



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Human Rights in Bahrain: Next Steps**

**September 9, 2016**

**11:00 AM – 12:30 PM**

**HVC-210 U.S. Capitol Visitor Center**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on *Human Rights in Bahrain: Next Steps*.

I will introduce our witnesses in a few minutes, but I would like to welcome them now and thank them for taking the time to join us today. All of them have been involved for many years in the effort to protect human rights and foster democratic reform in Bahrain, and I very much appreciate their commitment and their many contributions.

I want to state for the record that the Commission did invite representatives of the U.S. State Department to testify today, but we were informed that no one was available to participate.

I regret the Department's absence, because Bahrain is a long-standing ally whose stability and future development is of key importance to the United States. I have appreciated past engagement with State on the human rights situation in Bahrain, including a briefing I received a few weeks ago. And I have taken note of recent statements by State Department officials expressing concern over the increasing repression against human rights defenders and opposition political leaders that motivates this hearing.

I know that for some at State, the human rights situation in Bahrain and its implications for that country's stability are of genuine concern. So it is truly unfortunate that we will not have the opportunity for a dialogue with the State Department today.

This is the fourth hearing the Human Rights Commission has held on the human rights situation in Bahrain since 2010. We have also hosted briefings, issued statements, written letters, and supported Bahraini prisoners of conscience – individuals who have been imprisoned for “crimes” such as writing op-eds, sending tweets, or going to meetings. In the aftermath of the brutal repression of citizen protests in 2011, we have consistently encouraged the government to respect the fundamental civil and political rights of all the Bahraini people, and to move forward with reforms that would satisfy their democratic aspirations.

Since 2011, there have been hopeful moments – the King’s embrace of the 26 recommendations of the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), which provided at least a partial roadmap for reform, and the start of the national dialogue that led to constitutional amendments in May 2012.

But during the last couple of years reforms have clearly stalled. The national dialogue has been suspended since 2014. The State Department’s most recent report on the status of the BICI recommendations makes clear that they have not been fully implemented, and that “national reconciliation as envisioned by the BICI report has not yet been achieved.”

And in recent months, we have witnessed a sharp escalation in repression against human rights defenders and opposition political leaders. Some of the things that have happened:

- In June, rights activists were prevented from traveling to the UN Human Rights Council and have been slapped with travel bans.
- Last May, Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of Wifaq, the largest opposition political society in the country, who was already imprisoned after calling for political reform, had his four year prison term extended to nine years. In July the government dissolved Wifaq.
- The citizenship of Shi’a cleric Isa Qassim was revoked, prompting thousands of protestors to take to the streets in protest. He is one of more than 300 people who have been stripped of their citizenship in recent years.
- At least four other Shi’a clerics have been charged with “illegal gathering” due to their involvement in protests. In June an amendment was passed prohibiting people who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities.
- Well-known activist Nabeel Rajab was rearrested and charged with “insulting a statutory body” for tweets about torture in Jau Prison and “disseminating false rumors in time of war” for criticizing the Saudi-led war in Yemen – charges that could mean up to 13 years in prison. Then last Sunday Nabeel wrote an op-ed for the New York Times from jail. The next day Bahraini prosecutors added a charge for “deliberate dissemination of false news and spreading tendentious rumors that undermine the prestige of the state.”

The list is longer, but I expect we will hear more detail about this crackdown during today’s testimonies.

We in the U.S. are not the only people worried by this pattern. In August, five UN special rapporteurs issued a joint statement expressing their concern that the Bahraini authorities were engaged in systematic harassment of the majority Shi'a population.

This escalation of repression worries me greatly. Bahrain is a major non-NATO ally that formally joined the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in 2014. The U.S. naval command headquarters in Bahrain, home to the 5<sup>th</sup> fleet, is the cornerstone of the security relationship. Bahrain benefits from U.S. foreign military financing, international military education and training funds, and NADR anti-terrorism funding. With the exception of some restrictions on support to the Ministry of Interior, the security relationship has not been affected by Bahrain's reaction to its internal unrest.

Yet it should be self-evident by now that selling arms and strengthening the military capacity of Middle Eastern allies is not a sufficient strategy to fight terrorism. Poor governance and the systematic repression of fundamental rights, with their attendant loss of human dignity, contribute in major ways to the conditions that feed radicalization throughout the region.

What I see in Bahrain are government actions that are deepening and hardening sectarian divides, and closing off opportunities for political solutions to long-standing problems. I believe this is a grave error that will eventually undermine Bahrain's stability, leaving the U.S. in a difficult situation in yet another Middle Eastern country.

Bahrain fears that Iran could meddle in its internal affairs. But its own actions are opening the door and increasing that risk.

Today I look forward to hearing recommendations on how the U.S. government and Congress can encourage and provide incentives for Bahrain to return to the path of serious political reform, guided by the BICI recommendations.

With that, I would like to introduce our witnesses.

I would also like to formally submit all the witnesses' testimony into the hearing record. I also submit for the record the following documents:

- New York Times editorial entitled "Punishing Dissent in Bahrain," dated September 7, 2016.
- Press release entitled "UN Rights Experts Urge Bahrain to Cease the Persecution of Shias," dated August 16, 2016.
- U.S. State Department congressionally-mandated report on the steps taken by the Bahraini government to implement the recommendations of the 2011 Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, submitted June 21, 2016.