



Rt Hon Prime Minister Theresa May  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

**26 October 2016**

The Rt Hon Prime Minister Theresa May,

I urgently write to you ahead of your forthcoming meeting with the King of Bahrain this week requesting you to raise the human rights situation in Bahrain in the strongest of terms. The United Kingdom's influence is strong in Bahrain, but it has not been used to benefit human rights substantively. The only way to positively impact the human rights situation there is to make use of your leverage and to criticise these issues in public. To do any less will re-inforce the authoritarianism of the Bahraini king's government.

Bahrain's king, a frequent visitor of the United Kingdom, was last here in May 2016. In the five months since, his government has overseen an intensified crackdown on civil and political society. There is no freedom for political participation, no freedom of expression, and no method by which civil society can organise that is not under the total control of the Bahraini government. This serious deterioration in Bahrain's human rights situation is in spite of a November 2011 pledge by King Hamad himself to institute wide-ranging reforms, in the aftermath of the government's brutal crackdown of Arab Spring protests, in which tens died and hundreds were tortured.

In May, the King oversaw a ceremony declaring the formal end of post-Arab Spring reforms. Yet the situation could not be much worse.

Bahrain's leading human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab, currently faces up to 15 years in prison and is expected to be sentenced on Monday 31 October. This is for tweets expressing his opinion on the war in Yemen, which Bahrain is a participant in, and for his documentation of torture in a Bahraini prison. He faces an additional year in prison after he was charged with "undermining the prestige of the state" after the New York Times published his opinion piece, *Letter from a Bahraini Jail*.

Other activists are also at risk. Over twenty human rights activists have been banned from travel since June, preventing them from attending the UN Human Rights Council's last two sessions and other international engagements. Zainab Al-Khawaja, an activist sentenced on a litany of charges related to her free expression, was released from prison after public pressure from the United States, and then forced into exile in June under threat of re-arrest and indefinite detention. Over 330 persons have been stripped of citizenship, including human rights defenders, journalists, former members of parliament and activists.

With civil society so tightly restricted, political society has fared even worse. Over the summer, the largest political society (what political parties are termed in Bahrain) was dissolved on spurious charges. This party, Al Wefaq, was first established in 2001 and participated in two elections, winning over 60% of the vote in 2010 and 48% of the seats at the National Assembly. The leader of the Alwahdawi party, Fadhel Abbas, is serving a 5-year prison term for calling the war in Yemen unconstitutional. The former leader of the National Democratic Action Society was released from

prison in July this year, and the public prosecution – which is not independent from the state – is appealing against an earlier court’s decision to acquit him on charges of inciting the change of the regime, in relation to a speech he gave last year.

Religious freedoms have also come under major threat. The Shia of Bahrain, who constitute an estimated 60% of the citizen population, have been harassed and “persecuted” – these are the words of five UN experts. Meanwhile, the Bahrain Defence Force, the same army responsible for the construction of the new Royal Navy base in Bahrain, has published books which endorse killing Shia if they do not “repent”. It should be greatly disturbing for the United Kingdom that Bahraini recruits to the terrorist group ISIS have been drawn from the ranks of the defence and security forces.

Most troublingly are the torture victims on death row. Two victims in particular, Mohammad Ramadan and Husain Moosa, have exhausted all appeals. The British-trained police Ombudsman, which is not independent from the police force, has not only repeatedly failed to investigate claims of abuse brought to them, it has covered up the abuses. These death row torture survivors are the most vulnerable victims of Bahrain’s violent police force, corrupt justice system, and closed political and human rights sphere.

The measures by the King of Bahrain’s government against the country’s civil and political society are wide-reaching and unprecedented since the Arab Spring. In a region beset with turmoil, Bahrain could be a place of reform. Instead, it is another case study of dictatorship, one which the UK has played a role in: over £5.8m in British tax payer money has been spent on reform assistance to Bahraini authorities since 2012, yet the culture of impunity remains unchanged.

The United Kingdom plays an important role: as Bahrain’s closest Western ally, UK foreign policy carries a great deal of weight. When the doors to 10 Downing Street and Buckingham Palace remain open to the King of Bahrain, when arms deals and business are conducted as usual despite persecutions, then Bahrain’s violations are legitimised.

For five years, the UK has pursued a quiet diplomacy route which has failed to induce its ally to reform, a conclusion evidenced by the deteriorating situation. It is no exaggeration of the UK’s influence to say that if you publicly criticise the King of Bahrain’s rights record and make use of Britain’s leverage, then positive change can happen. If you do not, then the Government of Bahrain will double down in its repression. I ask only that you make the right decision.

Yours Sincerely,

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

Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei

Director of Advocacy

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy