

Joshua Colangelo-Bryan Testimony Regarding Nabeel Rajab

I am honored to speak today on behalf of Nabeel Rajab, a human rights defender who has been imprisoned in Bahrain since July 2012.

There was a time when no one could have predicted that Nabeel was to become a prisoner of conscience, a victim of the Bahraini government's determination to suppress all dissent. Nabeel was born in 1964 to a prosperous family that enjoyed good relations with Bahrain's ruling family. In his early adulthood, Nabeel was an entrepreneur, operating a variety of small businesses, while also marrying and having two children. However, the pursuit of profits was not Nabeel's true calling.

Rather, Nabeel began to work on human rights matters in the 1990s, inspired by political unrest and systematic human rights abuses that were prevalent in Bahrain at that time. After King Hamad announced reforms which, among other things, allowed civil society groups to form, Nabeel co-founded the Bahrain Center for Human Rights in 2002, which addresses issues from torture to extra-judicial killing to the abuse of migrant workers. Displeased with the Center's activities, the Bahraini government officially disbanded it in 2004.

Nonetheless, Nabeel ensured that the Center continued to function, most critically since February 2011, when massive pro-democracy protests erupted in Bahrain. The government met these protests by shooting and killing peaceful demonstrators, beating detainees to death, and engaging in large-scale political prosecutions. These crimes were detailed in the report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which King Hamad had charged with investigating such matters.

Since 2011, Nabeel and the Center have investigated and reported on human rights abuses, providing essential information to the international community, whose representatives often have been denied entry into Bahrain. The Center also has lobbied the European Union, the United Nations, and national governments. Nabeel himself has visited with members of Congress to discuss the situation in Bahrain.

Nabeel has never been parochial in his focus, however. He has long worked on human rights issues outside Bahrain, advocating on behalf of people regardless of their sect, color, citizenship or background. For example, Nabeel championed the due process rights of Guantanamo Bay detainees. This work, on behalf of people perceived to be Sunni extremists, earned Nabeel – a secular Shia – enmity from some within his community in Bahrain, a country that suffers from sectarian polarization. For Nabeel, such work was simply a matter of principle.

In a similar vein, Nabeel was a founder of the Gulf Center for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization that works to protect human rights defenders throughout the Gulf region. Nabeel is a member of the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch's Middle East Division, and was Deputy Secretary General for the International Federation for Human Rights.

Unfortunately, Nabeel's advocacy for others in his home country has led to his paying a very heavy and personal price. In the early morning hours of April 18, 2011, unknown assailants lobbed teargas grenades over a garden wall that surrounds his home and the home of his elderly

mother, who suffered from respiratory disease, causing her great distress. On January 6, 2012, riot police beat Nabeel as he was leaving a peaceful protest, sending him to the hospital.

In the summer of 2012, the government began to subject Nabeel to transparently political prosecutions. In June, a court fined him for tweeting that police had failed to protect civilians from attack by an armed group. Another court sentenced him to three months' imprisonment after he tweeted that Bahrain's prime minister no longer enjoyed support in Sitra, which prosecutors contended was offensive to town residents. Following that conviction, masked security forces roughly seized Nabeel from his home in front of his children and brought him to prison.

On August 16, 2012, while Nabeel's lawyers attended an appeal in that case, authorities brought Nabeel from prison to a different courtroom, where the judge convicted him in three other proceedings for taking part in "unapproved" pro-democracy demonstrations. Even though the court did not find that Nabeel had engaged in or incited any act of violence, it sentenced him to three years' imprisonment; a term reduced to two years by an appellate court. Nabeel is currently serving that sentence and only recently was denied an early "good behavior" release.

Nabeel is not unique in having been subjected to such injustices. We have seen a Bahraini court sentence half a dozen opposition activists to life terms for peacefully protesting in favor of establishing a republic in Bahrain. A Bahraini court sentenced a nurse to prison for "destroying public property" after she stepped on a photograph of the prime minister. Conversely, Bahraini courts have sentenced security personnel convicted of shooting or beating people to death to terms of as little as six months, when such personnel have been convicted at all.

Nabeel called me recently from prison. He did not want to talk about his circumstances, perhaps in part because the call was monitored. But, in truth, Nabeel has never been overly concerned about himself. Indeed, his focus has remained steadfastly on the well-being of others. So he asked about my family and requested that I offer his thanks to Congressman McGovern.

For years, Nabeel has spoken out on behalf of those who could not speak out for themselves. Now that Nabeel is imprisoned, it is my privilege to speak out on his behalf. Hopefully, by bringing attention to the injustices visited upon Nabeel, we can remind authorities in Bahrain that we will not forget Nabeel, but will continue to demand that Bahrain treat him in accordance with international standards and laws, and release him.