



Written Statement of
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Bahrain: 2022 Elections

Say Their Names
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Mr. Chairman McGovern and Mr. Chairman Smith, thank you for convening this hearing on Bahrain, and for inviting me to speak.

I'm taking to you today from Kyiv, where human rights are under direct attack from authoritarianism.

I have been documenting human right issues in both Ukraine and Bahrain for many years, meeting with local human rights activists in both countries and often relaying their recommendations to Washington.

While I make no comparison between the two countries' situations I would point out there has been a markedly different reaction over the last decade from U.S. government officials to local human rights defenders in Bahrain compared to those in Ukraine.

While the U.S. government rightly publicly applauds the work of human rights defenders here, and denounces threats and attacks against them, it too often stays silent when defenders in Bahrain are targeted.

Governments, like people, who are only for human rights in some places some of the time aren't really for human rights.

Chairmen McGovern and Smith, I was first invited to speak to this commission over ten years ago, when _____ the problem of the U.S.'s weak response to the issue of attacks on human rights defenders in Bahrain.

Since then the human rights situation, including the situation of local human rights defenders, has become significantly worse. When I addressed this commission in May 2012 the country had just been rocked by large-scale, peaceful protests for human rights and democracy. A state of emergency was in place, and leading activists and others seen by the government as dissidents, including dozens of medics, had been tortured and jailed.

Yet even during that crackdown political opposition groups were allowed to exist, some local human rights activists were allowed to document and publicize abuses, human rights NGOs - including my own - were allowed to visit the country and report on what was happening, and a semi-independent newspaper was allowed to make some criticism of the ruling family.

Ten years on, the political opposition is not allowed to stand in the upcoming elections (in fact opposition groups are not allowed to exist at all), virtually all local human rights defenders have been put into prison or forced into exile, the newspaper has been closed down, and independent international human rights organizations are not allowed into the country.

Chairman McGovern may recall that in August 2014 the government of Bahrain refused to grant him a guarantee of access to Bahrain when he and I proposed making a fact-finding trip there together.

Over the last ten years things have spiralled, with nearly all of the human rights defenders I mentioned in 2012 and at subsequent hearings still in jail, their health deteriorating. Ten years ago there was a de facto moratorium on prisoner executions. Now some prisoners are executed.

Ten years ago we were told by U.S. government officials that quiet diplomacy worked best with the Bahraini government, and with other neighboring governments in the Gulf. We now see how that has worked out with Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain is a similarly erratic ally of the United States, yet despite a litany of broken promises from the Bahraini government about reform, the situation has spiralled.

I can spend my time today examining a decade of U.S. failure in Bahrain, and noting examples of how a series of U.S. administrations ignored recommendations from local human rights activists in Bahrain, and what the resulting costs were to the activists and to the reputation of the United States.

For example, in the last ten years the U.S. Congress has provided the executive with tools to press Bahrain's authorities. Arbitrary detention is a sanctionable human rights abuse under the Global Magnitsky targeted sanctions program, whether it's an adversary or a friend or a military ally responsible for the abuse.

Individual Bahraini officials who are involved in or responsible for that abuse can be barred from entering the United States and subject to an asset freeze if they have property there, but to date none have been.

There are other things the U.S. can do with now, today.

These next two weeks promise to be intense in Bahrain. Before the elections on November 12, His Holiness Pope Francis will make the first papal visit to the country.

We hope he will take the opportunity to raise human rights issues, including those of peaceful human rights activists being jailed for long terms after undergoing torture and sham trials.

U.S. government officials should publicly commend calls made by Pope Francis for the government of Bahrain to respect human rights.

The U.S. should also learn from its many past mistakes and adopt a policy of publicly naming all those human rights defenders who have been wrongly fully jailed, and calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Where there have been rare successes on human rights in Bahrain they have come after public international pressure including public criticism by the U.S. government.

Most of the medics arrested, tortured and found guilty a decade ago were acquitted after the U.S. government spoke out for them. The release from prison of my fellow panelist Maryam Al Khawaja, and the release from prison of her sister Zaynab, followed public calls from U.S. government officials that they be released.

The U.S.-Bahrain relationship is layered and complicated, with deep military ties and lucrative arms deals. U.S. engagement with Bahrain and its other authoritarian Gulf allies need a radical overhaul, and I'm more than happy to recommend to this commission or other parts of the U.S. government how that should be done.

But today, this week, the U.S. government should do something much simpler that only takes two minutes.

Because of the papal visit and because of the elections, international media attention will be on Bahrain in a way it hasn't for a decade, and it's vital that the U.S. government speak up this week, today.

A senior U.S. official should call publicly for the releases of Naji Fateel, of Abduljalil Al Singace, of Hassan Mushaima, of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja.

Say their names. Say they should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Break the code of silence that won't name them, and call for their release. Break the diplomatic etiquette of hiding behind phrases that call for "due process" in their cases.

The silence hasn't worked. The etiquette hasn't worked. The Behind Closed Doors conversations haven't worked.

Say their names.

There are many more wrongfully jailed, but let's start here.

Thank you, Chairmen, for this opportunity to speak, and I look forward to any questions you have.