

Mr. President,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain welcomes this opportunity to comment on the ongoing technical cooperation agreement between the Office of the High Commissioner and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We would like to express our concern with the progress of this agreement as it approaches its formal conclusion at the end of this year.

While we encourage the formal commitment of Saudi Arabia to engage with the OHCHR in technical assistance and capacity building programs, we are concerned that two years into the agreement, we have seen little improvement in the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia, which remains one of the worst in the world.

We are particularly concerned with the continued lack of judicial independence in the country, evidenced by a large number of arbitrary sentences that continue to criminalize free expression. This has been specifically highlighted in the past year, with the sentencing of human rights activist and blogger Raif Badawi and his lawyer, human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair, as well as with the pending death sentence against Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Likewise, Saudi Arabia maintains lengthy arbitrary sentences against other human rights defenders like Mohammed al-Qahtani. A further gap in implementation of the 2002 recommendations issued by the SR on Independence of Judges and Lawyers, emphasizes a need to focus on technical assistance and capacity building with a view toward substantive reform of the Saudi judiciary.

We would also like to express that continued attacks on members of Saudi civil society undermine the spirit of the Kingdom's agreement with OHCHR, which should be granted full permission to lead capacity building activities for civil society actors, without fear of targeted reprisals.

With this in mind, we call on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to extend its agreement with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and to ensure this agreement encompasses technical assistance in key areas such as the criminal justice and judiciary systems. We further call on Saudi Arabia to guarantee the full participation of civil society with complete protection against intimidation or reprisal.

Thank you.