

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing: Human Rights in Bahrain: Next Steps
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Testimony of Matar Ebrahim Matar

First of all, I would like to thank Congressman Jim McGovern, Congressman Joseph Pitts, and the entire team at Tom Lantos committee for your effort on Bahrain. Also I would like to thank Secretary John Kerry for visiting Bahrain and meeting with all sides. As I would like to thank the DRL and Ambassador Samantha Power for raising the issue of Bahrain regularly. Also, I would like to thank the State Department for taking the initiative by releasing statements to address the revocation of the citizenship of Sheikh Isa Qasim and refusing to endorse the accusations of the Government of Bahrain to link him with the Iranian policy. In fact, Qasim and Nabeel Rajab played extraordinary role to protect the uprising in Bahrain from shifting toward sectarianism or violence.

Today, in my testimony, I want to emphasize on the vision of the pro-democracy movement to move forward and how is the way toward an inclusive and fair political system in Bahrain.

In Bahrain, the conservative Islamic Shia Party, Alwefaq and, the liberal and mixed party of Sunni and Shia Wa'ad are both working together under one vision to take Bahrain toward constitutional Monarchy. A wide part of the pro-democracy movement accepts the ruling family in power but refuses authoritarianism. Wefaq and Wa'ad were looking forward to extending the relation with the GCC including the Saudi and these strategies will remain despite the cold or negative responses. I believe that the pro-democracy movement is still able to convince a wide majority of the people of Bahrain to accept a gradual reform process, if the right confidence building measures were taken place by all sides. I may elaborate more about these required measures during the Q&A.

The sectarianism is the major feature for the new phase of deterioration in Bahrain. The sectarianism is a very tricky term. We need to be very careful when we address it. The struggle in Bahrain is not about sectarianism between Sunni and Shia, it is about sectarian policies coming from the government of Bahrain against the Shia population. It is also important to mention that the sectarian policies against Shia don't mean that the government of Bahrain is a conservative government that cares about Sunni Islam or Sunni Muslims. In Bahrain, Sunnis are losing as well. The Government of Bahrain encourages the Sunni from early ages to join Interior Ministry, Bahrain Defense Force, National Security Apparatus and National Guards. It is very hard for them to speak out against the government and it is hard for them to quit and join the labor market and they get stuck under these conditions. Finally, when the government of Bahrain commits sectarian policies against Shia, this doesn't mean that this government will

tolerate any Sunni dissent. In fact, the government may go harsher on Sunnis to keep the sectarian orientation of the struggle as what happened to the moderate liberal Sunni, Ebrahim Sharif who was arrested, and sentenced twice since the beginning of the uprising, and the same for Mohammed AlBuflasa, who was the first detainee in the uprising.

Where does the U.S. fit in all this? In fact, stable Bahrain helps U.S. fifth fleet to operate in Bahrain. Currently, stability in Bahrain is built on repression, sectarian policies against Shia, blackmailing against Sunnis and by human trafficking facing the South East Asians who are used in the front line of the conflict to face the frustrated protesters. It is not a good approach for the U.S. Administration to enjoy a stability that costs Bahrain all this damage. Before thinking about how the U.S. administration can promote democracy in Bahrain, we should think about how the government of Bahrain can be prevented from using its special relation with U.S. against its people. The congress will be on the right track when its members support the 114th Congress, S. 2009 and H.R. 3445, that would prohibit specific arm sales until Bahrain fully implement all BICI recommendations. I don't prefer to see my country sanctioned. On the other hand, I don't want to see the Bahrain government enhancing the legitimacy of their policies by more international recognition through more arms sale with U.S.

It is for the interest of U.S., Saudi and people of Bahrain to have a success story of transition in Bahrain. U.S. cannot prevent more deterioration in Bahrain alone, any political process should be sponsored by EU and UK as well. The U.S. administration avoided to lead a political process in Bahrain. U.S. administration has a good understanding and good analysis about the situation in Bahrain and also had a lot of interest there. It is the time to turn it into proactive policies through leadership and persistence.

Thank you.