



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing**

### **Bahrain: Repression and the Consequences for Reconciliation**

**Thursday, February 11, 2016  
11:00 AM – 12:00 PM  
902 Hart Senate Office Building**

#### **Rep. James P. McGovern -- Opening Remarks**

Good morning. On behalf of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I welcome you to our briefing this morning on repression and reconciliation in Bahrain.

I would like to recognize the organizations that are co-hosting our discussion today:

- Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain
- Human Rights First
- Project on Middle East Democracy

I thank them for their continual efforts to keep the human rights situation in Bahrain in the public eye, and on the Congress' agenda.

Last August, Sen. Ron Wyden and Sen. Marco Rubio introduced S. 2009, The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Accountability Act, and Senators Leahy and Merkley have also signed on as co-sponsors. In September, my colleagues Congressmen Joe Pitts and Hank Johnson and I introduced the same legislation over in the House. Since then, we've picked up another eight co-sponsors. Why did we do this?

As we all know, Bahrain is a major ally of the United States and hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. In February 2011, I began to follow events in Bahrain very closely, when the promise of the Arab Spring reached that country and citizens rose up to peacefully protest corruption, abuses by the security forces, a dysfunctional justice system, and the general lack of democracy. Unfortunately, the response to the peaceful dissent and calls for change was violent repression: protestors, including medical personnel, were arrested, jailed and tortured; some were killed; and eventually hundreds of people were convicted of political charges due to their efforts to peacefully exercise their fundamental rights, including opposition leaders who received life sentences for "terrorism."

After the fact, the government of Bahrain, a monarchy, set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to investigate what had happened. BICI did a better than expected job, finally issuing a report whose 26 recommendations became a point of reference for beginning constructive change towards a more inclusive, less discriminatory, more rights-respecting regime.

When you talk with Bahrainian authorities today, they will tell you that they have made a lot of progress, and that all of the recommendations either have been implemented, or are in process.

Yet the State Department's most recent human rights report recognizes that during 2014, citizens continued to have limited ability to change their government peacefully; that protestors continued to be arrested on vague charges that sometimes led to their torture in detention; and that lack of due process in trials of political and human rights activists, students and journalists persisted.

In addition, the government imposed and enforced travel bans on political activists, revoked citizenship, and arbitrarily regulated communications between political societies and foreign entities. Discrimination continued based on gender, religion and nationality, and against the Shia population.

This is not the whole list. But it's enough to make clear that very serious obstacles persist for Bahrainis who wish to exercise their most fundamental civil and political rights.

In spite of the DOS report, which came out in June of last year, in July the State Department announced that it would lift its ban on selling or transferring certain weapons to Bahrain. That ban had been put in place in response to the 2011 crackdown, and I strongly supported it both because it kept U.S. weapons out of the hands of bad actors and because a privileged relationship with the United States should depend on respect for basic rights like free assembly and expression. Unfortunately, the State Department's decision sent precisely the opposite message to Bahrain's rulers.

So I joined in introducing the BICI Accountability Act, first, because it is important that U.S. allies and partners like Bahrain be held to a higher standard. Second, as we are seeing throughout the Middle East, repression leads to increased violence and instability; it contributes to the conditions that generate violent extremism. In Bahrain in particular, that could threaten the safety of several thousand U.S. Navy personnel, while further destabilizing the Middle East.

I understand that international relationships are multi-faceted, and I support engagement – but with accountability. I reject the argument that human rights concerns must naturally give way to geopolitical ones. Indeed, unaddressed human rights abuses often *lead* to geopolitical problems. The more repressive a regime becomes, the more likely today's peaceful protests become tomorrow's violence and chaos.

So, thank you everyone for coming to this important briefing, and I look forward to hearing about the current state of affairs in Bahrain, and the recommendations of our panelists for further action that the U.S. Congress could take to contribute to peaceful reform in Bahrain.