



Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

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Joint Statement: Freedom of Association Must be Respected for Dialogue to be Possible

The undersigned civil society organizations would like to first express gratitude for the important role that the OHCHR has and continues to play in addressing human rights violations in Bahrain. Bahraini civil society has and will continue to work closely with the OHCHR to improve the human rights situation in Bahrain.

It is with disappointment that the undersigned independent civil society organizations in Bahrain have collectively decided to not attend the event organized by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights jointly with the National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) and relevant government agencies. It is important to note that the NIHR does not meet the Paris Principles, namely the requirements to guarantee pluralism and independence.

This initiative comes at a time when the Bahraini government continues to carry out attacks against and/or severely restricts the space and ability of independent human rights defenders and organizations working in Bahrain. The majority of independent Bahraini human rights organizations, including the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, have been dissolved or prevented from registering as formal organizations in the country. Many independent Bahraini human rights defenders have been imprisoned for exercising their rights to freedom of assembly and expression, and many have also been forced into exile for fear of attacks or imprisonment. This includes prominent human rights defenders Nabeel Rajab and Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, both of whom are still serving arbitrary prison terms for their work. Furthermore, in 2013, a draconian draft law on civil organizations was sent to Parliament. If approved, it will work to further [restrict and control](#) the work of civil society organizations.

Human rights defenders continue to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, ill treatment, defamation campaigns, harassment, unfair trials and incarceration. We strongly believe that to have a genuine dialogue, the voices of these actors would need to be included in any process. All the while, larger patterns of human rights violations are still rampant in the country, and no genuine accountability measures have been taken by the government to address past and ongoing violations.

In this context, the OHCHR has regrettably not invited civil society organizations to participate in the series of events that have been organized alongside the NIHR. Instead, persons have been invited in an individual capacity. We believe this to be a highly dangerous concession by the OHCHR for the holding of these meetings, as it begins a process within a framework that denies independent human rights defenders their fundamental right of association, which includes the freedom to join and create organizations.

We fear the adoption by the OHCHR of this framework is very likely to be used to justify and legitimize the repressive policies of the Bahrain government. Moreover, by organizing this meeting, the OHCHR has greatly undermined our confidence that our voices will be respected and listened to within the proceedings of the meeting on an equal footing as the government.

This is especially disappointing considering that several civil society organizations members specifically highlighted this issue and the need for recognition of human rights organizations within any OHCHR event in a meeting with OHCHR representatives during the 25th Session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Civil society in Bahrain is more than willing to participate in OHCHR organized events for the sake of promoting human rights in the country. We cannot, however, do so under circumstances that appear to propagate the systematic problems that have led to the current human rights crises within Bahrain.

We urge the OHCHR to ensure that any activities it is involved with are organized in a manner that fully respects the fundamental rights of human rights defenders.

Signatories:

1. Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy
2. Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain
3. Bahrain Center for Human Rights
4. Hope Defenders
5. Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights
6. European Bahraini Organization for Human Rights
7. Ebtisam Alsaegh – Independent activist