



Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
 80, 2 St Stephen's Green
 Dublin 2, Co. Dublin, Ireland

14 September 2016

Dear Minister Charles Flanagan,

The undersigned organisations are writing to you to urge the Government of the Ireland to call publicly and privately on the government of Bahrain to release human rights defender Nabeel Rajab, immediately and unconditionally and drop the charges against him, as they relate solely to his peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Nabeel Rajab's trial is ongoing and if convicted, he could face up to 15 years in prison on charges relating to his criticism of Bahrain's participation in Saudi Arabia-led military operations in Yemen which, according to the United Nations, have so far been responsible for the deaths of more than 900 civilians, and included numerous unlawful airstrikes on markets, homes, hospitals and schools. The Bahraini High Criminal Court is scheduled to issue its verdict on 6 October 2016.

Nabeel Rajab's comments on Twitter about the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen led to his arrest on 2 April 2015. Bahrain's penal code provides for up to 10 years in prison for anyone who "deliberately announces in wartime false or malicious news, statements or rumors. The authorities released him on 13 July 2015, but the Prosecution did not close the case and ordered his re-arrest on 13 June 2016. Nabeel Rajab is also facing charges of "offending a foreign country," - Saudi Arabia – and "offending national institutions," for comments about the alleged torture of inmates in Jau Prison in March 2015.

Nabeel Rajab is the co-founder and president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and holds advisory positions with Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, and the Gulf Center for Human Rights. Amnesty International consider him to be a prisoner of conscience. His human rights activism and his peaceful criticism of the Bahraini authorities has resulted in his imprisonment on two previous occasions, between May 2012 and May 2014, and between January 2015 and July 2015.

Your government has signed joint statements calling on Bahrain to improve its human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council in the past and we urge you to now make a public call for Nabeel Rajab's immediate and unconditional release.

Please find [here](#), and below, a copy of an open letter written by Nabeel Rajab from his prison cell and published in the New York Times on 4 September 2016. The Bahraini authorities immediately responded to this letter and brought against Nabeel Rajab the additional charge of "undermining the prestige of the state".

Yours Sincerely,

- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
- Amnesty International
- ARTICLE 19
- Bahrain Center for Human Rights
- Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy
- CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
- Clive Stafford Smith OBE, Human Rights Lawyer
- English PEN
- European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights
- FIDH, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
- Freedom House
- Front Line Defenders
- Gulf Center for Human Rights
- Human Rights First
- Human Rights Watch
- IFEX
- Index on Censorship
- International Service for Human Rights
- PEN International
- Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
- Reporters Without Borders
- World Organisation Against Torture, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Letter From a Bahraini Jail

Originally published in the New York Times

RIFFA, Bahrain — I write this from a Bahraini jail cell where I have been detained, largely in isolation, since the beginning of summer. This is not new to me: I have been here before, from 2012 to 2014, in 2015, and now again, all because of my work as a human rights defender.

Nor am I alone: There are some 4,000 political prisoners in Bahrain, which has the highest prison population per capita in the Middle East. This is a country that has subjected its people to imprisonment, torture and even death for daring to desire democracy. My close colleague Abdulhadi al-Khawaja was tortured and sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for his human rights work.

No one has been properly held to account for systematic abuses that have affected thousands. In 2015, I was arrested on new charges of “insulting a statutory body” and “spreading rumors during a time of war” for posts on Twitter. The police held me from April to July last year. I was released only after the king of Bahrain issued a pardon in an earlier case, also related to views I had expressed.

Despite the pardon, the 2015 charges and a travel ban remained in place, and I was threatened with further action. The head of the cybercrimes unit at the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Bahrain summoned me and my family to a meeting, where — in front of my children — he warned me that if I didn’t stop my advocacy work, I would face up to 15 years in prison.

That threat became reality when I was arrested in June. The warrant came from the same cybercrimes unit chief who threatened me last year, and I now face prosecution for my work exposing human rights abuses. The authorities even added a third charge of “insulting a neighboring country,” meaning Saudi Arabia. They have also laid a new charge against me of spreading “false news,” in relation to interviews I’ve given to the news media. It’s quite the rap sheet.

My supposed “insult” to Saudi Arabia relates to tweets I posted calling for an end to the war in Yemen, a war escalated by the Saudi-led coalition to which Bahrain belongs and for which the United States provides support. The United States has authorized multibillion-dollar arms sales to the Saudis since the war began last year.

From the beginning, I was against the war. The civilian death toll was immediate and catastrophic, and I spoke out against the unfolding humanitarian crisis, calling for peace. Now, I am paying the price.

I met Secretary of State John Kerry on his visit to Bahrain earlier this year and was glad to talk with him about our difficult situation. Mr. Kerry criticized the boycott of the 2014 election by opposition parties, although the opposition’s demand was simply for a constitutional monarchy in place of Bahrain’s autocratic system. Since that election, the leader of the largest opposition group, the Wefaq National Islamic Society, was sentenced to nine years for “promoting violence,” and the society was suspended and its assets frozen.

I would like to ask Mr. Kerry now: Is this the kind of ally America wants? The kind that punishes its people for thinking, that prevents its citizens from exercising their basic rights?

The government has gone after me not only for my comments on Yemen, but also for my domestic activism. One of my charges, “insulting a statutory body,” concerns my work shedding light on the torture of hundreds of prisoners in Jaw Prison in March 2015. The State Department has

highlighted the same problem, but last year lifted the arms embargo it had placed on Bahrain since the repressions that followed the 2011 Arab Spring protests, citing “meaningful progress on human rights reforms.” Really?

After I met Mr. Kerry, I was interrogated at the Interior Ministry by the chief of the cybercrimes unit, the one who later ordered my arrest. He wanted to know everything about my conversation with the secretary of state. That official interrogated me again in April after I signed an open letter, with 25 other activists, calling on President Obama to discuss human rights and the plight of activists in the Middle East when he visited Saudi Arabia earlier this year.

The Bahraini government tried to pressure me into publicly disavowing the letter. I refused.

Recent American statements on Bahrain’s human rights problems have been strong, and that is good. But unless the United States is willing to use its leverage, fine words have little effect. America’s actions, on the other hand, have emboldened the government to detain me and other rights advocates: Its unconditional support for Saudi Arabia and its lifting of the arms ban on Bahrain have direct consequences for the activists struggling for dignity in these countries.

Instead of fanning the flames in Yemen by supplying arms to the Saudi coalition, Mr. Obama’s administration should use its leverage to resolve the conflict. Working to secure the release of people who call for peace, and are trying to build democracy in the region, would serve that aim.

Update: After this Op-Ed essay was published, Nabeel Rajab was charged with publishing “false news and statements and malicious rumors that undermine the prestige of the kingdom.”