



17 November 2017

The Honorable Justin Siberell
United States Embassy Manama
Bldg 979, Road 3119, Block 331, Zinj
P.O. Box 26431
Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain

Ambassador Siberell,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) would like to welcome you to your new post as the United States (US) Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bahrain. As an organization founded by Bahraini-Americans, we thank you for your service and your continued contributions to America's interests abroad. We welcome many of the commitments you made during your confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including those to monitor the upcoming 2018 lower-house parliamentary elections; ensure a robust dialogue with the government with a view toward advancing human rights reforms; and prevent the authorities from misusing anti-terror measures and anti-terror support to "conflate legitimate political speech with terrorism." The current administration has made troubling comments about wholly de-linking human rights and security issues in Bahrain, so we particularly appreciated your position "that there need [not be] a contradiction between promotion and protection of human rights...and effective security practices which protect the population, and that is a point I will continue to emphasize ... that we need to bring these two together." Now that you have formally presented your diplomatic credentials to Bahrain's king, we strongly encourage you to fulfill these pledges and work to re-emphasize the core importance of human rights and reform within the US-Bahrain bilateral relationship.

As you begin your term, however, we would also like to draw your attention to the overall deterioration of the kingdom's human rights situation in recent years, as well as key areas for positive US engagement. Specifically, we would like to raise the following major issues of concern: the extreme repression of independent civil society; the closure of political space and its implications for the upcoming 2018 elections; systematic religious discrimination; and escalating US cooperation, assistance, and arms transfers to the Bahraini security services responsible for such discrimination and abuse.

Overall Situation: Reversing Reforms

Over the last 12-24 months, the Bahraini government has [intensified](#) the repressive measures put in place after the 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations, and has even withdrawn some of the few reforms it had previously implemented. The authorities began 2017 by ending a *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty, executing three victims of torture after trials marred by serious due process violations. That same month, the government restored domestic law enforcement powers to Bahrain's National Security Agency (NSA), an institution implicated in systematic and widespread torture in 2011. In April, the king approved a constitutional amendment allowing civilians to be tried in military courts, with the first set of proceedings starting last month against several victims of enforced disappearance. Bahrain's leading Shia cleric, Sheikh Isa Qassim, was convicted of money laundering in May on politically motivated charges, and the government used lethal force to clear a months-long peaceful sit-in around his home, killing five demonstrators and injuring hundreds. That same month the courts disbanded the kingdom's last major opposition political society, Wa'ad, and in June the government indefinitely suspended operations at the country's only independent newspaper, *Al-Wasat*. Meanwhile, the government continued its relentless suppression of civil society, committing reprisals against activists and their families and effectively cutting of them off from the international community.

The government's decision to re-empower the NSA, in particular, represents a complete reversal of one of just two recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) that the authorities had actually

implemented. Its moves to expand the military court jurisdiction and resume executions contravene in spirit the only other recommendation to be fully implemented, which called for a commutation of death penalties issued by the military tribunals of 2011.

Repression of Independent Civil Society

Throughout this overarching campaign, Bahrain has targeted most leading civil society actors with arbitrary arrest and detention, including prominent human rights defenders like Nabeel Rajab and Ebtisam al-Saegh. [Rajab](#), the president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, has been arbitrarily detained since June 2016 on charges related solely to free expression, and in July 2017 he received a two-year prison sentence for discussing Bahrain's restrictions on free press during media interviews. He currently faces another 15 years in a separate trial for comments made on social media in which he criticized the war in Yemen and the systematic use of torture in Bahrain's prisons. Additionally, the authorities have also threatened to prosecute Rajab over editorials that have been published in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*, and another set of comments posted to his social media accounts while he was in detention.

Although [al-Saegh](#) was just recently released from prison, she endured severe physical, sexual, and psychological torture and may still face prosecution on unfounded "terror" charges based on her human rights work. During her detention, security officials – including NSA personnel – specifically interrogated her about her work with international human rights non-governmental organizations, international human rights institutions like the United Nations Human Rights Council, and other Bahraini activists.

The authorities have also intensified reprisals against exiled activists living outside Bahrain by targeting their family members that remain in the kingdom. In October 2017, the government convicted three [family members](#) of human rights defender Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, director of advocacy at the London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), in clear retaliation for his continued campaigning. Hajer Mansoor Hassan, Sayed Nizar Alwadaei and Mahmood Marzooq Mansoor were falsely accused under the broad and unjust anti-terror law in the country, and were arbitrarily arrested, tortured and convicted in an unfair trial that did not observe due process.

Meanwhile, high-profile [prisoners of conscience](#) convicted on charges related to the 2011 pro-democracy movement remain in prison, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace. They remain isolated from Bahrain's thousands of other political prisoners and face ongoing degradation, arbitrary punishment, and deprivation of adequate medical care from the prison administration.

By many metrics, the current level of civil society repression is worse even than in 2011, with many of the current restrictive measures and reprisals taken under 'normal' circumstances rather than under a state of emergency. The recent intensity of the campaign has led some activists to [describe](#) the present situation as one of "de facto martial law." Specifically, the expansion of the military courts' jurisdiction and the restoration of the NSA's arrest authority threatens to establish a parallel legal system for more rapidly torturing, incarcerating, or even executing civil society actors falsely identified as 'enemies of the state.'

Amid these troubling developments, and given the general lack of transparency and due process guarantees within the Bahraini judicial system, we urge you to visit prisoners of conscience and attend activists' trials in an effort to safeguard their wellbeing and basic judicial and procedural rights.

Closure of Political Space

Likewise, the Government of Bahrain has systematically targeted all formal political opposition, grossly violating the rights to free expression and association while effectively closing space for peaceful dissent. Most recently, on 26 October 2017, Bahrain's High Court of Appeals confirmed the [dissolution](#) and asset seizure of Wa'ad (also known as the National Democratic Action Society), the country's largest secular, leftist opposition group. The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MoJ) [launched](#) dissolution proceedings against Wa'ad on 6 March 2017, citing unsubstantiated allegations of "incitement of acts of terrorism and promoting violent and forceful overthrow

of the political regime” [after](#) the society issued a statement describing Bahrain as experiencing a “constitutional political crisis.” The MoJ’s [accusations](#) also concerned Wa’ad’s “support with the Al-Wefaq” and its alleged description of the three individuals executed by the government in January 2017 – who were tortured into providing false confessions – as “martyrs.” According to state media, the ruling was partially based on the [argument](#) that the “society cannot claim to exercise its freedom of expression” because it reportedly fails “to recognize the constitution.” The society’s assets are now to be liquidated and “deposited into the State’s Treasury.” Meanwhile, the authorities have continued to judicially harass the group’s leaders, including Ebrahim Sharif, Farida Ghulam, and Radhi al-Mosawi, with charges and travel bans stemming solely from free expression, free assembly, and their association with Wa’ad.

The government took similar action against Bahrain’s largest political group, Al-Wefaq, on 14 June 2016, when a Bahraini court [approved](#) the society’s suspension within hours of receiving a request from the MoJ. Authorities immediately enforced the order, freezing the group’s assets, blocking its website, and closing its headquarters. On 17 July 2016, after the judiciary expedited the legal proceedings, Bahrain’s High Civil Court [affirmed](#) the order and formally dissolved Al-Wefaq. The Second High Civil Court of Appeals upheld the dissolution on 22 September. Al-Wefaq’s Secretary-General, Sheikh Ali Salman, is currently serving a four-year prison [sentence](#) stemming from a political speech, and he [recently received](#) new charges over alleged communications he had with the Qatari government in 2011 amid Bahrain’s ongoing diplomatic row with that country.

The authorities [dissolved](#) another opposition political group, Amal, in 2012, and it is currently [incarcerating](#) Fadhel Abbas, the leader of the smaller leftist society Al-Wahdawi, on charges related to tweets.

Ahead of the elections for the lower house of Bahrain’s parliament expected in 2018, the government appears to be eliminating all official opposition and further restricting independent political activity. The US and other key allies have specifically urged Bahrain to open political space for real opposition engagement, and the Department of State has expressed repeated concern over the targeting of groups like [Wa’ad](#) and [Al-Wefaq](#).

In your confirmation hearing, you said that “effective channels for political discourse...are critical to ensuring essential stability upon which [the US-Bahrain] partnership must rest and ultimately for the stability and strength of the Bahraini state and its relationship with its people.” We urge you to follow through on this commitment and work to ensure that the Bahraini government reverses its attack on peaceful political opposition and allows full, representative participation in the 2018 election. Additionally, we encourage you to press for broader democratic reform of the Bahraini political system to expand the authority and independence of the elected representatives, and to guarantee fair and free elections by reducing abusive practices like sectarian gerrymandering. Most importantly, you must work to secure the release of imprisoned opposition leaders targeted solely for their political activism so that Bahrain can restart a genuine national dialogue.

Violations of Religious Freedom

Against the backdrop of these intensified attacks on civic and political space, the Government of Bahrain has also continued to perpetuate longstanding forms of discrimination against its majority Shia Muslim population. Launching the State Department’s 2016 International Religious Freedom Report earlier this year, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explicitly [cited](#) Bahrain as one of the world’s worst violators of the right to free belief. The secretary stated: “The [Bahraini] government continued to detain and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians. Members of the Shia community there continue to report ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. Bahrain must stop discrimination against the Shia communities.”

As documented in the State Department’s report, the [Bahraini Shia population](#) remains economically and socially marginalized, and is disproportionately subject to abuses like arbitrary detention, citizenship revocation, excessive restrictions on religious practices, and the targeted judicial harassment of faith leaders. For example, the Bahraini authorities arbitrarily denaturalized the country’s leading Shia cleric, [Sheikh Isa Qassim](#), in 2016, charging him and two other clerics, Mirza al-Dirazi and Sheikh Hussain al-Mahroos, with alleged money laundering the

following month. These charges stemmed from religious practices, with the government targeting Sheikh Isa for collecting money for charitable redistribution in accordance with a Shia custom known as *khums*. When Sheikh Isa's supporters organized a peaceful sit-in in his hometown of Diraz to protest the denaturalization order, the authorities collectively punished the town, surrounding it with checkpoints, restricting access, imposing internet blackouts, and preventing Shia clerics and worshipers from leading prayers or attending services at the local mosques. Security forces launched two violent raids on the sit-in: once in January 2017, killing a young demonstrator; and again in May 2017 – days after President Donald Trump met with Bahrain's king and assured him there would be no "strain" in the US-Bahrain relationship – resulting in the death of five demonstrators and mass arrests of nearly 300.

Once arrested, Shia detainees regularly face particular "intimidation, harassment, and ill-treatment by prison guards because of their religion," as noted in the State Department's report. Inmates at Bahrain's main male detention center, Jau Prison, consistently alleged that guards do not allow inmates to practice their faith freely and that officials arbitrarily prohibit religious practices for allegedly violating prison "safety."

Since 2012, the authorities have additionally employed a combination of new legal powers authorized under the country's anti-terror and citizenship legislation to [arbitrarily revoke the citizenship](#) of civil society actors and alleged dissidents. Of those targeted with this measure, the vast majority are members of Bahrain's Shia community. The government has stripped nearly 500 persons of their nationality in the last five years, including more than a hundred so far in 2017. In many cases, these revocations are the result of unilateral administrative orders issued by the Ministry of Interior, which are typically un-appealable. Moreover, many of these individuals are rendered stateless, which means they are unable to access a bank account in Bahrain, pursue employment without a sponsor, hire a lawyer, own property, or obtain public services like healthcare, education, or registration for a new-born child. Statelessness places these individuals at risk of being deported, with further difficulties due to the lack of documents or clear authorization to travel. Bahraini authorities have forcibly deported many of those rendered stateless by this practice. For example, Bahraini human rights lawyer [Taimoor Karimi](#) saw his citizenship revoked in 2012 for allegedly participating in demonstrations during the pro-democracy movement, and was forcibly deported to Iraq in 2016.

We urge you to continue the State Department's work highlighting the discrimination faced by the Shia community in Bahrain, and to make the protection of religious freedom a priority of the Embassy in Manama. Equality under the law is a necessary step toward sustainable stability and reconciliation in Bahrain, and the US must actively and wholeheartedly support its implementation.

American Security Assistance and Reform

Lastly, it is of particular concern that the current US administration has chosen to deepen security ties to Bahrain amid this serious deterioration in the human rights situation, and to specifically reward the kingdom's single most discriminatory institution – the security apparatus – with billions of dollars' worth of new, unconditional arms sales. The Bahrain Defence Force (BDF), which is set to receive new combat aircraft, armaments, and patrol boats, remains virtually closed to recruits from the country's majority Shia community, and facilitates the propagation of religious extremism. While the military does not produce official employment figures, it is estimated that Shia Muslims account for less than 5 percent of BDF personnel. In contrast, the percentage of [foreign-born Sunni personnel](#) is as high as 50. The last independent national survey of public sector employment, conducted in 2009, found that "not a single Shi'i [sic] of those randomly sampled for interview reported working for the police or armed services," compared to 17 percent of working Sunni male respondents. In 2015, it was [estimated](#) that Shia constituted 2-5 percent of all security personnel, contrasted with the country's Shia population of between 58-70 percent. According to the Sunni leader of the secular Wa'ad political society, Ebrahim Sharif, there was not a single Shia ranked higher than a brigadier in the Ministry of Defense in 2011. Likewise, there are no Shia members of the Supreme Defense Council, the country's highest security body.

US Defense Secretary James Mattis himself [suggested](#) in 2011 that sectarian prejudice in Bahrain's military threatens to undermine the country's long-term stability and fuel extremism. There is evidence that Bahraini officials have directly spread anti-Shia and other extremist views within the security forces. A [pamphlet](#) published

by the BDF and the Department of Religious Education, for example, which is reportedly distributed amongst the employees of these two institutions, provides purported religious justifications for violence and discrimination against these sects, even calling for those who practice certain Shia traditions to be killed. Over a hundred Bahrainis have defected to join extremist militant groups like ISIS, including former security officials that have later been designated as terrorists by the State Department, and the US was forced to cancel anti-terror support programs over vetting concerns during your tenure as Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CT).

We therefore urge you to publicly raise your concerns over sectarian discrimination within the Bahraini security forces and to take new steps towards incorporating an integration program into defense sector collaboration between the kingdom and the US. Security assistance and reform conditions need not be contradictory. As you yourself noted, security and human rights are mutually reinforcing. Similarly, reform incentives need not be characterized as punitive restrictions. Though we unequivocally disapprove of renewed arms sales to Bahrain at the height of its most severe crackdown on human rights since 2011, if these transfers are to proceed, the US can and must use them and other forms of defense assistance as an opportunity for constructive, collaborative engagement with the security forces by attaching reform packages like demographic integration support as an added benefit, not a constraint. Furthermore, the embassy must guarantee that any such assistance is accompanied by all possible precautions to certify that any weapons, equipment, and training provided to Bahraini forces are not used to perpetrate further violations or sow greater instability. It is incumbent upon you, as America's new ambassador in Manama, to ensure the US security partnership curbs the abuses outline above, rather than further emboldening them.

Ultimately, we wish you all the best in your new post, Ambassador, and we hope that you will be a partner in achieving in sustainable security, stability, and political reconciliation in Bahrain. ADHRB stands ready as a resource for you and your mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Husain Abdulla', written over a horizontal line.

Husain Abdulla
Executive Director
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)