

### Short description of what happened

The trolling started after Reem Abdellatif, a prominent Egyptian-American journalist now based in The Netherlands, published her first column in December for the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz. Titled “How I escaped Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom that terrorizes women,” it described the challenges she faced as a female journalist who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia and denounced Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s much-publicized Vision 2030 reform plan as a smokescreen to divert attention from human rights abuses. Almost immediately, she began receiving hateful messages.

### Full case study

#### What is it like for women journalists in the Gulf?

You can be targeted for being a journalist, a woman, and a woman of Egyptian or African descent. I faced attacks and sexism in the Gulf because I tick all three boxes.

Systemic racism and gendered attacks are huge challenges. The only difference (with the rest of the Arab world) is that some countries, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, invest more money in PR to control the narrative and their image. Social media users and propagandists from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia have infiltrated online spaces to silence critics. Twitter has become their playground. Almost every woman journalist who dares to criticize or question authorities in the region gets threatened or trolled online.

Women journalists rarely report these attacks because there is a lack of accountability.

There has always been a fear of authority in the Middle East region due to assassinations of journalists, forced disappearances, or gendered attacks, as happened to Ghada Oueiss<sup>1</sup> (a Lebanese journalist for Al-Jazeera who alleges that her phone was hacked and she faced online harassment). Others are also worried about losing their jobs. I was warned by many female colleagues to avoid speaking about my experience before I left the Gulf. Some were genuinely scared for my life or the lives of my loved ones; others warned me I might never work in media again because Saudi Arabia is invested in prominent media organizations, including Bloomberg<sup>2</sup>.

This culture of silence is why perpetrators act with impunity. The global community also turns a blind eye to perpetrators in the Middle East because they think this behavior is part of the culture. It is

1 <https://cpj.org/2021/02/ghada-oueiss-hacking-harassment-jamal-khashoggi/>

2 <https://www.bloomberg.com/distribution/blog/2017-09-20/bloom>

[bergs-saudi-research-marketing-group-srmg-sign-agreement-launch-bloomberg-al-arabiya/](https://www.bloomberg.com/distribution/blog/2017-09-20/bloom-bergs-saudi-research-marketing-group-srmg-sign-agreement-launch-bloomberg-al-arabiya/)

linked to racism and perpetuates a colonialist mentality that has no place in today's world. It puts women like me and many others at risk.

Your columns on topics like sexual abuse and harassment of female journalists have drawn a lot of criticism. Do you think this has to do with the outlet that published them — Haaretz — or the issues you address in your columns?

Social media accounts claiming to be from Saudi Arabia and even a few colleagues from the Middle East tried to discredit my lived experiences simply because I published in Haaretz – an Israeli newspaper. These attacks never offer constructive criticism or an invitation for dialogue. The real issue is that I am a woman of Middle Eastern descent who overstepped societal boundaries to choose where and how my testimonies get published. This is what our attackers fear more than anything: women reclaiming the narrative.

The unhinged behavior and discrimination that I witnessed while working in Saudi Arabia is very similar to the gendered attacks that I'm currently experiencing online. Twitter users claiming to be from Saudi Arabia have launched relentless attacks against me for questioning authority and discussing the need for deep structural reforms. They use profanities that are meant to break and disempower women, particularly in traditional Middle Eastern societies. The words they use to attack me and other women would never be used to describe men. The lengths they go to can be emotionally draining, nerve-wracking, and frightening at times.

As a journalist, I've been very active online for over a decade now, mainly covering the Middle East and the Gulf region. I lived for nearly 12 years in the Middle East, with five of those based in the United Arab Emirates. Now, the pandemic has pushed women like me further into the digital space. That's why today, strategic information warfare is the new frontline, and journalists who question authority are on the frontlines.

What was the content of some of these attacks?

They called me names, used racist slurs against me because I am Egyptian and from Africa, told me to keep my nose away from Saudi Arabia, threatened sexual abuse and rape, made uninvited lewd sexual advances, accused me of working for the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar.

The threats grew more serious after I published my second column<sup>3</sup> for Haaretz stressing the need for the Arab world to deal with sexual harassment and assault and to break the silence surrounding these issues. Somebody claiming to be from Saudi Arabia sent me an email<sup>4</sup> that I posted on Twitter and read "Die with anger and expect strong retaliation soon." Die with anger is indeed an Arabic saying that doesn't necessarily mean one should literally die, but when followed by such remarks as "expect strong retaliation soon," it is worrying.

In your opinion, what needs to be done to improve the situation for female journalists in the Gulf and what should journalists bear in mind when reporting on issue like sexual harassment and abuse? Women, activists, journalists, and survivors of gender-based violence must reclaim free agency over their stories and bodies. We must continue to exercise our basic human right to free expression.

Women in the region must also reclaim the narrative. Our stories must be told by us in ways that can empower future generations and educate global communities. By that, I mean we must forge our own paths and start believing that we have a right to take up space. The international community and nations that uphold human rights, particularly the United States, must be supportive of journalists in the region. That is the only way sustainable change can happen.

This case study was originally published by the Committee to Protect Journalists.  
<https://cpj.org/2021/03/journalist-reem-abdellatif-on-the-risks-facing-female-reporters-who-cover-the-gulf/>

*notes*