

17 October 2014

Rt Hon Phillip Hammond MP
Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

Dear Mr. Hammond,

We are writing to you in light of your current tour of Gulf Cooperation Council countries regarding the arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights defenders **Nabeel Rajab, Zainab Al-Khawaja** and **Ghada Jamsheer** in Bahrain for cases of peaceful expression.

Nabeel Rajab, the President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Director of the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR) and Deputy Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), remains in prison following his arrest for a tweet in which he expressed his view about the role Bahrain security institutions play as "incubators of ISIS ideology". Mr. Rajab had travelled to Bahrain from the United Kingdom following a European advocacy tour that included a panel at the UK House of Lords.

His detention has been criticised internationally. The United Nations has warned his detention sends a "chilling message".¹ The Norwegian government has recently advised² that the arrest of Mr. Rajab sends a negative message and has called for his immediate release. The European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights has voiced serious concerns over his arrest and detention and the United States State Department has called on Bahrain to drop the charges against him³.

We urge the United Kingdom to add its voice to these universal calls. As a close ally to Bahrain, the UK has influence that could result in steps to release human rights defenders and political prisoners in Bahrain. You will recall that the UK signed a joint statement⁴ during the 26th session of the UN Human Rights Council, which urged the government of Bahrain "to release all persons imprisoned solely for exercising human rights, including human rights defenders some of whom have been identified as arbitrarily detained according to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention". We ask you to follow up on this statement by calling for the immediate and

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15135&LangID=E>

² http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/aktuelt/nyheter/2014/mr_forkjempere_bahrain.html?id=771739

³ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/233047.htm#BAHRAIN>

⁴ <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2013/09/09/joint-statement-expresses-concern-about-human-rights-situation-in-bahrain/>

unconditional release of both Mr. Rajab and Ms. Al-Khawaja who have been detained solely for exercising their human right to free expression.

Zainab Al-Khawaja is a prominent activist in Bahrain, who is facing serious charges of "publicly insulting the King" after ripping a photo of him during a court hearing. The case, which runs contrary to Bahrain's international human rights obligations, was immediately transferred to the Higher Criminal Court in Bahrain meaning that she now faces up to seven years in prison for a peaceful act of expression. It is important to note that Ms. Al-Khawaja is eight months pregnant, and faces the possibility of going into labour in arbitrary detention.

Amnesty International has criticised⁵ the decision and called for her immediate release arguing "laws that prohibit insults or the disrespect of heads of state or other public figures are contrary to international human rights law and standards".

Her sister **Maryam Al-Khawaja**, Co-Director of the GCHR, is also facing prison on charges of assault brought against her after she arrived in Bahrain on 30 August to try to visit her father, jailed human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, founder of BCHR and GCHR. She was released after two weeks but is due in court on 5 November.⁶

In addition to these cases, women's rights defender **Ghada Jamsheer** was arrested and imprisoned on 15 September, on charges of defamation on Twitter. She remains in detention and will face to court prosecution on charges related to her freedom of expression on 22 October.

The arrest and ongoing detention of both Mr. Rajab and Ms. Al-Khawaja threaten to destabilise further an already unstable country. It is imperative that human rights advocates are not targeted for exercising their human rights peacefully. The work of human rights defenders often requires criticising governments as noted by the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders⁷, which call for this role to be "recognised and supported".

We urge the British government to demand the immediate release of all detained human rights defenders and activists in Bahrain.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
English PEN
Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
Index on Censorship
Pen International
Redress
Reprieve

⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahrain-release-pregnant-activist-detained-ripping-photo-king-2014-10-1>

⁶ <http://gc4hr.org/news/view/767>

⁷ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/GuidelinesDefenders.pdf>