The Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) is a London-based non-profit organisation focusing on research, investigation, and advocacy for human rights and democracy in Bahrain.

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The human rights situation in Bahrain continued to deteriorate in 2019, with the government maintaining a violent crackdown on its citizens. Over the last two years, the state has waged an unrelenting campaign against all forms of dissent, with the promises of reform made in the wake of Bahrain’s 2011 uprising now a distant memory. All opposition parties and independent media have been dissolved, protests continue to be brutally crushed and critical voices are ruthlessly targeted. As little as criticising the government on social media can result in years in prison.

Although the government strives to project an image of reform and moderation, investing heavily in global sporting and cultural events to encourage tourism and promote the country abroad, Bahrain remains among the Middle East’s most repressive states. Torture in Bahraini detention centres is widespread and systematic. The unlawful executions of two torture survivors last July, Ali Al Arab and Ahmed Al Malali, triggered international outrage. In 2019, Bahrain’s courts held among the largest mass trials since 2011. In late February, 167 individuals were sentenced in one trial for participating in a peaceful sit-in in Duraz between 2016 and 2017 in which five people were killed by police. A month later, 139 individuals were sentenced at once on terrorism charges, 138 of whom were also stripped of their citizenship. While the citizenship of 551 citizens was reinstated later that month after significant international pressure, the law permitting denaturalisation has not been changed and major opposition figures remain without citizenship.

Despite being the smallest country in the Middle East, Bahrain now imprisons its populace at a higher rate than any other Arab state. Bahrain’s prisons came under particular scrutiny in 2019, as inmates reported increasingly squalid conditions in facilities rife with ill-treatment and religious discrimination. The United Nations, European Parliament and international human rights watchdogs have all strongly condemned Bahrain’s consistent failure to provide political prisoners with an adequate standard of medical care, a callous policy which contributed to the tragic death of 24 year-old Sayed Kadhem Abbas on 3rd February 2020.

Internationally, Bahrain continues to participate in the Saudi-led war on Yemen, described by the UN as the worst humanitarian crisis on earth. Bahrain also remains embroiled in the Gulf Crisis with neighbouring Qatar, which has raged since 2017 with no sign of abating.

Despite the UK’s professed commitment to democracy and human rights, British government ministers repeatedly dismissed concerns raised by parliamentarians about Bahrain’s rights record, electing to rely on assurances from the Bahraini regime and disregard repeated warnings from independent experts. Unfortunately, prospects for change in Bahrain appear slim while the regime continues to receive unconditional political, military and financial support from the UK, US and neighbouring Gulf States. Under President Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s leadership, human rights are likely to continue to take a back seat.
**KEY EVENTS OF 2019**

- Bahrain continued to issue death sentences and carry out executions:

A government firing squad executed three individuals on 27 July, including torture victims Ali AlArab and Ahmed AlMalali. In January 2020, Bahrain’s High Criminal Court of Appeals reimposed death sentences against torture victims Mohammad Ramadhan and Husain Moosa, despite credible evidence their conviction depend on confessions extracted under torture. Eight further death sentences handed down on political charges were upheld in 2019, while at least four new death sentences were imposed against non-violent offenders.

- Restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly tightened further:

Freedom of expression remains highly constrained, with Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior (MoI) increasingly policing social media to silence critical voices, including prominent activists and opposition figures Nabeel Rajab and Ibrahim Sharif. 167 people were sentenced in March in a single mass-trial for having participated in the peaceful Duraz 2016 sit-in, in which police killed five people.

- Deteriorating prison conditions and medical negligence:

Abhorrent conditions including beatings, psychological abuse, religious discrimination and harassment during family visits are routinely reported by Bahraini detainees. Authorities further punish human rights defenders including prominent political leaders Hassan Mushaima and Abduljalil Al Singace as well as the mother-in-law of BIRD Director of Advocacy, Hajer Mansoor, by withholding necessary medical treatment.

- Increased targeting of women activists:

BIRD’s joint-report with Americans for Democracy and Human Rights (ADHRB), Breaking the Silence, documented the Bahraini government’s increased targeting of female activists and human rights defenders for the first time. The report followed the cases of nine female political prisoners, tracking human rights violations at every stage of the criminal procedures from their arrests to their imprisonment at Isa Town Female Detention Centre.

- The use of lucrative sporting events to whitewash human rights abuses:

Sportswashing has become a cornerstone of Bahrain’s international diplomacy, offering the kingdom valuable propaganda and financial opportunities. In February, a major international campaign secured the release of Bahraini refugee footballer Hakeem Al-Araibi, after Bahrain attempted to have him extradited from Thailand. Another successful campaign also criticised links between Formula One’s (F1) Bahrain Grand Prix and the torture and imprisonment of activist Najah Yusuf, who was granted a royal pardon in the summer.

- Unwavering UK military and third party support in spite of human rights concerns:

Bahrain continued to receive technical assistance from the UK, funded by the Integrated Activity Fund, a highly secretive pool of public money reserved for members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. While a British High Court ruling curbed arms sales to the Gulf, UK military training to Bahrain has continued unabated. Moreover, third parties have also enjoyed lucrative training contracts with Bahrain. At the time of publication, the University of Huddersfield remains embroiled in a scandal over its ties to a Bahraini “torture hub.”
CHAPTER 1
HUMAN RIGHTS EVENTS OF
2019

Through 2019, the Bahraini government intensified its crackdown on all forms of dissent which is now entering its third year. Three executions were conducted in 2019 and death sentences have continued to be handed down, including for non-violent offences.

Prominent opposition leaders, human rights defenders, journalists and activists including Nabeel Rajab, Sheikh Ali Salman, Hassan Mushaima, Dr Abduljalil Al Singace and the family members of BIRD Director of Advocacy Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei all remain unlawfully imprisoned. Opposition parties and independent media remain outlawed and the government has clamped down on online criticism through new cybercrime legislation.

Despite the reinstatement of citizenship to 698 individuals, almost 300 Bahrainis remain without citizenship, the majority of whom are stateless. The government continues to imprison its population at a considerably higher rate than any other Arab nation and deteriorating prison conditions, including medical negligence and religious discrimination, have been widely condemned.

Death Penalty

Bahrain resumed executions in 2017, marking the end of a seven-year de facto moratorium on the death penalty with the execution of Sami Mushaima, Abbas AlSamea and Ali AlSingace. On 26 July 2019, a government firing squad carried out further unlawful executions against three individuals, including torture victims Ali AlArab, 25 and Ahmed AlMalali, 24, who were sentenced to death in a mass unfair trial alongside 58 others in January 2018.

The executions went ahead despite significant international outcry and calls from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the United States (US) Congress to halt the executions. After the death sentences were carried out, Callamard condemned their deaths as “arbitrary killings.” In the aftermath of the executions in July 2019, the UK Minister of State for Human Rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, asserted that “the UK remains firmly opposed to the death penalty” and expressed “deep concern and regret that these executions were carried out.” However, the government nonetheless failed to take any substantive action against Bahrain, nor extend their concerns to the fairness of the trial or allegations of torture.

On 8 January 2020, Bahrain’s High Criminal Court of Appeals reimposed the death sentences of Mohammad Ramadhan and Husain Moosa, which were overturned in 2018 after new medical evidence emerged suggesting that they had been tortured. The verdict, which had been scheduled on Christmas day, was postponed after international media exposed Bahrain’s use of holidays to conceal harsh sentences. If the verdict is upheld by the Court of Cassation, they will be at imminent risk of execution. While the FCO’s Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Minister Dr Andrew Murrison was “deeply concerned” by the decision, he failed to comment on the fairness of the trial.

In 2019, four individuals were sentenced to death in Bahrain for non-violent drug offences in two separate cases, in January and February 2019 respectively. Bahrain’s Appeals Court and Court of Cassation further upheld 8 death sentences handed down on political charges.
As of February 2020

12

sentenced to death for political offenses

8 facing imminent execution
4 awaiting final court decision
8 additional in exile
According to BIRD’s records, as of January 2020, there are **24 individuals on death row** in Bahrain held in Building 1 at Jau Prison. Among them are 12 individuals sentenced on political offenses, of whom 8 are facing imminent execution having exhausted all legal remedies and 4 are awaiting the Court of Cassation’s final decision. An additional 8 individuals sentenced to death in political cases are currently in exile.

The remaining 12 are sentenced on non-political charges, some of whom have exhausted all legal remedies. Of these, two individuals convicted of nonviolent drug trafficking offences had their final appeals rejected in January 2020. In response, 139 NGOs from 55 countries called on the UN to pressure Bahrain to commute their sentences and reintroduce a moratorium on the death penalty.

### Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression has continued to deteriorate in Bahrain throughout 2019. Anti-terror and **cybercrime laws** have been used to criminalise political dissent and civil society activity and prosecutions for online activity increased considerably, with the MOI posting on their official Twitter that “those who follow inciting accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable.”

The Bahraini government ended 2018 by upholding the conviction of **Nabeel Rajab**, the country’s most prominent human rights defender, on New Year’s Eve. Rajab was sentenced to five years for tweets exposing torture in Jau Prison and criticising the Saudi-led coalition’s attacks on Yemen. The sentence was upheld despite the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) issuing an opinion in August 2018 deeming his detention arbitrary and discriminatory on the basis of his human rights activities.

In March 2019, former leader of the dissolved secular Wa’ad party, **Ebrahim Sharif**, was handed a six-month suspended sentence for tweets criticising deposed Sudanese president Omar Al-Bashir. In May, the Mol accused Bahraini journalist **Adel Marzooq** of cybercrime for analysing politics in the region on Twitter. On 30 May 2019, Bahrain’s Mol announced their intention to target those merely following anti-government social media accounts, while two days later, an Mol official further stated that “countering inciting social media accounts that promote sedition and threaten social fabric and civil peace was a national duty and part of the community partnership to protect the security and safety of the nation.”

In a tweet posted on 5 June 2019, Twitter’s Public Policy page released an official statement saying that the implementation of such measures would “pose a significant risk to free expression and journalism” in the country. They also provided users with a guide on how to view a user’s tweets without having to follow them, in order to avoid government surveillance.
In a symbolic move emblematic of the government’s increasingly brazen disdain for freedom of expression, the Bahraini government demolished the headquarters of the Al-Wasat newspaper in June. Al-Wasat, which was shut down by authorities in 2017, was the country’s last independent newspaper.

**Freedom of Assembly and Association**

Bahrain has long experienced restrictions to freedom of association and assembly, most notably the 1973 decree and Decree No. 32/2006, which prohibits unauthorised gatherings, punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment. However, conditions have worsened considerably since the initiation of an ongoing crackdown in 2017.

In the run-up to Bahrain’s elections in November 2018, Bahrain amended its Law on Associations to bar members of political opposition groups from serving on the boards of civil society organisations. The government also revised the Exercise of Political Rights Law, disqualifying individuals from running for office if they are “felons and persons previously convicted to a prison sentence of six months or more” or “leaders and members of dissolved political organisations.” Given Bahrain’s long history of imprisoning opposition figures, this eliminated major opposition groups from standing in the elections and was condemned by legislators in the UK, US and EU.

In February 2019, the Bahraini authorities issued a verdict in a mass trial of 171 defendants, sentencing 167 people to prison terms for their participation in a peaceful sit-in in Duraz in 2016, which saw 5 individuals killed by security forces. Meanwhile, protests continue to be violently suppressed, and a 22-year old protester was found dead in July 2019 after police used tear gas to disperse dissidents in the suburbs of Manama, following the execution of two torture victims the day before.

**Citizenship Revocation**

Revocation of citizenship from dissenting figures remains a worrying trend and 900 Bahraini nationals have been denationalised by the government since 2012.

Between January and April 2019, 180 individuals were stripped of their citizenship, including 138 individuals in a single mass-trial on 16 April 2019. Days after the decision, following the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' public concerns, King Hamad reinstated the citizenship of 551 individuals, including those of two female activists.

The citizenship of 92 and 55 individuals was further reinstated in May and July 2019 respectively. However, as of January 2020, the law permitting denationalisation remains unchanged and 292 individuals remain denationalised, including key opposition leaders and activists.

**Prison conditions**

Prison conditions continued to deteriorate in Bahrain throughout 2019, with inmates complaining of unsanitary conditions, religious discrimination, medical negligence and the imposition of a glass barrier during family visits that prevents any physical contact between inmates and their families.

Throughout 2019, Bahraini prisoners launched a wave of hunger strikes in protest conditions, with the largest strike featuring more than 600 prisoners at Jau Prison and Dry Dock Detention Centre. Among their demands was adequate access to medical care, unobstructed family visits and their religious rights. Ali AlHajee joined the strike on 1 September, maintaining his strike for a total of 75 days.

**Freedom of Religion**

Sectarian discrimination against the Shia prison population remained a subject of concern in 2019 in both male and female Bahraini detention centres.

Inmates at Jau prison have complained about consistent sectarian discrimination against the Shia. This includes deliberate denial of religious texts and participation in Shia festivals, verbal insults as well as medical negligence and harassment. To deter them from practicing their faith, other inmates have reportedly been threatened with solitary confinement or denial of family visits. Furthermore, BIRD has obtained a list of banned books from Jau Prison, which includes many Shia religious texts.

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**The Guardian**

Hundreds of Bahrainis like me are being made stateless - and the UK is complicit | 19 April 2019

**Reuters**

Bahrain revokes citizenships, sentences 69 to life in Prison | 16 April 2019

**AP**

Major opposition figures not among those given back Bahrainicitizenship | 29 April 2019
Women political prisoners have also reported multiple instances of denial of their religious rights at Isa Town Prison, including the scheduling of meal times to conflict with prayer times, which forced them to choose between food and prayer.

In September 2018, Isa Town Prison officials assaulted political prisoners Hajar Mansoor, Medina Ali, after preventing them from joining their fellow inmates in commemorating Ashura. A year later, in September 2019, Hajar and Medina were again banned from commemorating Ashura coinciding with their cases being raised by the UN Secretary General. They were also reportedly banned from accessing religious books.

**Medical Negligence**

The detention conditions of several Bahraini human rights defenders and political dissidents held at Jau Prison and Isa Town Prison in 2019 exhibited a worrying pattern of neglect for health and welfare. This included a general denial of medical care, particularly with specialised doctors, and the failure of the authorities to provide examination results and medication as a form of punishment.

These concerns were highlighted by Amnesty International in September 2018, HRW and BIRD in a joint report in October 2019, as well as by four UN Special Rapporteurs in September 2019 and a further eight Special Rapporteurs in November 2019. In February 2020, this callous policy contributed to the tragically premature death of 24 year-old Sayed Kadhem Abbas. Despite complaining for months of severe headaches, vomiting and loss of consciousness, authorities at Jau Prison failed repeatedly to take him for specialist cancer scans.

The most concerning cases include 71 year old political leader Hassan Mushaima, who suffers from a range of serious health problems, including diabetes, gout, numbness, heart and prostate problems, and is in remission from lymphoma cancer, requiring PET scans every six months. Prison authorities, however, have routinely failed to take him to appointments due to his refusal to submit wearing humiliating shackles.

Similarly, Dr Abduljalil Al Singace, a prominent academic and human rights defender, suffers from post-polio syndrome and depends on a wheelchair. Like Mushaima, he has also been prevented from attending appointments for refusing to be shackled. When imposed on inmates who do not pose an escape or security risk, shackles and other restrictions violate the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules).

Naji Fateel, 45, and Ali AlHajee, 36, who are also serving long sentences due to peaceful opposition activities, also reported consistent denials of medical care. Fateel suffers from spinal and other injuries that he said resulted from torture in detention, as well as high cholesterol. Prison authorities have failed to provide him with required medications and several times canceled scheduled operations for injuries to his arm and leg. AlHajee said prison authorities have denied him permission for a necessary surgery to his lower jaw, as well as dental implants, which drove him to launch a 70-day hunger strike in September 2019.

Elyas AlMulla, 28, a stage three colon cancer patient who suffers from colon pain, pain under his ribs, nausea, and fatigue, was not always provided with the necessary immunity medication, nor did authorities perform tests requested by AlMulla’s radiologist. In 2019, Elyas’ ordeal was raised by HRW, BIRD and four UN Special Rapporteurs. On 22 January 2020, Elyas was released from prison, having served eight years of a 15 year sentence.

Denial of and restrictions to medical care has remained a pervasive problem for female political prisoners in Isa Town Prison, as documented by BIRD and Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). Political prisoner Hajar Mansoor was denied urgent medication for a lump in her breast which she feared might be cancerous, as well as kidney stones and fibroids. Her cellmate Medina Ali was also prevented from accessing specialised medical care for uterine bleedings.

The FCO has never addressed the abuses facing male and female political prisoners, and when concerns were raised, they referred victims back to ineffective oversight bodies.

**Bahrain: Prisoners Denied Medical Care | 8 October 2019**

**The Guardian**

I’m fasting in protest outside Royal Windsor Horse Show to save my father’s life | 10 May 2019
Women Activists

In September 2019, BIRD published the findings of an extensive two-year investigation with Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) in a report entitled “Breaking the Silence: Bahraini Women Political Prisoners Expose Systemic Abuses.” The report exposed the increased targeting of female activists and human rights defenders since 2017 which coincided with the reinstatement of the National Security Agency (NSA)’s arrest powers.

The report found a litany of abuses at every stage of the criminal procedure, including arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, sham trials and cruel and inhuman prison conditions. The report also highlighted the failure of British training to prevent abuses and the role of the UK government in whitewashing the abuses of their Gulf ally. BIRD and ADHRB launched the report at the 42nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Since the publication of the report, all but two of the women featured in the report have been released, including prominent political prisoners Najah Yusuf and Medina Ali. On 1 November 2019, 8 UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the King of Bahrain, expressing “grave concern” about the mistreatment of Medina and her cellmate Hajer Mansoor by staff at Isa Town Prison.

As of January 2020, Hajer Mansoor and Zakeya Al Barboori remain imprisoned.
In 2019, the relationship between sport and human rights in Bahrain became an increasingly contentious issue, with the government’s attempts to have refugee footballer Hakeem Al Araibi deported from Thailand sparking a global scandal and international condemnation.

“Sportswashing,” a term coined by Amnesty International to describe investment by abusive regimes in professional sport to distract from human rights abuses, dominated headlines about Bahrain throughout 2019. These reached a climax in the run up to F1’s annual Bahrain Grand Prix, with widespread calls for Bahrain to release activist Najah Yusuf, who was tortured and imprisoned for protesting against the race in 2017.

Bahrain has long been a pioneer in sportswashing, with the establishment of the Bahrain Grand Prix in 2004 an early example of an Arab Gulf state’s attempts to harness the popularity of international sport for propaganda purposes. While Bahrain’s wealthier neighbours have become prominent investors in professional football, Bahrain has assembled a diverse portfolio which includes stakes in professional motorsport, athletics, cycling and combat sports.

As investing in professional sport has become an increasingly central aspect of Bahrain’s international relations strategy, the government has aggressively targeted any of its citizens who undermines the image of prosperity and normalcy that they have tried to project.

This has frequently included their own athletes, many of whom were arrested and banned from professional sport after participating in the 2011 uprising. In the wake of the uprising, a special commission was established by Prince Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, fourth son of King Hamad, which identified and prosecuted over 150 Bahraini athletes who had joined protests. Many reported being tortured and in 2014 a UK court quashed Prince Nasser’s diplomatic immunity amid allegations he had personally participated in the torture of protesters.

Hakeem AlAraibi and the crackdown on athletes

Recently, Bahrain has demonstrated a new willingness to target athletes even beyond its borders. At the end of 2018, Bahrain issued an Interpol red notice for the arrest of Bahraini refugee and professional footballer Hakeem Al Araibi, in an attempt to have him extradited to Bahrain. His arrest while on his honeymoon in Thailand, triggered a major international campaign, with the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), the International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPro) and the International Olympic Committee all publicly supporting his case and eventually secured his release after 76 days in detention on 11 February 2019. A profile on Hakeem’s ordeal, published in The Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend magazine, was among the newspaper’s most-read features of 2019.

A Hakeem conducted several interviews in 2015 and 2016 with The New York Times and ITV, in which he had been very critical of the ruling family. In particular, he criticised the current president of the Asian Football Confederation and cousin of the king, Sheikh Salman Al Khalfia, during his candidacy for FIFA presidency in 2016.

Running From Bahrain’s Dark Side | 26 February 2019

Refugee Soccer Player Hakeem al-Araibi Granted Australian Citizenship | 12 March 2019

Hakeem al-Araibi: thank you Australia for bringing me home – but my fight is not over | 27 March 2019

Bahraini refugee athlete details Bahrain’s sportswashing of human rights abuses | 3 December 2019
#savinghakeem

Melbourne soccer player Hakeem al-Araibi on doing time in a Bangkok jail, and the remarkable global campaign to set him free

by James Massola
Since being released, Hakeem has been granted Australian citizenship and has begun to increasingly speak out on human rights issues in Bahrain. In November 2019, Hakeem publicly advocated for the release of imprisoned Bahraini mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter Mohammad Mirza, who is serving ten years in prison for participating in anti-government protests. Later that month, Hakeem received a standing ovation after delivering a speech to the UN Human Rights Council.

Najah Yusuf and the Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix

Bahraini security forces have a long history of violently dispersing protests related to the Bahrain Grand Prix, for which Bahrain’s rulers pay organisers F1 at least $34 million a year to hold in the country. Protesters are frequently violently targeted, notably leading to the killing of father-of-five Salah Abbas and 22-year old photojournalist Ahmed Ismail Hassan by police during demonstrations against the race in 2012. However, in 2019 the case of Najah Yusuf mired the Grand Prix in controversy once again.

In April 2017, female activist Najah Yusuf was arrested in Bahrain just days after posting criticism of the race on Facebook. Najah was tortured and sexually assaulted by officers from Bahrain’s National Security Agency (NSA) and coerced into signing a pre-prepared confession which was later on used to sentence her to three years in prison in June 2018.

F1 initially attempted to distance themselves from Najah’s case, but were forced to admit concern in October 2018 after being confronted with Najah’s court ruling which explicitly referenced posts criticising the Grand Prix as one of the basis for her conviction. However, by March 2019, F1 had again reversed their position. In a letter to Lord Scriven, who had written to F1’s General Counsel Sacha Woodward-Hill on behalf of Najah, F1 accepted assurances from the Bahraini government “that anyone who merely criticised or continues to criticise Formula One in Bahrain is free to do so.”

In response, BIRD intensified pressure on F1 in the run up to the 2019 race, working closely with a number of parliamentarians, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and trade unions. Recently freed refugee footballer Hakeem Al-Araibi also joined calls for the race to be cancelled if Najah was not released, in OpEds published in The New York Times and Guardian Australia. The campaign culminated in the publication of a powerful Op-Ed in The Guardian from Najah herself, which generated unprecedented media interest for her case and the controversies surrounding the Bahrain Grand Prix.

In August 2019, after spending over two years in prison, Najah was finally released by royal pardon. A month later, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), deemed Najah’s imprisonment to have been arbitrary, unlawful and in violation of her human rights. The WGAD also recommended that Bahrain “take the steps necessary to remedy the situation of Ms Yusuf without delay” and “accord her an enforceable right to compensation and other reparations, in accordance with international law.”

F1 have promised to raise the WGAD findings with Bahrain and stress their recommendations for redress. Najah also gave her first interview since her release to The Independent, who published a powerful account of her experience since her arrest in 2017.

However, despite the vindication provided by the WGAD ruling, Najah was fired from her job upon her release, while her 16 year old son is now serving a 23 year sentence on trumped up charges which Najah believes are a reprisal for the international support her case received. Four months on, F1 have failed to indicate whether they have fulfilled their promises and Najah continues to await compensation.

Bahrain-McLaren Pro-Cycling Team

Among the most prominent figures driving Bahrain’s investment in professional sport is Prince Nasser, who previously served as President of Bahrain’s Olympic Committee. Driven by the success of his first endurance sports venture, the tri-
government of Bahrain mistreats its citizens and its athletes in particular, is clearly beyond the jurisdiction” of the Commission.

He further added that the Commission is concerned only with whether the team respects “the UCI Regulations and its ethical requirements”, is “financially healthy” and respects UCI’s “administrative and organisational requirements.” In sum, UCI made it clear that it does not consider human rights to be a consideration relevant to its business.

Despite the concerns of rights groups, UCI renewed the licence of the newly-rebranded Bahrain-McLaren team on 10 December 2019. The team has continued to lure prominent riders with lucrative contracts, notably signing former Team Sky director Rod Ellingworth and veteran racer Mark Cavendish for the 2020 season.

Royal Windsor Horse Show

In 2019, the King of Bahrain was once again travelled to the UK to attend the Royal Windsor Horse Show, an annual equestrian event hosted on the grounds of Windsor Castle since 1943. Since 2013, The King has been a regular attendee and personally sponsors an event at the show, the King’s Cup. King Hamad and Queen Elizabeth share a keen interest in horses and have gifted horses to one another from their respective royal stables.

The event has been dogged by protests since family members of three UK-based activists were arrested in Bahrain during the show in 2017, in an attempt to prevent them disrupting the King’s visit. In response, BIRD registered a complaint against the show’s organisers with the UK National Contact Point for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, who found that it merited “further examination”.

In 2019, Bahraini activist Ali Mushaima fasted outside the main gate in protest against the deliberate denial of medical care to his father, imprisoned Bahraini opposition leader Hassan Mushaima.

Bahrain-Merida cycling team being used to ‘sportswash’, campaigners say | 3 July 2019

Human rights campaigners call for Tour de France ban on Bahrain-Merida | 3 July 2019

Triathlon: Made in Bahrain | 10 October 2019
The relationship between the UK and Bahrain remained apparently steadfast throughout 2019, despite a series of scandals. These included the storming of the Bahraini Embassy in London by the Metropolitan Police to rescue a Bahraini protester and a decision by the British High Court outlawing arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which compelled the UK government to temporarily halt all arms sales to both Saudi and Bahrain, amongst other states.

Despite the ban, Britain has maintained its financial and technical support to the Gulf Kingdom, including to institutions accused of serious human rights violations, while government ministers, politicians and representatives of the British armed forces continued to visit Bahrain throughout the year.

Throughout the year, British politicians maintained scrutiny of British government policy by tabling over 120 parliamentary questions on Bahrain. A debate about human rights in Bahrain was held in March at the House of Lords, while the government was challenged on its relationship with Bahrain in an oral session at the Lords in July. BIRD also hosted events in parliament in February and October.

Bahrain Embassy Siege

In July, protester Moosa Mohammed, who scaled the roof of Bahrain’s embassy in London to protest against the imminent execution of Ali AlArab and Ahmed AlMalali was allegedly violently attacked by embassy staff.

Footage broadcast by Channel 4 appeared to corroborate Moosa’s allegations that a staffer beat him with a wooden pole while he sat precariously on a ledge at the embassy’s roof. Moosa alleged that he feared for his life; in an unprecedented move Metropolitan Police stormed the building to rescue him. When asked for comment, the UK government deferred responsibility, asserting that they “would expect the Police to investigate any allegations of criminal behaviour and bring charges where appropriate.”

In November, Moosa filed a criminal complaint against the embassy with the Metropolitan Police at Charing Cross Police Station, on grounds of threats to kill, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, torture and attempted murder. He told reporters that if police hadn’t stormed the building he believed he “would have been killed, like Jamal Khashoggi.” The Metropolitan Police’s Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) will investigate the case.

Petrofac Scandal

In October, Freedom of Information Act (FOI) requests sent by The Guardian revealed that former Conservative Prime Ministers Theresa May and David Cameron both lobbied the Bahraini royal family to award a $5 billion contract to oil company Petrofac, just months before the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) began investigating the company for bribery, corruption and money laundering.

While Cameron had left Downing Street six months before he promoted Petrofac during a two-day visit to Bahrain, Theresa May was still Prime Minister when she wrote to Bahrain’s Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa in support of the company’s contract bid. The bid was ultimately unsuccessful.

The controversy deepened in February 2020, when it emerged that the government’s former trade envoy Liam Fox continued to personally lobby Bahraini royals on behalf of Petrofac after the SFO began their investigation and after the company’s cofounder, major Tory donor Ayman Asfari, was arrested on corruption charges.
Asfari and his wife, Sawsan, are believed to have donated almost £800,000 to the Conservatives, raising questions about conflicts of interest arising from the Conservative Party’s numerous billionaire donors. The contract was eventually awarded to another company.

**Military Aid to Bahrain**

In another blow for the UK government, a decision by the British High Court ruled UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia to be unlawful on the grounds that ministers had failed to assess “whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law.” In response, the UK government announced a ban on new arms sales licences to all the nations in the Saudi-led coalition, including UAE, Egypt, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Despite the ban, a Bahraini delegation was nonetheless invited by the government to the biennial Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) exhibition at London’s EXCEL Centre, the world’s largest arms fair. Since 2011, the UK has licensed over £105 million worth of arms to Bahrain, including £49 million in aircraft, helicopters and drones; £30 million in small arms licences and £5.7 million in ammunition.

While arms sales have ostensibly been curbed, UK military training to Bahrain has continued unabated. In April, photographs emerged depicting British Royal Military Police conducting training exercises in Bahrain with King Hamad’s personal Royal Guard. FOI requests sent by BIRD uncovered that since the start of 2018, the British Army has provided four such training programmes to the elite unit, costing the taxpayer £18,964.36. The funding was provided by the Defence Assistance Fund, which is used to support the UK government’s Defence Engagement strategy that seeks to exploit Britain’s “defence assets and activities, short of combat operations, to achieve influence.” The army also provided training to the Royal Guard of Oman and the Amiri Guards of Qatar and Kuwait.

The FOIs also found the British Army also provided training to the Royal Guard of Oman and the Amiri Guards of Qatar and Kuwait, costing the British taxpayer a total of at least £288,602.99 since mid-2016.

**Technical Assistance to Bahrain**

FOI requests also shed new light on the UK government’s technical assistance programme, which was established in the wake of the Bahraini uprising and purports to be “building effective and accountable institutions, strengthening the rule of law, and justice reform” in the Kingdom. Since 2012, the UK government has spent over £6.5 million on the programme.

Until 2017 its primary beneficiaries were human rights oversight bodies including the National Institute for Human Rights, the Ministry of Interior Ombudsman and the NSA Ombudsman, which have been criticized by the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) as “not independent” and “not effective.” Since 2017, the FCO has prevented scrutiny of the technical assistance programme by channelling funds through the highly secretive Integrated Activity Fund (IAF), a £20 million a year pool of public money reserved for regimes in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

However, an FOI sent recently by BIRD prompted the first disclosure of details about how the opaque fund is being spent. The FOI revealed that the FCO has spent over £14,000 of taxpayer money bringing delegations from Bahrain to advise them on a new law permitting judges to convert jail time into non-custodial sentences.

In practice, Bahrain’s new law has proven highly discriminatory. Despite being eligible, applications from high profile political prisoners including the country’s most prominent human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab, and female activist, Hajer Mansoor, were rejected without cause. In November, 8 UN experts challenged Bahrain on “the rationale for rejecting requests made by Hajer and Nabeel for alternative non-custodial sentences.”

**Training by Third Parties: University of Huddersfield**

Bahrain’s MoI has also signed contracts with third party organisations in the UK to provide training to Bahraini institutions. Since 2018, the University of Huddersfield has been contracted to train students at Bahrain’s Royal Academy of Policing (the Academy), which in February 2020 was exposed as one of Bahrain’s most notorious “torture hubs.”

Articles in The Times and The Yorkshire Post reported that at least 10 political prisoners and three asylum seekers in the UK had been tortured at the Academy, for which the University of Huddersfield reserves an exclusive MSc course in Security Science.

Victims reported being subject to beatings, electrocution and
sexual assaults, as well as threats against the lives of their family members. Both BIRD and Huddersfield-born Lord Scriven had previously warned the university about the abusive reputation of Bahrain’s police force, but were rebuffed.

The controversy was exacerbated by the promotion of Brigadier General Fawaz Al Hassan to Director General of the Academy in December 2019. Al Hassan, who benefitted from UK taxpayer-funded training in 2015, was director of Bahrain’s Muharraq Security Complex when female activists Najah Yusuf and Ebtisam Alsaegh alleged they were sexually assaulted and tortured by police officers.

Furthermore, FOI requests sent by BIRD found that the University had failed to conduct adequate human rights due diligence, relying solely on an outdated FCO report and a cursory country profile by the BBC.

The Times also exposed the course’s ties to Huddersfield University’s disgraced former Chancellor, Prince Andrew, who travelled to Bahrain to “strengthen” ties with the Academy and meet with students on the course in April 2018. Huddersfield students were instrumental in forcing Prince Andrew to stand down as Chancellor, after a car-crash interview with the BBC’s Emily Matlis about his links to the recently deceased convicted paedophile, Jeffrey Epstein.

### Official Visits

Numerous official visits were exchanged between Bahraini and UK officials during 2019. The UK-Bahrain Joint Working Group convened for its 11th and 12th sessions, with then-MENA Minister Alistair Burt travelling to Bahrain to meet Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa and current MENA minister hosting Sheikh Khalid in October.

In October, the Prime Minister’s Envoy for Religious Freedom and Belief, Rehman Chishti, visited Manama. During his trip, which cost the taxpayer £1838, Chishti met “religious leaders and visited places of worship” to discuss freedom of religion in Bahrain. He was also granted a rare audience with King Hamad, after which he praised the King’s “strong historical track record for religious freedom.”

Bahrain’s unusual decision to grant a minor diplomat a meeting with the king raises questions about Chishti’s relationship with the governments of Bahrain and other Gulf states. Chishti has spoken positively about the Bahraini government in parliament and previously received almost £6000 in hospitality from the Saudi Embassy in London. Also in 2016, it emerged that Chishti was drawing a £2000 a month salary from a Saudi think-tank, the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies. Over a two year period, Chishti earned £46,000 from the organisation.
Visits by Military and Security Services

Testifying to the ongoing military cooperation between the UK and Bahrain, representatives from Bahrain’s security services also made official visits to the UK in 2019. In August, Field Marshall Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, commander-in-chief of Bahrain’s armed forces, paid a visit to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to meet the chief of the defence staff Sir Nicholas Carter. A spokesman from the Bahraini Embassy in London said the pair “discussed ways of strengthening joint military cooperation” between the two countries. Under Khalifa bin Ahmed’s watch, Bahraini civilians were sentenced to death by civilian courts, including the executed Ali AlArab and Ahmed AlMalali.

Another controversial visit was made in April by a delegation from Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior to two British prisons, HMP Berwyn and HMP Whitemoor. The delegation included Brigadier Abdulsalam Al Arifi, the Director General of Reformation and Rehabilitation in Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior, who is the highest authority responsible for managing prisons in Bahrain. Under Al Arifi’s watch, a string of abuses have been reported at Bahraini prisons, including reprisals against female political prisoners, medical negligence, religious discrimination and the obstruction of family visits. Given the huge number of prisoners launching hunger strikes in the second half of 2019, there is little to suggest that Al Arifi’s visit to the UK has in any way improved conditions in Bahraini prisons. In practice, these visits allow for the Bahraini Ministry of Interior to tout its legitimacy under the guise of their partnership with and participation in training provided by the UK, while making no improvements in reality.

British military officials also travelled to Bahrain in 2019, with the commander of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, General Paul Nanson, flying to Manama for an inaugural alumni dinner for the Middle East’s many Sandhurst graduates. He was accompanied by the heads of the Royal Navy’s officer academy in Dartmouth and the Royal Air Force College in Cranwell. Sandhurst has a long-established reputation for schooling Middle Eastern dictators, and King Hamad himself is a Sandhurst graduate and a generous patron to the school. Indeed, it emerged in 2013 that the king donated £3 million pounds to Sandhurst in return for a building being renamed after him.

2019 International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue

Since 2013, London-based international affairs think-tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), has held a biennial conference in Bahrain known as the ‘Manama Dialogue,’ where security experts and foreign ministers discuss political issues related to the Middle East. Transparify, an NGO which ranks the financial transparency of think tanks, has ranked the IISS the third-largest think tank by expenditure, but given the IISS the lowest possible rating - “deceptive” - on the transparency of its funding. As usual, the 2019 Manama Dialogue saw the attendance of several prominent figures from the British government and armed forces, many of whom had recently left government service. These included former-chancellor Phillip Hammond, former FCO MENA minister Alistair Burt, former Defence Minister Sir Michael Fallon, former Minister of State for Europe and the Americas Sir Alan Duncan, as well as current Member of Parliament (MP) for Beckenham, Bob Stewart. High-ranking individuals from the British Army and intelligence services, including Senior Defense Advisor to the Middle East, Sir John Lorimer, and former MI6 Controller and adviser to the King of Bahrain, Sir Geoffrey Tantum, were also in attendance.

The regular presence and participation of so many high ranking politicians and military figures at the IISS is emblematic of the deep political ties between Bahrain and the British government, raising serious questions about the FCO’s ability to act as a neutral arbiter when it comes to democracy and human rights.