

BIRD
BAHRAIN INSTITUTE FOR
RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY



His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales
Clarence House
London
SW1A 1BA

13 October 2016

Sir,

We write to you with great concern over your announced November visit to Bahrain to promote military cooperation. The absence of human rights from the agenda is particularly alarming given the recent intensification of human rights violations by the Government of Bahrain, and we urge you to reconsider.

This summer, the Government of Bahrain has renewed a campaign of repression and harassment against critical voices, significantly undermining alleged human rights reforms in the country. The UK has provided technical assistance towards these reforms since 2012 to little effect: the rights situation has regressed substantially in 2016 alone. State repression of civil rights in Bahrain is now at its highest level since the Arab Spring swept the country in 2011. A royal visit at such a time not only legitimises this repression, but insults the many suffering under the regime.

On Monday 31 October, Bahrain's High Criminal Court is expected to sentence human rights defender Nabeel Rajab to up to 15 years in prison. The case encapsulates the current crackdown. Rajab, the prominent campaigner and president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, is being prosecuted based on comments posted on social media criticising Bahrain's participation in Saudi Arabia-led military operations in Yemen and documenting torture to Central Jau prison in the country. He is charged with spreading "false or malicious news, statements, or rumours" during wartime, "offending a foreign country" and "offending a public institution" under articles 133, 215 and 216 of the Penal Code and faces up to 15 years' imprisonment. He has also been banned from travel since November 2014, after returning from a European advocacy trip which included a visit to the United Kingdom.

In September, Bahrain's prosecution brought new charges against him for "undermining the prestige of the state" after the New York Times published his [opinion piece](#), *Letter from a Bahraini Jail*. Nabeel's health has greatly deteriorated since his initial arrest in June, and he is

currently being held in solitary confinement ahead of his sentencing. If he is sentenced or remains in detention by the time of your planned visit, it will be seen as a green light by the Bahraini government to continue its campaign to wipe out legitimate calls for democratic change.

Bahrain is quickly undoing any notion of reform. In September, a court of appeals upheld the decision to dissolve the largest political society in the country, Al Wefaq, marking the final nail in the coffin for any claim of reform. Al Wefaq was a cornerstone of Bahrain's political civil society, winning over 60% of votes in the 2010 national assembly elections. Today, there is no space for independent political groups to operate. Virtually all leading political opposition figures are now imprisoned. In May this year the leader of Al Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman, had his sentence increased from four to nine years.

According to five UN experts in August 2016, Bahraini authorities have systematically [harassed](#) its Shia population, despite the Bahraini monarchy's claim of religious tolerance. Over the past three months, at least 60 have been subjected to questioning and arbitrary detention and prosecution. The number of individuals who have had their citizenship stripped has increased to over 330. Of those cases, over 290 are members of the Shia community and include opposition figures, journalists and human rights defenders. This is a powerful act of intimidation with a purpose to silence criticism.

The village of Duraz has been subjected to both a physical and internet blockade as thousands of protesters have continued to gather outside the home of prominent spiritual leader Sheikh Isa Qassim after the Ministry of Interior stripped his citizenship on 20 June 2016. These numbers are unprecedented since the 2011 protests. In addition, human rights activists have been placed under travel ban orders to prevent them from attending two sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In the past month, Bahrain has been warned by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: "The past decade has demonstrated repeatedly and with punishing clarity exactly how disastrous the outcomes can be when a Government attempts to smash the voices of its people, instead of serving them."

No one deserves to be punished for their peacefully expressed opinion. The European Convention on Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." The United Kingdom has the obligation to support human rights defenders, to defend freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of press, and to call out governments when they are committing human rights abuses.

The United Kingdom and Bahrain have a strong historical friendship and this year the countries have claimed to celebrate a bicentenary of relations. But this friendship should not be expressed as endorsement for a regime that is continuing to commit grave violations against its people or as unequivocal and uncritical support. The United Kingdom should be there to support the most vulnerable, not to legitimate the crimes being taken against them.

The UK continues to pursue a technical assistance programme to Bahrain, which began in 2012. Yet there remains no accountability of abuses, no opening of civil and political space, and no legal reform. Torture victims are today on death row, their executions imminent, and British-trained bodies have not just failed to support them, but gone so far as to wilfully ignore complaints of torture brought before them.

This visit takes place in the context of escalating repression, that longstanding British relations and involvement has not helped to resolve. To visit this repressive Kingdom is to enable them. The Bahraini monarchy and government will interpret your visit to mean that relations with Britain will remain strong in spite of severe human rights violations.

It is for these reasons that we urgently ask for your recognition of these grave human rights abuses in Bahrain and for you to cancel your upcoming trip to Bahrain. By cancelling your visit, you will be upholding and representing the freedoms enjoyed in the United Kingdom: freedom of speech, religion, movement, assembly and freedom of the press. We believe that the UK's long term interests are best served by promoting genuine human rights reform in Bahrain.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei

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