

Mr. President,

Last week, the Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Expression emphasized his concern over the depth and breadth of restrictions on all forms of freedom of expression worldwide, including attacks on political dissent. Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain would like to call the Council's attention to the deeply concerning examples of such attacks in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Unfortunately, these states continue to suppress free expression in their legal systems, often imposing criminal sanctions on individuals who express opinions that are critical of the government.

For example, Mohammed al-Ajami, a Qatari literature student and poet, is currently in prison for the contents of his poetry, which expresses dissent toward the government.

In August 2010, Mr. al-Ajami recited a poem critical of the government at a private event. On November 16, 2011, Qatari state security arrested him in relation to his poetry and charged him with inciting the overthrow of the ruling government and criticizing the Emir.

The government did not allow Mr. al-Ajami to attend his trial, and appointed two separate lawyers for Mr. al-Ajami even though he had already retained independent counsel. Additionally, Mr. al-Ajami's attorney was not permitted to give oral arguments at the trial. On November 29, 2012, the Criminal Court in Doha convicted Mr. al-Ajami and sentenced him to life in prison. An appellate court later reduced this sentence to 15 years. On October 21, 2013, Qatar's Supreme Court confirmed this sentence despite arguments that the charges and trial were deeply flawed.

As states like Qatar continue to criminalize dissent, we ask the Council to call upon all States to respect and fully implement the right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and fully protect all forms of peaceful expression, including political dissent. We also call on Qatar, as a Member of the Human Rights Council, to immediately free Mohammed al-Ajami, and all others who are in prison for their peaceful expression.

Thank you.