

GNI Statement: Prioritizing Human Rights in IGF Host Selection

The Global Network Initiative (GNI), the preeminent multistakeholder organization focusing on privacy and freedom of expression in the technology sector, is deeply troubled by the United Nations' decision to hold the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia this year. The decision to convene in Saudi Arabia creates an impression that the IGF community, the UN bodies that help to organize it, and the diverse stakeholders that participate in it, are turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's long record of human rights violations.

The IGF is considered the world's premier multistakeholder event for discussing some of the foremost challenges facing the evolution of the Internet and related technologies. This year, in particular, it is set to play an important role in evaluating the outcomes of and discussing the next steps related to other key multilateral processes convenings earlier this year, including the Global Digital Compact (GDC), the WSIS+20 High-Level Event, and the Summit of the Future.

However, hosting the IGF in Saudi Arabia imperils the safety of and therefore will limit the attendance and participation of many longstanding and expert members of the internet governance community, particularly women, LGBTQ+ people, journalists, and human rights defenders. GNI stands in solidarity with those working to promote human rights in Saudi Arabia and calls on the host country to release those improperly detained. We also set forth below several recommendations for improving the IGF's hosting decisions going forward.

GNI's Participation in IGF 2024

Given GNI's longstanding support for the IGF's role in fostering multistakeholder approaches to internet governance, GNI is hosting a session on "[Multistakeholder Best Practices: NETMundial GDC, WSIS & Beyond](#)," and participating in several other important sessions, including "[From WSIS to GDC-Harmonising strategies towards coordination](#)" and "[Digital Solidarity & Rights-Based Capacity Building](#)." However, due to our concerns about the host country, GNI has decided not to attend this year's IGF in person and wishes to state clearly our opposition to and concern with the ongoing repression of human rights by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Importance of IGF's Multistakeholder Model

The amount of institutional knowledge the IGF holds and the community of technologists, civil society groups, businesses, researchers, and policymakers it has fostered over the years is incomparable to any other existing process. It is for these, among other reasons, that the IGF, including the intersessional work through the national and regional IGFs (NRIs), Dynamic Coalitions, and Policy Networks, has become a vital component of the governance of the Internet

and related technologies, and why it must be preserved, protected, strengthened and broadened. In line with the recommendations set out in the UN Global Digital Compact, GNI calls on UN member states to renew the mandate of the IGF during the WSIS+20 review.

Saudi Authorities Must Uphold Human Rights

Although this is not the first time that the IGF is being hosted in a country that has a problematic human rights record, hosting the IGF in Saudi Arabia could not be more clearly misaligned with the IGF's stated values and goals. The Saudi government routinely stifles freedom of expression and press freedom, targeting [journalists](#), writers, activists, and [cartoonists](#) with imprisonment, harsh and lengthy sentences, and travel bans. It is also a routine preparator of [transnational repression](#), targeting human rights defenders and dissidents based abroad. Saudi Arabia has also not ratified the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and we expect it to uphold the human rights commitments set forth in that document. According to paragraph 22 of the GDC, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has committed “to respect, protect and promote human rights in the digital space.”

While the government of Saudi Arabia has taken some high-profile decisions to expand a small set of domestic civil liberties, it has continued to [persecute and detain many citizens](#) for online activities that are protected under international human rights law, including:

- [Hatem al-Najjar](#), a Palestinian journalist, was arrested in January 2024 after pro-government social media accounts called for his arrest over old tweets that were perceived by some as critical of Saudi Arabia.
- Manahel al-Otaibi, a 30-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist, was [sentenced](#) in January 2024 to 11 years in prison for promoting women's rights online.
- Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, a 55-year-old retired schoolteacher, was [sentenced](#) to death in July 2023 for criticizing authorities on X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube.
- Asaad al-Ghamdi (his brother) a 47-year-old Saudi teacher, was [sentenced](#) in May 2024 for several criminal offenses related solely to peaceful expression online.
- Salma al-Shehab, 34, a doctoral student studying in the UK and mother of two young children, was [arrested](#) on a visit home to Saudi Arabia and sentenced in August 2022 for having a Twitter account and following and retweeting dissidents and activists.
- Osama Khalid and Ziad al-Sufyani, both volunteer Wikipedia editors and administrators, were [arrested in 2020](#) and initially sentenced to five and fourteen years' imprisonment respectively, before Khalid's sentence was increased to 32 years upon his appeal.

As the IGF convenes in Riyadh, GNI urges the government of Saudi Arabia to immediately release all political prisoners jailed for exercising their fundamental human right to freedom of expression. In so doing, the nation's leaders can demonstrate genuine commitment to the IGF's objective of [advancing human rights and inclusion in the digital age](#).

Saudi authorities must also uphold the values of the UN, including freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and create a conducive environment for open dialogue and collaboration. We urge them, the UN, and the IGF Secretariat to ensure that visas are allocated expeditiously to those who wish to attend the IGF in person, and protect the safety, security, and data privacy of all participants, [including journalists](#). It is imperative that in-person attendees feel free to express their views without fear of digital surveillance, online harassment, or reprisal during or after the conference.

IGF Should Reconsider its Host Selection Process

According to the IGF's [FAQ page](#), decisions on where to host the IGF are made by the IGF Secretariat "based on the suitability of facilities and conditions for hosting", as well as on the need to rotate among regions and between developing and developed countries. Notwithstanding this rhetorical commitment, it is important to note that the UN's limited financial support significantly restricts the pool of potential hosts. Once a host is chosen, a Host Country Agreement (HCA) is supposed to outline the responsibilities of both parties. However, the IGF Secretariat has consistently been opaque about the selection process, including which countries expressed interest, the criteria used, and the specific terms of the HCAs.

Reiterating recommendations from the Freedom Online Coalition [Advisory Network](#), GNI encourages the IGF Secretariat to enhance transparency and accountability in the host country selection process. By sharing relevant information, including draft HCAs with the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) and soliciting broader input on human rights and other concerns, the Secretariat can ensure a more inclusive and informed decision-making process. Additionally, incorporating a rigorous human rights due diligence process into the review of future host locations is crucial to upholding the IGF's commitment to human rights.

While GNI remains committed to the IGF's mission and its multistakeholder model, we urge the IGF Secretariat and the UN to prioritize human rights in future host country selections. GNI also calls on the international community to hold the Saudi Arabian government accountable for its human rights record and to advocate for the release of all political prisoners.