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Written statement* submitted by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The Targeting of Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Cooperation Council

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) takes this opportunity at the 40th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to raise serious concerns over the continued targeting of human rights defenders in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Overview

GCC governments regularly target, threaten, imprison, and torture individuals for their human rights activism. Human rights defenders often face reprisals for their work, including travel bans and attacks and threats against family members. In prison they are often denied adequate access to medical care and they occasionally face collective punishment for little to no reason, including the confiscation of personal belongings.

Bahrain

Bahrain has taken concerted steps to suppress civil society, including by targeting human rights defenders for their activism, expression, and associations. For example, one of Bahrain's most prominent activists, Nabeel Rajab, is currently serving a five-year prison sentence on charges stemming from free expression. Rajab had tweeted comments critical of the war in Yemen and torture in Bahraini prisons. Bahrain's Court of Cassation upheld his sentence on 31 December 2018.

Several prominent Bahraini activists, known as the Bahrain 13, remain imprisoned for their involvement in Bahrain's 2011 peaceful pro-democracy movement. These individuals, human rights defenders, religious and political leaders, and activists, were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for exercising their right to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and many of them were tortured and sentenced in unfair trials. Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was sentenced to life in prison and has been subjected to reprisals in prison. He has had his belongings confiscated, and his access to television, radio, and books restricted. He has also faced restrictions on family visits. Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace, a human rights activist, blogger, and academic, was sentenced to life in prison and he has faced treatment similar to Al-Khawaja's. He has also been denied adequate medical treatment for a variety of conditions while in prison and his health has greatly deteriorated as a result.

Bahrain also uses reprisals against activists to threaten and intimidate them because of their work. For example, security forces have repeatedly subjected human rights defender Ebtisam al-Saegh to abuse, including interrogation by the National Security Agency (NSA) in which agents physically, psychologically and sexually tortured her. Authorities threatened al-Saegh by saying that they would continue to target her if she did not cease her human rights activities.

Officials have also targeted expatriate activists. For example, authorities have targeted London-based activist Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei's family members who still reside in Bahrain in an effort to intimidate him into halting his human rights work. In October 2017, the government convicted three members of Alwadaei's family of committing terrorist crimes in an unfair trial - Hajer Mansoor Hassan his mother-in-law, Sayed Nizar Alwadaei his brother-in-law, and Mahmood Marzooq Mansoor his cousin. Authorities have also targeted Alwadaei's wife, Duaa Alwadaei. On 21 March 2018, a Bahraini court convicted and sentenced Duaa *in absentia* to two months in prison for allegedly insulting a public officer.

Oman

The Omani government targets writers and activists, sentencing them to prison sentences for allegedly endangering state security, insulting the government, or criticizing the ruling system. Activist Hassan Al-Basham has been long been active on human rights issues, including advocating for prisoners of conscience in online writings. Because of his work, security forces arrested him on 17 September 2015. Although officials released him on 23 September, they arrested him again two days later. In February 2016, a court charged Al-Basham with using “the Internet in what might be prejudicial to religious values” and “insulting the Sultan,” and sentenced him to three years in prison. On 19 November 2017, the Court of Appeals upheld Al-Basham’s initial sentence while ignoring medical reports of deteriorating health conditions submitted by his lawyers. In April 2018, Al-Basham died while in custody after a “sudden deterioration of his health due to the sharp drop in his blood sugar level” and he was “left for an undisclosed period of time lying on the ground without receiving any medical attention.”¹

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia targets women human rights defenders. Among the women’s rights defenders currently in prison are Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada who were arrested in July 2018 for their outspoken efforts to advance women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. Prior to their arrests, in May and June 2018, the Saudi government arrested almost a dozen prominent women’s rights activists – seven women and three men. Among them were Professors Aziza al-Yousef and Iman al-Nafjan, Loujain al-Hathloul, Aisha al-Mana, Madeha al-Ajrourh, Hessa al-Sheikh, and Dr. Fatoon al-Hassi. Authorities also arrested Dr. Ibrahim al-Modeimigh, and members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) Mohammed al-Bajadi and Omar al-Said.

In addition, Saudi Arabia’s prosecutor is seeking the death penalty against activist Israa al-Ghomgham. She was arrested in December 2015 along with her husband, Moussa al-Hashem, because of her role in organizing peaceful anti-government protests in Qatif in the kingdom’s Eastern Province in the wake of the Arab Spring. She was also arrested because she called for human rights reform and the release of human rights activists.

Qatar

Qatar arrests human rights defenders on charges relating to their activism and exercise of fundamental freedoms. On 29 November 2011, a court sentenced Mohammed Rashid al-Ajami to life in prison for “insulting the Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani” and spreading “incendiary material” for publishing a poem deemed critical of Gulf governments. He served five years in prison before being pardoned in 2016.²

Dr. Najeeb Al-Nuaimi, a well-known human rights lawyer who defended al-Ajami, has been targeted for his efforts. In January 2017, the government arbitrarily imposed a travel ban on him and the ban remains in place.³

1 “Oman: Death in custody of Mr. Hassan Al-Basham,” FIDH, 15 May 2018, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/oman-death-in-custody-of-mr-hassan-al-basham>.

2 “Qatari poet pardoned after 5 years in jail,” Aljazeera, 16 March 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/qatari-poet-pardoned-5-years-jail-160316093748724.html>.

3 “Qatar: Human rights lawyer Dr. Najeeb Al-Nuaimi protests travel ban imposed on him,” Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 30 April 2018, <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1841>.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) restricts the right to free expression and opinion, and utilizes broad cybercrime laws to criminalize social media posts critical of the government. Ahmed Mansoor, winner of the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2015, is serving a 10-year prison sentence in relation to comments he made on Twitter. Mansoor was arrested in March 2017 and was convicted in May 2018 on charges of insulting the “status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols,” and using his social media account to spread “hatred and sectarianism,” as well as “false information.” His tweets had called for the release of fellow Emirati human rights defender Osama Al-Najjar and raised concerns for imprisoned academic Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, who is serving a 10-year prison sentence on free expression charges. Ahmed Mansoor has been in solitary confinement since his arrest in 2017, and his 10-year sentence was upheld on 31 December 2018.

Osama Al-Najjar was arrested in 2014, tortured, and sentenced to three years in prison on charges of belonging to a “banned group,” “offending and inciting hatred against the state” via social media, and “passing information to foreign organizations,” following posts he made on Twitter that were critical of the government. Despite serving his sentence, Al-Najjar remains in prison as his detention was extended at the request of the Public Prosecution on the pretext that he represents a “threat.”⁴

Kuwait

The Kuwaiti government continues to discriminate against its stateless *bidoon* population, denying them fundamental freedoms and human rights. Due to their lack of citizenship, many *bidoon* residents are subject to harassment and economic disenfranchisement. Despite their activism and efforts to improve *bidoon* residents’ status of living and social standing, *bidoon* activists have been targeted and harassed, including being fired from their jobs and being denied basic amenities. These steps affect entire families, meaning many activists’ relatives may face harassment and loss of their jobs. Other activists advocating for *bidoon* are also targeted. For example, the Twitter account of human rights lawyer Abeer Al-Haddad was hacked after she filed a complaint calling for reforms in *bidoon* treatment.⁵

Conclusion and Recommendations

Human rights defenders in the GCC face significant risks in continuing their activism. The governments of GCC countries purposely target and threaten human rights defenders in an effort to silence them, using arrests, travel bans, torture, and reprisals to instill fear and crack down on civil society.

ADHRB calls on the GCC states to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience;
- Amend counterterrorism and cybercrime laws as to not criminalize free expression;
- Allow civil society to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

4 Khalid Ibrahim, “United Arab Emirates: Seven months after completing his sentence, blogger Osama Al-Najjar remains in prison,” Global Voices, 3 November 2017, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/11/03/united-arab-emirates-seven-months-after-completing-his-sentence-blogger-osama-al-najjar-remains-in-prison/>.

5 Kuwait: Twitter account of human rights lawyer Abeer Al-Haddad hacked after she sued the head of the Central Apparatus for Illegal Residents’ Affairs,” Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 6 October 2018, <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1966>.