

Sigmar Gabriel
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Auswartiges Amt
D-11013 Berlin
Germany

8 June 2017

Your Excellency,

We are writing to urge your government to call on Bahrain to end the arbitrary suspension of *Al Wasat* newspaper. The Ministry of Information Affairs suspended *Al Wasat*, the only independent newspaper in Bahrain, on 4 June 2017, effectively silencing the media in Bahrain and violating the right to freedom of expression. The newspaper's suspension comes after an escalation of reprisals against civil society, and the killing of five protesters by Bahraini police in May.

Al Wasat's suspension is the latest in a recent spate of reprisals against independent media and civil society actors, including journalists, writers, and human rights defenders. In this context, journalists in Bahrain have expressed serious concerns that the newspaper will not be allowed to resume publication.

The suspension comes days after the decision to dissolve *Wa'ad*, the last major opposition party on 31 May¹ and the raid on *Duraz* village on 23 May, when five protesters were killed by Bahraini police and 286 arrested in the deadliest policing incident in King Hamad's reign.² Human rights defenders have also been subjected to harassment, torture and sexual abuse in the past weeks.³

The Bahrain News Agency reported "The Ministry of Information Affairs suspended *Al Wasat* newspaper until further notice following its recurrent violation of the law and spreading what would stir divisions within the community and undermine the Kingdom of Bahrain's relations with other countries."⁴ This accusation relates to an editorial about ongoing protests in Al-Hoceima, Morocco.⁵ Prior to the suspension of *Al Wasat*, Bahrain was already counted among the 20 most restrictive countries for press globally, with Reporters Without Borders ranking Bahrain 164th out of 180 countries in its 2017 World Press Freedom Index.⁶ In April, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and five press freedom groups and media outlets expressed concern over the "seeming attempt to silence independent reporting within the country" by refusing to grant accreditation to Bahraini citizens who report to foreign and independent media, including the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, France 24 and Monte Carlo Doualiya.⁷

Bahrain's print media consists of five major Arabic-language daily newspapers. Of these, four are strongly pro-government and are owned by figures associated with the government. *Al Wasat* is the sole exception. Established in 2002 during a period of reforms, *Al Wasat* takes a critical editorial line

¹ Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, *Secular Opposition Society Wa'ad Dissolved, Assets Confiscated*, 31 May 2017, <http://birdbh.org/2017/05/secular-opposition-society-waad-dissolved-assets-confiscated/>.

² Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, *Bahrain Police Raid Duraz Sit-In, Killing 5 and Injuring Dozens*, 24 May 2017, <http://birdbh.org/2017/05/bahrain-police-raid-duraz-sit-in-killing-5-and-injuring-dozens/>.

³ Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Woman Human Rights Defender Tortured, Including Sexually Assaulted, As Bahrain Renews Campaign to Silence Peaceful Critics*, 31 May 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/document/?indexNumber=mde11%2F6392%2F2017&language=en>

⁴ Bahrain News Agency, *Information Ministry Suspends Newspaper*, 4 June 2017, <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/788857>.

⁵ Al-Wasat, *احتجاجات الحسيمة المغربية تعيد قرع الأجراس* (Morocco's Al-Hoceima Protests Ring Alarm Bells), 4 April 2017, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1246922.html>

⁶ Reporters Without Borders, *Bahrain*, <https://rsf.org/en/bahrain>.

⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, Letter to King Hamad, <https://cpj.org/blog/cpjbahrainletter427.pdf>.

and is financially independent of the state. Its editor Mansoor Al-Jamri won the CPJ International Press Freedom Award in 2011 and the Peace Through Media Award in 2012.

It is not the first time that *Al Wasat* has been suspended. In January 2017, the newspaper was barred for two days from publishing online, though the print version was allowed, following a front-page story on the executions of three individuals.⁸ All three individuals were torture victims who had been sentenced to death following unfair trials. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said it was “appalled” by the executions.⁹ In August 2015, the newspaper was shut down for two days, allegedly because they did not refer to Bahraini casualties in Yemen as “martyrs”.¹⁰ In April 2011, in the middle of the March-June 2011 State of Emergency, the government suspended *Al Wasat* for one day. Karim Al-Fakhrawi, a co-founder of *Al Wasat*, was arrested on 2 April 2011 and tortured to death in police custody.¹¹

The suspension of *Al Wasat* muzzles the media, unduly restricting the right to freedom of expression and opinion. As the only independent newspaper in Bahrain, its suspension removes a key voice for public discourse and denies the public the right to access information and diverse views. In the context of current, severe human rights violations occurring in Bahrain, calls for the resumption of the only independent newspaper and the respect for freedom of expression and opinion urgently need to be heard and acted on. We, the undersigned, urge your government to publicly call on the Government of Bahrain to allow *Al Wasat* to resume publication immediately.

Yours Sincerely,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

ARTICLE 19

Bahrain Center for Human Rights

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

Committee to Protect Journalists

English PEN

European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights

French PEN Club

Gulf Center for Human Rights

Index on Censorship

Norwegian PEN

PEN International

Project on Middle East Democracy

Reporters Without Borders

Individuals

Dr. David Andrew Weinberg

Senior Fellow

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

**Organizational affiliation for identification purposes only.*

⁸ Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, *Bahrain Partially Suspends Alwasat, Only Independent Newspaper*, 17 January 2017, <http://birdbh.org/2017/01/bahrain-partially-suspends-alwasat-only-independent-newspaper/>.

⁹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Press Briefing Notes on Iran and Bahrain*, 17 January 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21092&LangID=E>.

¹⁰ Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, *IAA Suspends Al Wasat, Bahrain's Only Independent Newspaper*, 6 August 2015, <http://birdbh.org/2015/08/bahrain-government-suspends-al-wasat-countrys-only-independent-newspaper/>

¹¹ 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>.