



US Secretary of State John Kerry's First Visit to Bahrain

United States Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Manama this week to meet with Bahraini officials and participate in a ministerial meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). With US government sources [indicating](#) that “regional security [will likely] dominate” the talks, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) urges Secretary Kerry to address the sources of internal instability in his host country. We call on Secretary Kerry to use his first visit to Manama to assert in person what the State Department has supported in the past: the institution of greater human rights protections, the implementation of democratic reforms, and the release of all prisoners of conscience in Bahrain.

Five years on from the peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations in 2011, the Government of Bahrain has [intensified](#) its suppression of free assembly, free expression, and free association, with security forces targeting human rights defenders and political activists for arbitrary detention, [torture](#), and even [death](#).

Yet, as the government has continued to restrict the development of civil society in Bahrain, Secretary Kerry and the US State Department have increasingly rolled back their public criticism. In 2014, after Bahraini officials expelled Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski for meeting with members of the opposition, Secretary Kerry [strongly criticized](#) the government for hindering the reconciliation process and prosecuting political leaders like Sheikh Ali Salman and Khalil Marzouq of the al-Wefaq Political Society, the country's largest opposition group. Only a year later, however, Secretary Kerry [praised](#) King Hamad al-Khalifa and the royal family for working “diligently” and “closely” with the US to foster an open dialogue with the country's political opposition leaders – even as many of those same individuals, like Sheikh Salman, [remained](#) in jail. The monarchy has since abandoned its commitment to the national dialogue process altogether, stating that it should only take place in the parliament which no longer includes members of the opposition as the result of an electoral boycott.

Despite Secretary Kerry's encouragement, Bahrain's authorities have shown no signs of reversing this shift away from reform. As recently as 14 March 2016, security forces [incarcerated](#) human rights defender Zainab al-Khawaja and her 15-month-old son on charges related to her peaceful dissent. Her father, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, is one of thirteen prominent activists and opposition leaders [serving](#) up to life in prison for their connection to the pro-democracy movement in 2011, known as the Bahrain 13. Sheikh Salman, Secretary General of al-Wefaq and the same leader targeted after meeting with Assistant Secretary of State Malinowski in 2014, will be standing trial on additional charges related to his peaceful political activism on 11 April 2016 – only several days after Secretary Kerry's upcoming visit. Though a [spokesperson](#) for the US State Department “encouraged” the release of Sheikh Salman and the leader of the Wa'ad Political Society, Ibrahim Sharif, during the fifth anniversary of Bahrain's uprising, both men remain in detention.

“As most obviously evidenced by the continued persecution of Sheikh Ali Salman and other peaceful political activists, the Government of Bahrain has – at best – demonstrated a clear unwillingness to make good on its promised reforms,” said Husain Abdulla, Executive Director of ADHRB, “At worst, it is actively regressing, with new means of targeting political dissent, such as [citizenship revocation](#) and [forced deportation](#), on the rise. Secretary Kerry needs to publicly stand beside the Bahraini Foreign Minister and reiterate personally the need for demonstrable reengagement with the reconciliation process on behalf of the Government of Bahrain.”

Last month, Secretary Kerry [spoke](#) about the deteriorating political situation in Egypt – another key US ally – emphasizing that “restrictions on the space for civil society activity will create neither stability nor security.” In the absence of any evidence that the Government of Bahrain has lifted similar restrictions, Secretary Kerry must raise these same concerns during his upcoming trip to Manama. ADHRB urges Secretary Kerry to publicly call for the release of all prisoners of conscience in Bahrain, such as Sheikh Salman, Zainab al-Khawaja, and the Bahrain 13, as well as the cessation of travel bans on human rights defenders like Nabeel Rajab. We also call on him to demonstrate the US government’s ongoing commitment to open dialogue in Bahrain by meeting with representatives of the political opposition, as the State Department has done in the past. Finally, we call on Secretary Kerry to urge the Government of Bahrain to implement the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), end its suppression of civil society, and meet its international treaty obligations to uphold human rights standards. Only these measures will achieve the US objectives of securing sustainable political development and enduring stability in Bahrain.