation of the Neom megacity project and Vision 2030 will not be possible, also bear a solemn corporate human rights responsibility.

Motivated by the massive incentives and subsidies the Saudi authorities are offering, many companies are jockeying for contracts at Neom in a variety of fields, ranging from strategic consulting and sophisticated technology to construction. All of these companies have a legal and moral responsibility to neither take part in nor benefit from human rights violations. This responsibility is enshrined in the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights ([UNGPs](#)), which state that "Business enterprises (...) should address adverse human rights impacts with which they are involved", and the fact that states are the duty-bearers does not absolve businesses of their own responsibility.

The UNGPs provide a framework for assessing whether companies respect the rights of those affected by their services and products. Notably, the UNGPs emphasise business commitments to respect human rights by undertaking due diligence processes to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for the human rights impact of their activities. However, the lack of mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with these principles remains a major barrier to greater corporate transparency and accountability. Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, where no independent civil society exists and expressing critical views of the authorities or government policies is heavily penalised, it is literally impossible to fully and satisfactorily carry out due diligence and stakeholder engagement.

In June 2020, ALQST and other NGOs sent a [joint letter](#) to several management consulting firms involved in Neom, expressing concern that their involvement had failed to prevent its adverse human rights impact on the local population, including the violation of their right of access to land and the punitive measures taken against them for peacefully expressing their opposition. Unfortunately, only one of the firms responded to the query, providing an inadequate assertion that the company engages where it believes the work "can contribute to positive economic and societal transformation". This formulation is sharply contradicted by what has been happening on the ground.

A selective list of foreign companies involved in Neom

Company name	Country	Industry	Further details
Boston Consulting Group	US	Consultancy	Provided consultancy during the early plans for Neom
Oliver Wyman	UK	Consultancy	Provided consultancy during the early plans for Neom
McKinsey & Co	UK	Consultancy	Provided consultancy during the early plans for Neom
Solar Water	UK	Energy	Chosen to build 'solar dome' desalination plant in 2020 ³
Air Products and Chemicals	US	Energy	Signed a \$5 billion agreement for a production facility in 2020 ⁴
Keller	UK	Construction	Signed an "umbrella framework agreement" ⁵
Bechtel	US	Construction	Awarded a contract for executive project management work ⁶

3 Environmental Expert, NEOM chooses Solar Water Plc for first solar desalination project, 30 January 2020, <https://www.environmental-expert.com/news/neom-chooses-solar-water-plc-for-first-solar-desalination-project-843452>

4 Air Products, Air Products, ACWA Power and NEOM Sign Agreement for \$5 Billion Production Facility in NEOM Powered by Renewable Energy for Production and Export of Green Hydrogen to Global Markets, 7 July 2020, <https://www.airproducts.com/news-center/2020/07/0707-air-products-agreement-for-green-ammonia-production-facility-for-export-to-hydrogen-market>

5 Keller, New contract, trading update and interim dividend increase, 27 June 2022, <https://www.keller.com/news/new-contract-trading-update-and-interim-dividend-increase>

6 Bechtel, NEOM selects U.S. construction leader Bechtel to accelerate primary infrastructure development for its Cognitive Cities, 10 August 2020, <https://www.bechtel.com/newsroom/releases/2020/08/neom-selects-bechtel-infrastructure-development/>

AECOM	US	Consultancy	Awarded a multi-year contract to provide project management consultancy ⁷
FCC Construction SA	Spain	Construction	Awarded a drill and blast tunnelling contract ⁸
China State Construction Engineering Corporation	China	Construction	Awarded a drill and blast tunnelling contract ⁹
Samsung C&T Corporation	South Korea	Construction	Awarded a drill and blast tunnelling contract ¹⁰
Hyundai Engineering and Construction Co. Ltd	South Korea	Construction	Awarded a drill and blast tunnelling contract ¹¹

7 AECOM, AECOM secures project management consultancy services contract for Saudi Arabia's NEOM Bay mega-project, 9 July 2019, <https://aecom.com/press-releases/aecom-secures-project-management-consultancy-services-contract-for-saudi-arabias-neom-bay-mega-project/>

8 Neom, Neom awards one of the world's largest drill and blast tunneling contracts, 14 June 2022, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/newsroom/neom-tunneling-contracts>

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

8. Recommendations

ALQST calls on businesses involved in Neom to:

- reflect upon your legal and moral responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and relevant company commitments;
- engage in meaningful consultation with the affected communities, Saudi civil society members in the diaspora and other relevant stakeholders in order to gauge existing or potential adverse human rights impacts;
- provide mitigations, such as relief to the Huwaitat through grants or relocation assistance;
- ensure that the services, technologies and materials provided to the Saudi authorities cannot and will not be used in violations of basic human rights; and
- reassess your involvement in the Neom project, and be prepared to cease your engagement, unless and until the adverse human rights impacts can be addressed.

ALQST calls on the Saudi authorities to:

- respect all residents' rights to adequate housing without discrimination;
- carry out a prompt and transparent inquiry into the mass evictions that have taken place at the Neom site;
- provide mechanisms whereby those who have suffered violations can obtain justice;
- address evicted residents' immediate needs for accommodation and for education and health services;
- hold timely and inclusive public consultations on all current and future development plans, to ensure that the rights, needs and interests of all stakeholders are met;
- release all members of the Huwaitat tribe arbitrarily arrested for publicly criticising their eviction and drop all charges against them;
- amend the national Law of Eminent Domain and Temporary Taking of Property of 2003 to bring it into line with international standards; and
- ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and ensure that Saudi laws and regulations comply with it.

The Dark Side of Neom:

Expropriation, expulsion and
prosecution of the region's
inhabitants



ALQST for Human Rights

February 2023

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