

Sir Vince Cable MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



CC: Tom Brake MP, Alistair Carmichael MP, Rt. Hon. Sir Edward Davey MP, Tim Farron MP, Wera Hobhouse MP, Christine Jardine MP, Norman Lamb MP, Stephen Lloyd MP, Layla Moran MP, Jamie Stone MP, Jo Swinson MP, Lord Scriven

14 September 2017

Human Rights in the Gulf: Policies at the Liberal Democrats Party Conference

Dear Sir Vince Cable MP,

We write to you ahead of the Liberal Democrats' annual conference to urge your party to ensure policy decisions are rooted in the value of protecting human rights – particularly in the Gulf, where the din of international trade negotiations threatens to drown out concerns over the suffering of civilians.

We welcome the Liberal Democrats' international affairs plans to champion the rules-based international order, implement a policy of "presumption of denial" for arms exports to countries listed as Human Rights Priority Countries by the FCO. Such commitments are important even as the United Kingdom looks for economic and security partnerships in the Gulf region ahead of leaving the European Union.

Current UK Government Policy in Bahrain: Opaque Policies Endangering Human Rights

Bahrain is a strategic ally to the UK and host to a Royal Navy base, the construction of which was funded by the country's king. Since 2012, the UK Government has spent in excess of £5 million in taxpayers' money funding a technical assistance programme to Bahrain, which has gone nowhere. It has been funded by the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund, an opaque fund that lacks transparency, which the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy described as a "[slush fund](#)". When we requested basic information about this programme, including a list of projects, budgetary information and beneficiaries, we were alarmed by our government's response, following an internal review, that "the Government of Bahrain has requested that information remain confidential". Britain has helped [train Bahrain's violent police](#), which continues to employ [lethal force](#) against protesters, killing five protesters in a single day in May. Significant assistance has been given to Bahrain's Police Ombudsman and National Institute for Human Rights, which [whitewash illegal executions](#), and which the UN Committee Against Torture [recently criticised](#) as ineffective, not independent and lacking clear mandates. It is unacceptable for the UK Government to sacrifice its position on transparency to aid authoritarian regimes.

For all the UK Government's assistance, the situation in Bahrain has deteriorated precipitously. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in September [deplored](#) the increasing torture and democratic "shutdown" in the country. Bahrain's government has [shut down civil society space](#), allowing no independent trade unions, NGOs or newspapers to operate. The National Security Agency has been

empowered to commit obscene acts of torture without restriction. In July, leading human rights campaigner Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to two years in prison for speaking to journalists, and faces further charges carrying up to 15 years for tweeting about the Yemen war and torture in Bahrain. [Amnesty International](#) has described the recent rise in abuses as “Bahrain’s year of crushing dissent.”

Yet Bahrain is not content to crush dissent at home: UK-based activists have also been targeted with impunity. In March, police arrested three relatives of the London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy’s Director of Advocacy, Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei. Police subjected them to ill-treatment and interrogations about his work, then charged them with trumped-up criminal offences; they remain in prison. Human Rights Watch has [described](#) it as “retribution” for the activist’s work. In May, Bahraini forces detained the family members of three UK activists to blackmail protesters from attending the [Royal Windsor Horse Show](#). The Horse Show is sponsored by Bahrain, and King Hamad was in attendance. When protesters attended the horse show despite the threats, Bahraini security agents in Windsor followed and threatened them and a journalist.

It is wholly unacceptable that Bahrain should punish activists and their family members for protests conducted against Bahraini royalty on British soil. The UK Government has provided no support for the activists affected, who include among them stateless persons and refugees who fled Bahrain for Britain, as well as British citizens. Instead, it has continued to provide political aid and cover for a monarchy which shows no respect for the British value of free speech even when on British soil.

Saudi Arabia

In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition has helped cause and accelerate the worst man-made humanitarian crisis in the world. The Saudi coalition, which includes British allies Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, has benefited from British arms and British training. The Ministry of Defence has delivered at least two training sessions to the coalition’s [Joint Incident Assessment Team](#) – a unit intended to investigate humanitarian law violations, whose membership includes a [Bahraini judge](#) responsible for sentencing hundreds of civilians and torture victims in unfair proceedings at the military court during the 2011 Arab Spring.

Saudi Arabia is responsible not just for suffering in Yemen, but also in its oil-rich Eastern Province, where the small, Shia-majority town of Awamiya has been subjected to a demolition of its historic quarter since May, which the UN has [condemned](#). Saudi security forces have allegedly fired into populated areas, occupied a public school, closed clinics and pharmacies, and prevented essential services such as ambulances from reaching the area. Residents claim that of the 30,000 who lived there, [up to 20,000 fled](#). On 12 June, [a three year old was shot](#) by an armoured vehicle as his family drove to his grandparents’ home to break the fast during Ramadan. He died from these wounds in August – and is one of at least 23 Awamiya residents who have been killed. It is alleged that Saudi forces were firing indiscriminately at civilians in retaliation for the death of a security official the previous night. The violations against the Saudi Shia are not helped by Saudi Arabia’s religious curriculum, which could amount to hate speech: religious text books teach children from an early age to distrust “unbelievers” and to consider Shia and other Muslim practices as [“evil-natured”](#).

The UK Government has made no statements on the situation in Awamiya, and [refused to answer a journalist](#) on whether there were any investigations into the use of British equipment there. British security relations and arms exports to Saudi Arabia need to be held to a higher standard to prevent abuses and complicity in them.

Moving Forward: Human Rights-led Foreign Policy

When the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary visited Bahrain in December 2016 and Saudi Arabia in March, they promised greater security and trade relations, failing to make any mention of human rights. This approach is fundamentally wrong: long-term security and stability in the region, an often-expressed goal, can only be achieved if the human rights of the Gulf's people are genuinely respected and protected. Commitments made within the [National Security Strategy](#) to expand Britain's military presence and cooperation in the Gulf and trade cyber security to the autocratic countries, which may use such technologies against peaceful dissidents and threaten long-term stability, rather than improve it. Trade and security agreements made without a strong human rights component may appear expedient on the surface, but in the long term they precipitate greater violence by repressive states and damage the stability of these countries, the region, and the UK's position globally.

We welcome the Liberal Democrats' current plan and want to see further policy commitments grounded in human rights adopted at the Liberal Democrats' upcoming conference. In particular, we call on you to:

- Campaign for the suspension of the UK Government's opaque technical assistance and training programmes to Bahrain until human rights guarantees are in place, including a successful country visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Bahrain's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture;
- Campaign for the suspension of arms exports to Saudi Arabia until an independent UN investigation into alleged war crimes in Yemen is conducted and concluded;
- Scrutinise the UK Government's policies in its arms exports to these countries;
- Adopt specific commitments to support human rights defenders and civil society activists working for democratisation in their home countries, including in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf region.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, Director of Advocacy

The Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)