

Mr. President,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain would like raise our deep concerns over a negative international trend toward restrictions on the right to free expression. This trend is most vividly observed in the examples of GCC States like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. These increased restrictions stand in direct contravention with the aims and objectives outlined in the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action.

In Bahrain, the government continues to use its expansive anti-terror laws to criminalize most forms of expression critical of the government. This month, a Bahraini court upheld a 6 month prison sentence for a tweet posted by the country's most prominent human rights defender: Nabeel Rajab. Mr. Rajab could face up-to-10 more years in prison if convicted on additional charges also in relation to his tweets. Mr. Rajab now joins fellow human rights defenders, like Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Abduljalil Singace, in a Bahraini prison. In addition to human rights defenders, this month Bahrain also sentenced political opposition leader Sheikh Ali al-Salman to 4 years in prison in relation to his peaceful expression.

Across the causeway from Bahrain is another example of a State committed to restricting free expression by any means necessary: Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government too has utilized its anti-terror laws to restrict peaceful dissenting expression in the name of state security. To this end, Saudi Arabia has created a parallel court system under the Ministry of Interior to try cases under its anti-terror law. This month, a Saudi court upheld the sentence of 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes against the Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi. Additional dissenting voices—like Waleed Abu al-Khair, Mohammed al-Qahtani and Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr—also face sentences ranging from 10 years in prison to death by beheading.

Mr. President, we call on all States that criminalize peaceful expression, like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, to immediately release all those imprisoned for their free expression and to review and amend all laws with a view towards ensuring international standards of free expression, in line with the aims and objectives of the Vienna Declaration.

Thank you.