

Statement Submitted by Husain Abdulla
Executive Director
Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

to the
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
In conjunction with the hearing
Human Rights and US Policy in the MENA Region: Ten Years After the Arab Spring
May 6, 2021

Honorable Co-chairs of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement to support the hearing you are holding on “Human Rights and US Policy in the MENA Region: Ten Years After the Arab Spring.”

My name is Husain Abdulla. I want Bahrain to be a stable and democratic country whose government respects the full range of human rights of its citizens.

That is not a radical statement. But people, have been killed, tortured, imprisoned, and exiled for trying to make it a reality.

This should be intolerable to Congress, the Administration, and the American people but there has been little, if any, progress toward this simple goal in the last ten years.

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain was established before the Arab Spring took place and has advocated for freedom and democracy in Bahrain in the ten years since. I will share with you observations about the human rights situation in Bahrain during this period, the impact that US policy has had on human rights and Bahrain, and steps we encourage the US Government to take to ensure that we are living up to our own standards on human rights and that we are holding the Government of Bahrain accountable for its actions.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the beginning of peaceful protests by the Bahraini people that took place as the Arab spring swept across the Middle East. Starting on February 14, 2011, thousands of Bahraini men, women and children took to the streets calling for greater participation in their government and social and economic reform. Within hours, the absolute monarch, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, sent thousands of security forces to end the protests.

Yet, the peaceful protests grew. Pearl Roundabout in the center of Bahrain’s capital city, Manama, became the hub of the peaceful calls for change. Thousands of men, women and children occupied the center of the roundabout and engaged in speeches and calls for democracy and respect for human rights.

Then came “Bahrain Bloody Thursday.” At about 4 AM on February 17, 2011, while most of the estimated 1,500 protesters camped in the roundabout were sleeping, as many as a thousand security forces stormed the area, shooting tear gas, throwing stun grenades, and discharging

shot guns at the terrified people. Many women and children were in the roundabout. Bahraini and international media were attacked. Paramedics and ambulance drivers who responded were also reportedly attacked and told not to help injured protesters. Four protesters were killed -- Mahmood Makki Abutaki, Isa Abdulhasan Ali Hussain, Ali Mansoor Khudair, and Ali Ahmed Moumen. As many as 300 were injured. Hundreds were arrested and the police pursued protesters to nearby villages to arrest them.

Following Bahrain Bloody Thursday, Nicholas Kristof wrote in the *New York Times*, "When a king opens fire on his people, he no longer deserves to be ruler." President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton decried the violence and condemnation poured in from other governments. Some believe that this outrageous action by the government ended the possibility of dialogue. Many of the protesters strengthened their demands, calling for a new constitution and an end to the monarchy in Bahrain, believing that the king had lost any legitimacy he may have had.

The King of Bahrain was forced by international pressure to institute the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), to investigate and report on the actions that took place in Bahrain February and March 2011. The commission documented 46 deaths, 559 allegations of torture, and more than 4,000 cases of employees dismissed for participating in protests. The report criticized the security forces for the use of excessive force and made clear that many of the abuses could not have happened without the knowledge of more senior government officials. The report also confirmed the Bahraini government's systematic torture of detainees and made clear that the Government's assertion that Iran was behind the uprising was unfounded.

The Commission made a series of recommendations related to the conduct of the Government of Bahrain focusing on accountability and improvements in human rights practices. Despite its damning findings against the Government of Bahrain and the Government's promise to implement the BICI recommendations, it quickly became clear that the Government of Bahrain had absolutely no intention of holding anyone accountable for the violations of human rights, implementing fair trials, or improving its human rights practices. The US Government applied little pressure and the Government's failure to implement the report's recommendations was ignored by those in power as if everything was fine.

But everything was not fine. And everything is not fine now. Between 2012 and today, major human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Human Rights First have documented serious, ongoing and blatant violations of the rights of the Bahraini people at the hands of their government. In February 2021, Amnesty International reported that the situation in Bahrain has actually gotten worse. It makes clear that:

systemic injustice has intensified and . . . Since 2011, the only structural changes Bahrain has seen have been for the worse, as opposition parties have been outlawed, the only independent news outlet has been shut down, and new laws have further closed the space for political participation. The protest leaders of 2011 continue to languish in grim prison conditions, and human rights including the right to freedom of expression are routinely trampled on.

The US State Department's Annual Human Rights Reports on Bahrain have consistently shone a bright light on these violations. In February 2021, the State Department summarized the situation in the country:

Significant human rights issues included: torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; harsh prison conditions, including lack of sufficient access to medical care in prisons; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including censorship, site blocking, criminal libel, and arrests stemming from social media activity; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; overly restrictive laws on independent nongovernmental organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement, including revocation of citizenship; restrictions on political participation; and significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

These massive and egregious violations of fundamental human rights should stir the United State to action regardless of whether the government perpetrating them is an ally or an enemy.

As the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The people of Bahrain have been waiting for ten long years for a sign that the arc is bending toward them. The United States must stand on the side of right and help them realize their dream of freedom and self-determination, the core asks of people across the region when the Arab Spring was young ten years ago.

I am hopeful with the emphasis by the Biden Administration in its first months in office on ensuring that US values, including a fundamental support for human rights, are reflected in our foreign policy. The President and Secretary Blinken know that we cannot serve as a beacon of hope while turning a blind eye to human rights violations.

But I have been optimistic before, only to be disappointed. The way we will know if the US is delivering a consistent and meaningful message to Bahrain that human rights matter in the bilateral relationship and that Bahrain is receiving that message is when Bahrain makes substantial and fundamental changes in its behavior. Words will not matter. Promises will not matter. Studies, reports, declarations, commissions, and meetings will not matter.

The only thing that will matter after ten years of inaction is concrete action by the Government of Bahrain, like the release from prison of jailed opposition leader Mr. Hasan Mushaima.

I also encourage leaders in the Administration and Congress to reevaluate our relationship with Bahrain. Mr. Speaker, Senator Chris Murphy recently wrote:

. . . I think it is time for us to challenge this belief . . . that the US can't defend our interests in the Gulf without massive bases scattered throughout the region. . . without billion-dollar bases in Bahrain. . . US bases are costly. . . they draw focus away from

important other theaters like Asia and Africa. But they also create a lot of pressure to ignore serious human rights abuses by our hosts. . . the Biden administration should seriously consider reducing its military basing in the region. Reconsidering the costs and benefits of basing the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain would be a good start, as the United States' massive footprint is becoming more trouble than it is worth.

More trouble than it is worth. After more than a decade of lies, abuses, and backsliding by the Government of Bahrain that is how a prominent member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee describes the US relationship with Bahrain.

As the new Administration decides how to engage with Bahrain, I urge the President and Secretary of State to use diplomacy, to use creativity, to use all the tools at its disposal to set in motion a process of democratic change and accountability in Bahrain. These tools include:

- Pause arms sales to Bahrain
- Begin developing a contingency plan for relocating the US 5th Fleet out of Bahrain and to a more stable nation
- Utilize all tools of diplomacy to call for the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, the start of a process of democratization, and accountability for those who have committed human rights abuses. Release of Mr. Hasan Mushaima is a bellwether for Bahraini action.
 - Additional first steps by the government would include ending the prohibition on political societies, decriminalizing all speech, allowing national and international press to operate without state intervention, stopping rendering its citizens stateless, stripping the National Security Agency of its power to arrest, bringing its anti-terrorism legislation into line with international human rights standards, integrating its security forces, and ending discrimination against the majority Shi'a population everywhere it exists.
- Engage diplomatically with others in the region, most notable Saudi Arabia, to remove impediments to democratization in Bahrain
- Review of Bahraini officials under the Global Magnitsky Act to punish Bahraini officials who have committed atrocities and have seen no consequences.

Ten-years ago, the people of Bahrain exhibited incredible bravery and commitment to non-violence, in calling for the release of political prisoners, accountability for those who have committed atrocities, and a transition to democracy. We all hoped the result would be a stable and democratic Bahrain that respects the full range of human rights of its citizens. The Bahraini people have not given up.

Today we stand at a crossroads of opportunity. If the Biden Administration and Congress engage themselves fully on the side of human rights, peace, stability, and justice they will find willing partners in the people of Bahrain and progress will be made to find a real and durable solution to the ongoing, egregious, and unacceptable violations of right by the Government of Bahrain against its own people. Thank you Mr. McGovern and Mr. Smith.