



Rt Hon Boris Johnson
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Whitehall
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15 August 2016

Dear Mr Johnson,

First, may we congratulate you on your recent appointment as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

We write to raise our deep concern over the current ambassador from the Kingdom of Bahrain to the UK, Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa, on his recent statements and record on press freedom, and urge you to raise the concerns set out below to the Government of Bahrain.

Last month, on 20 July, the Bahrain embassy in the UK released a statement in support of the actions of the Information Affairs Authority (IAA), which brought a case against Bahraini journalist Nazeeha Saeed. Ms. Saeed has worked as correspondent for France24 for seven years, and for Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya for 12 years. She was charged with working for international media outlets without a license. Her case is just the latest in a series of regressive actions targeting critical journalists, creating an environment where a free fourth estate cannot function.

The Bahrain embassy's statement reported that the IAA had lodged a legal complaint against Ms. Saeed for illegally working as a foreign correspondent, that Ms. Saeed's foreign correspondence license expired 'over 150 days' ago, and that she was warned of legal action.¹ None of this is true. The undersigned NGOs have seen a letter by the IAA from June 2016 denying her license renewal, which she had applied for at the end of March 2016 (some 110 days earlier to the embassy's statement, not 150). The IAA did not in fact warn her of legal action in the letter.

It is not innocuous that Sheikh Fawaz, as ambassador to the United Kingdom, had the embassy publish this statement in support of the IAA and we see this statement as a reflection of Bahrain's antipathy towards a free press, and as Sheikh Fawaz's direct role in antagonising the press.

The IAA is the government body that regulates the press, issues journalist licenses, and operates Bahrain News Agency and the state-run Bahrain TV. Sheikh Fawaz Al Khalifa, prior to becoming ambassador, was the first president of the IAA between 2010 and 2012, overseeing the institution during the Arab Spring. In that time, the government systematically cracked down on political and civil freedoms. The IAA was responsible for suspending the only independent newspaper, aiding in the

¹ Bahrain Embassy in London, *Press Release: Information Affairs Authority Clarifies Regulation for Foreign Correspondents Related to Nazeeha Saeed*, 20 July 2016, <http://us12.campaign-archive1.com/?u=adae2d71fee280549ad890919&id=79fd8c6d53>.

ensorship of the press and the deportation of foreign-national journalists, and in spreading hate speech through IAA-controlled TV stations.

Journalists interviewed by the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy have told us that press relations were calmer before Sheikh Fawaz's 2010-2012 presidency of the IAA. Sheikh Fawaz's appointment as media chief in July 2010 coincided with the arrest and torture of opposition politicians and activists in the lead-up to Bahrain's November 2010 General Elections, actions which precipitated the Arab Spring protests. Journalists state that government censorship of the press increased substantially with the formation of the IAA under Sheikh Fawaz.

In May 2011, Ms. Saeed was summoned to a police station in connection to the police killing of a protester she had witnessed. There, police detained her and tortured her into signing a confession, as reported by Human Rights Watch.² To date Ms. Saeed has been denied justice by Bahrain's courts.³ The IAA, despite its responsibilities to protect journalists, did not support her. Soon after Ms. Saeed's detention, BBC Arabic interviewed Sheikh Fawaz, then-IAA president, asking him: "Why is a journalist who has come to report these events treated in this way?" He replied: "She does not have any license to report for the French news agency."⁴ In fact, Ms. Saeed had a license at that time, and has done throughout her career, until the IAA's refusal of her latest renewal in April 2016. Sheikh Fawaz not only failed to protect a vulnerable journalist, he intentionally spread falsehoods justifying her mistreatment.

Ms. Saeed's case is not the only one in which Sheikh Fawaz has played a role. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, the accepted record of rights violations during 2011, notes ([para. 1611](#)) how Sheikh Fawaz's Deputy Assistant at the IAA summoned an Iraqi journalist working for the only independent newspaper, Al Wasat, for a meeting in April 2011 during an imposed State of Emergency. When the journalist arrived at the IAA offices, police arrested, beat and threatened him, then deported him that same evening.⁵

Al Wasat newspaper was subjected to a smear campaign led by the IAA itself. On 2 April 2011, the IAA-operated Bahrain TV broadcast a two-hour live show antagonising Al Wasat and immediately afterwards, the IAA suspended the newspaper, only allowing it to resume publication after the resignation of its senior editorial staff.⁶ The newspaper was not alone suffering this crackdown on free expression: Bahrain TV broadcast programmes identified and vilified celebrity protestors throughout the Arab Spring period. Athletes, including national football team players, who called on live broadcasts to defend their appearance at protests, were arrested and subjected to torture within days of doing so.⁷ The IAA-run Bahrain TV, which we reiterate would have been executing policy set by the president, Sheikh Fawaz, has never been held to account for its role inciting hatred against legitimate political protest and the targeting of specific persons.

² Human Rights Watch, *Criminalizing Dissent, Entrenching Impunity: Persistent Failures of the Bahraini Justice System Since the BICI Report*, 28 May 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/05/28/criminalizing-dissent-entrenching-impunity/persistent-failures-bahraini-justice>.

³ Reporters Without Borders, *RSF Demands Justice for Bahraini Journalists Tortured in 2011*, 20 November 2015, <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-demands-justice-bahraini-journalist-tortured-2011>.

⁴ Bahrain TV on Youtube, *IAA President Interview on BBC Arabic – 27 May 2011*, 27 May 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDIClo2AluE>.

⁵ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, November 2011, para. 1611, <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIREportEN.pdf>.

⁶ BICI, *Report of the BICI*, para. 1592.

⁷ ESPN (mirror), *ESPN E:60: Athletes of Bahrain*, 8 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfhPWwhWJlU>.

Journalism as a whole was under threat during Sheikh Fawaz's leadership of the IAA. The repression of independent journalists and media under his watch was on a scale similar to that seen in countries like Turkey and Egypt, which are known for state censorship of the press.

A sure indicator of this is in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, which ranks each country on press freedom, with the 1st country having the freest press. Bahrain's ranking, which stood at 119th in 2009, the year before Sheikh Fawaz's IAA presidency, fell by 46 rungs to 165th by 2012, the year his presidency ended. This was the greatest fall in rankings Bahrain ever saw.

Bahrain's ranking currently sits at 162 (with this latter rise in rank due mainly to the addition of countries ranked below Bahrain). As a point of comparison, the 2016 Press Freedom Index 2016 respectively ranked Turkey and Egypt at 151 and 159. The rankings reflect Sheikh Fawaz's devastating leadership of the state media body and the long shadow left on press freedom.

It was for these reasons that the community of press freedom activists, rights defenders and NGOs greeted Sheikh Fawaz's appointment as ambassador to the United Kingdom with alarm. His embassy's latest statements on the case of Ms. Nazeeha Saeed, for which the history extends back to his IAA presidency in 2011, calls back his direct role in repressing Bahrain's press and journalists. His role in allowing the incitement of hatred against pro-democracy protesters on his watch, and his continued public attempts to mislead on the cases of journalists like Ms. Saeed, are indications that neither he nor the country he represents share the key British values of the right to free speech and individual liberty, nor in the universally recognised right to freedom of expression, as protected under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Kingdom of Bahrain's choice of a person with a key role in repressing freedom of speech as their ambassador to the United Kingdom reflects Bahrain's unchanged, poor attitudes towards freedom of speech and human rights more generally.

We therefore urge you to address this promptly and raise these issues surrounding Sheikh Fawaz's past and current involvement in the violations of press freedom with the Government of Bahrain.

Yours sincerely,

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

Index on Censorship

Reporters Without Borders