



# 'NO ONE CAN PROTECT YOU'

BAHRAIN'S YEAR OF CRUSHING DISSENT

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**Cover photo:** A female protester holds a photo of Shi'ite scholar Isa Qassim as she confronts riot police armoured personnel carrier during a demonstration to mark the 6th anniversary of the February 14 uprising, in the village of Sitra, south of Manama, Bahrain February 14, 2017.

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“I guarantee that they [the Bahraini authorities] will leave me alone if I keep quiet. But I know myself I will never keep quiet. I will keep speaking for those people, for those victims, who cannot speak about themselves.”**

Nabeel Rajab, human rights defender before his arrest in June 2016

Since June 2016, the Bahraini authorities have dramatically stepped up their crackdown on dissent. As a result, by June 2017, Bahrain’s formerly thriving civil society had found itself reduced to a few lone voices brave enough to speak out. The majority of peaceful critics, whether they are human rights defenders or political activists, now feel the risk of doing so has become too high. Over the course of a year, the authorities increasingly resorted to a wide range of repressive tactics including arrest, harassment, threats, prosecution and imprisonment to silence peaceful critics. Amnesty International’s research concludes that the security forces have even resorted to torturing or otherwise ill-treating human rights defenders, both men and women, a practice that has not been prevalent in Bahrain since the height of the crackdown that followed the 2011 uprising.

Despite repeated claims by the Bahraini authorities to the contrary, Bahrain has been steadily backtracking on the promises of reform it made following its heavy-handed response to the uprising in 2011. The events saw peaceful protesters, including political leaders and activists, human rights defenders, medical professionals, teachers and lawyers, take to the streets demanding reform, only to be arrested, arbitrarily detained, tortured and, in some cases, unlawfully killed. This brutal repression spurred a public outcry, both in and outside Bahrain, which led the government to establish the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), composed of international jurists and human rights specialists, to investigate and report on the violations that had taken place.

Hopes for reform were raised when the King of Bahrain committed to fully implementing the BICI recommendations, and the country appeared to be set on a course of improved respect for human rights, as a number of legal reforms were implemented, and human rights institutions were set up to bring about accountability and act as a deterrent against future violations. However, these hopes were short-lived as it became clear in the ensuing months and years that impunity, rather than accountability, for the serious violations of 2011 would remain the norm. The judiciary continued to lack independence and preside over unfair trials leading to the imprisonment of peaceful critics, while detainees regularly reported torture and other ill-treatment in custody and the security forces used excessive force against protesters.

During the period between June 2016 and June 2017, Amnesty International found that at least 169 critics or their relatives were arrested, summoned, interrogated, prosecuted, imprisoned, banned from travel or threatened. Human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, political activists and leaders, Shi’a clerics, and peaceful protesters have been particularly impacted. The Bahraini authorities have also targeted the only

independent newspaper in Bahrain, *al-Wasat*, temporarily suspending its online edition in January 2017 and arbitrarily closing it down entirely in June.

Since June 2016 woman human rights defender **Ebtisam al-Saegh** has been repeatedly summoned for interrogation, subjected to a travel ban and charged in relation to her human rights activities. In May 2017 the authorities stepped up their efforts to silence her. On 25 May, she received a phone call from the National Security Agency (NSA) telling her to present herself to them the following day. She told Amnesty International that when she arrived she was blindfolded and, in the subsequent hours, sexually assaulted, beaten and kept standing for most of the seven hours she was being interrogated. She was released after being warned that, if she did not cease all her human rights work, she would be further targeted. Just over one month later, having ignored the warning, she was re-arrested and taken into custody again by the NSA, where she says she was beaten and interrogated. She was charged with terrorism-related offences on 18 July and ordered to be detained for six months, pending further investigation.

The authorities have increasingly resorted to charges which criminalize freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in order to detain their critics or scare them into silence as those charged remain liable to prosecution at any point. Prominent human rights defender **Nabeel Rajab** has been in and out of prison since 2012 and is one of the most targeted government critics in Bahrain. Following his re-arrest in June 2016, he was subjected to prolonged solitary confinement while suffering from fast-deteriorating health. He is being prosecuted in several cases; in one, he has already been sentenced to two years in prison and, in another, he could be imprisoned for another 15 years. He also faces another two sets of charges, all related to him peacefully expressing his opinion.

The authorities have targeted Bahraini activists residing outside Bahrain, subjecting their families to interrogation and imprisonment in reprisal for their relatives' human rights activities or participation in protests abroad. Some have experienced threatening phone calls or messages on social media.

Between June 2016 and June 2017, mass demonstrations took place in protest at various repressive measures taken by the authorities such as the revocation of the nationality of Shi'a spiritual leader **Sheikh Isa Qassem** and the resumption of executions in the country. In response, the authorities arrested, charged and prosecuted scores of peaceful protesters, including over 70 Shi'a clerics, and blockaded the village of Duraz for 11 months. Amnesty International acknowledges the violence Bahrain's security forces have sometimes had to face during clashes with some protesters. However, its assessment is that the security forces, including the NSA, have increasingly used excessive force, beating peaceful protesters, firing shotguns and semi-automatic rifles, and firing tear gas from armoured personnel vehicles or helicopters into houses or directly at protesters. Since the beginning of 2017, security forces have killed six people, including one child, and injured hundreds.

The authorities have dismantled the political opposition, dissolving the main opposition group, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society (al-Wefaq), and opposition political party Waad on the basis of what Amnesty International has found to be unfounded charges. The Bahraini authorities presented no credible evidence to show that either al-Wefaq or Waad are anything but peaceful opposition movements. The authorities also continued to imprison or otherwise target political leaders and members of opposition groups. In May 2017, the authorities stepped up their attempts to silence political activists by detaining them for interrogation, during which some reported they were threatened, tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

This report draws on the findings of Amnesty International's continuous monitoring of, and research into, human rights developments in Bahrain, with a particular focus on the period between June 2016 and June 2017. Amnesty International researchers investigated 210 cases for this report, interviewing 52 victims of human rights violations and witnesses to events documented in the report and 62 relatives or close friends of victims and lawyers. They spoke to 38 journalists, human rights defenders, political activists and lawyers. The findings are also based on an analysis of the authorities' public statements and correspondence with Amnesty International, as well as court documents, legal texts and other documentary evidence, including video footage, in a number of cases. Amnesty International also reviewed reports by media and other human rights organizations and statements by other countries' governments. Amnesty International had to conduct the majority of its interviews remotely, over the phone or internet, due to lack of access to Bahrain.

Amnesty International had welcomed the positive steps Bahrain took in 2011. However, since June 2016 Bahrain's authorities have in effect reversed positive measures they had taken to implement some of the

BICI recommendations. They restored the arrest and interrogation powers of the NSA, despite the fact that it had been heavily implicated in human rights violations during the 2011 crackdown, after nearly six years of limiting its mandate to intelligence gathering in line with the BICI recommendations. During the period between 23 and 28 May, Amnesty International received reports of eight cases of government critics being subjected to torture in NSA custody. The authorities had largely not used torture and other ill-treatment against human rights defenders and activists since 2011.

The heightened crackdown in Bahrain should be understood within the wider geopolitical context. The election of US President Donald Trump and his new administration's apparent deprioritization of human rights in US foreign policy seems to have encouraged Bahrain's government to be bolder in its attempts to silence dissent. The UK, which has heavily invested in Bahrain's reform programme and which has a "special" relationship with Bahrain, has looked to ensure closer trade ties with Gulf countries since the UK voted to leave the European Union. Its response to the deterioration of human rights in Bahrain has been muted. This, coupled with the lack of criticism by fellow member states in UN forums, has emboldened Bahrain further.

Amnesty International urges the Bahraini authorities to cease its crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. They should immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, halt the reprisals against human rights defenders, other peaceful critics and their relatives, and rescind the decisions to dissolve al-Wefaq and Waad and to ban the *al-Wasat* newspaper. The organization also calls on the authorities to urgently prevent the torture and other ill-treatment of human rights defenders, political activists and other detainees, rein in security forces and ensure prompt, independent and effective investigations into allegations of violations.

Amnesty International urges states within the international community that have influence in Bahrain to publicly and privately condemn the crackdown in Bahrain. It is also appealing to states supplying equipment to Bahrain that could be used for internal repression, including firearms, less lethal equipment and armoured vehicles, to stop transfers to Bahraini law enforcement agencies until the Bahraini authorities allow prompt, independent and impartial investigations into the allegations of abusive or arbitrary use of force.

# 2. METHODOLOGY

This report draws on the findings of Amnesty International's continuous monitoring of, and research into, human rights developments in Bahrain, with a particular focus on the period between June 2016 and June 2017.

Two Amnesty International researchers investigated 210 cases for this report, which were selected according to criteria including the seriousness of the violation and the victim's profile (such as whether they were a human rights defender). Some of the cases were reported to Amnesty International by the individuals concerned, while others were referred to it by human rights defenders and lawyers. The researchers conducted interviews with 52 victims of human rights violations and witnesses to events documented in the report; 17 were women and 35 were men. Of the 52, 39 were inside Bahrain and 13 were outside the country. The researchers also interviewed 62 relatives or close friends of victims of human rights violations and lawyers. In addition, they spoke to 38 journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, and lawyers, who provided an analysis of patterns and legal issues and who were selected because of their expertise on the issues Amnesty International was researching. Some of the interviews were conducted in English, in cases in which interviewees were comfortable speaking in this language; other interviews were conducted in Arabic. Amnesty International had to conduct the majority of the interviews remotely, over the phone or internet, due to lack of access to Bahrain.

Amnesty International was able to review court documents for 21 cases of individuals charged, arrested or detained and for the three cases brought against the political party Waad, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society (al-Wefaq) and the *al-Wasat* newspaper, including court judgements, public prosecution arguments, defence arguments and charge sheets. In other cases, the organization studied legal texts, medical records, social media posts, photographs and video footage, as well as listening to relevant audio recordings. Amnesty International also reviewed other human rights organizations' reports on arrests and detention in Bahrain, media reports on events documented in the report, and statements by other countries' governments on individual cases or reactions to events taking place in Bahrain.

Amnesty International examined information provided by the Bahraini authorities between June 2016 and June 2017 relating to some of the cases and issues in this report both in correspondence with the organization and in public statements. The information included details about the reasons why particular individuals were arrested, interrogated or had a travel ban imposed on them. It also contained details about particular protests, including the circumstances surrounding the killing or injuring of protesters and the number of deaths of or injuries to members of the security forces. Between June 2016 and June 2017, the organization wrote to the Public Prosecutor with regard to two cases and to the Ombudsman of the Ministry of Interior and head of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) about 13 cases. Neither the Public Prosecutor nor the head of the SIU responded, while the Ombudsman replied in August 2016 that the number of questions asked was too demanding and gave no further information. In addition, Amnesty International sent a memorandum on 23 June 2017 to each of the Minister of Justice, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Interior, head of the National Security Agency (NSA), Public Prosecutor, head of the SIU and Ombudsman of the Ministry of Interior and NSA, requesting clarification on 13 individual cases, which were different to those raised in previous correspondence. The memorandum raised concerns about the targeting of human rights defenders and other peaceful critics, including individuals charged by the terrorism unit of the public prosecution, excessive use of force against protesters, the ban on peaceful assemblies, the blockade of

Duraz and the dissolution of political parties, and requested clarifications. Amnesty International had received no response from any of the authorities or institutions to which it had written by 11 August.

A number of cases in the report are clearly identified, while other cases do not include the name or profile of the individual concerned or a detailed description of the violation committed against them in order to protect the person, at their request, from the likelihood of reprisals for having spoken to Amnesty International.

Amnesty International last visited Bahrain in January 2015. Since then, it has sought several times to visit the country, but the authorities have not granted it access again to date. The organization wrote to the authorities on 6 February and 10 March 2015 requesting access to Bahrain and received a response on 24 April stating that “a visit will be unrewarding at such a time”. Amnesty International wrote again on 1 August 2016 and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the proposed dates for a visit on 8 September as they “were not suitable”. On 14 September, the organization met Bahrain’s Deputy Foreign Minister, who said that a visit could only be considered after he had met with Amnesty International’s Secretary General. The organization wrote to the official on 15 November to repeat its request for a visit and ask when he would be in London to meet Amnesty International and, having received no response, again on 7 February 2017. The Deputy Foreign Minister responded on 21 February to reiterate that he insisted on meeting the Secretary General to discuss the “modus operandi of the relationship [between the Bahraini authorities and Amnesty International], including a visit”. Although Amnesty International met Bahrain’s Deputy Foreign Minister again on 1 March, he would not discuss a visit without meeting the Secretary General, who was unavailable at the time, and rejected the organization’s offer of a meeting with other senior directors.

Amnesty International would like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed and others who assisted in obtaining information, particularly the brave human rights defenders who work tirelessly to improve the human rights situation in Bahrain.

# 3. BACKGROUND

## 3.1 VIOLATIONS FOLLOWING 2011 CRACKDOWN

Following years of repression and growing discontent at the lack of inclusionary politics or accountability for human rights violations, tens of thousands of Bahrainis took to the streets of the capital, Manama, on 14 February 2011 to demand reform. In response, protesters were beaten, shot, and killed and opposition activists, teachers, doctors, journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders were detained, tortured, and imprisoned after grossly unfair trials. Responding to the resulting public outcry, both at home and internationally, King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to investigate alleged human rights violations and produce recommendations. Its November 2011 report concluded that security forces had committed torture and other ill-treatment and unlawful killings. It recommended to the Bahraini authorities, among other measures, that they take steps to ensure accountability for the human rights violations that had been perpetrated and carry out a number of legal and institutional reforms that would serve to prevent the recurrence of such violations. In a move seen widely as historic, the King publicly committed the government to accepting the findings and implementing the recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

In the following months and years, the Bahraini government introduced several legal reforms and created human rights institutions empowered to investigate allegations of human rights violations and ensure accountability. These moves raised hopes both within and outside the country that Bahrain was heading along a path of positive reform.

However, these hopes were short-lived. The authorities continued to severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and to imprison peaceful critics. Bahrain's judiciary sentenced defendants to death or to long prison terms following unfair trials, while failing to hold senior officials to account for violations that occurred during and since the 2011 uprising.

In parallel, the government faced a rise in violence on the streets that saw attacks on police officers and other members of the security forces using bombs, Molotov cocktails and stones and protest in which tyres and vehicles were set alight. According to the Ministry of Interior, four security officers were killed and scores injured in such attacks between June 2016 and June 2017.

## 3.2 CRACKDOWN AND U-TURN ON REFORMS FROM MID-2016

From mid-2016, as this report documents, Bahrain embarked on a full-throttled crackdown on all forms of dissent. During the same period, the government introduced legal changes that in effect reversed some of the BICI recommendations, such as once again allowing the trial of civilians in military courts and reinstating the NSA's arrest and interrogation powers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International, *Flawed reforms: Bahrain fails to achieve justice for protesters* (Index: MDE 11/014/2012).

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Disastrous move towards patently unfair military trials of civilians* (Press Release, 3 April 2017).

Torture and other ill-treatment in pre-trial detention, particularly of those accused of terrorism or other security-related offences, have remained rife, while prisoners in Jaw and Dry Dock prisons have been subjected to ill-treatment.<sup>3</sup> Violations in the justice system have continued. Trials have failed to meet fair trial standards, with courts admitting coerced “confessions” as evidence. The authorities have subjected individuals to enforced disappearance<sup>4</sup> and arbitrarily revoked people’s nationality. Courts have handed down death sentences and executions have resumed.

Bahrain’s human rights institutions have too often collectively failed to fulfil their roles in a sufficiently prompt, adequate and transparent manner to ensure accountability for the majority of victims and act as a deterrent, fuelling further mistrust in them.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the authorities have continued to restrict the registration of local NGOs and have blocked the website of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) in Bahrain since 2006.

Bahrain has remained closed to independent human rights bodies such as the UN Special Rapporteurs on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,<sup>6</sup> on the situation of human rights defenders, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression,<sup>7</sup> and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which has had its planned visits cancelled since 2014, most recently in June 2017.<sup>8</sup> International human rights organizations including Amnesty International,<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch,<sup>10</sup> Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)<sup>11</sup>, as well as international journalists who have been critical of the government,<sup>12</sup> have also been denied access to Bahrain.

The OHCHR and UN Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, on freedom of religion or belief, and on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression between them issued a number of strongly worded statements between June 2016 and June 2017. These have covered the arrest of **Nabeel Rajab** and the revocation of **Sheikh Isa Qassem’s** nationality,<sup>13</sup> the prison sentence of **Sheikh Ali Salman**,<sup>14</sup> the dissolution of al-Wefaq,<sup>15</sup> the persecution of Shi’a,<sup>16</sup> and the harassment of human rights defenders and the crackdown in Duraz.<sup>17</sup> The European Parliament has also expressed concerns publicly. However, despite the worsening human rights situation in Bahrain, most governments have remained silent or toned down their public criticism.

For example, the UK continued to praise Bahrain’s “progress on its reform agenda”<sup>18</sup> while its occasional comments on the human rights situation have been muted.<sup>19</sup> The UK’s “special” relationship with Bahrain, coupled with its Prime Minister’s attempts to further bolster trade ties with Gulf states following the UK’s vote

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3 Amnesty International, *Bahrain: End degrading treatment of activists* (Index: MDE 11/6159/2017).

4 Amnesty International, *Fate and whereabouts of Bahraini unknown* (Index: MDE 11/5581/2017) and *Forcibly disappeared Bahraini faces military trial* (Index: MDE 11/6224/2017).

5 Amnesty International, *Window-dressing or pioneers of change? An assessment of Bahrain’s human rights oversight bodies* (Index: MDE 11/5080/2016).

6 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Bahrain/Human rights: Government effectively cancels UN Special Rapporteur on torture’s visit*, 24 April 2013, [newsarchive.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13261&LangID=E](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13261&LangID=E)

7 For further details see [spinternet.ohchr.org/\\_Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewCountryVisits.aspx?Lang=en&country=BHR](https://spinternet.ohchr.org/_Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewCountryVisits.aspx?Lang=en&country=BHR)

8 Twitter, Abdulla F Al Doseri, 17 June 2017, [twitter.com/aaldoseri/status/876034732198424576](https://twitter.com/aaldoseri/status/876034732198424576)

9 Amnesty International has not been allowed into Bahrain since January 2015.

10 Human Rights Watch, *Bahrain Denies Entry to Human Rights Watch Representative*, 10 May 2017,

[www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/10/bahrain-denies-entry-human-rights-watch-representative](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/10/bahrain-denies-entry-human-rights-watch-representative)

11 Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain and Bahrain Center Cultural Society, *For consideration at the 27th session of the UN working group in April-May 2017*, 22 September 2016, [www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/bahrain/session\\_27\\_-\\_may\\_2017/js12\\_upr27\\_bhr\\_e\\_main.pdf](http://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/bahrain/session_27_-_may_2017/js12_upr27_bhr_e_main.pdf)

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13 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Press briefing note on Bahrain and Iraq*, 21 June 2016, [www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20146&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20146&LangID=E)

14 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Bahrain: UN expert condemns the sentencing of opposition leader Sheikh Ali al-Salman*, 1 June 2016, [www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20045&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20045&LangID=E)

15 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Press briefing notes on Turkey, Israel and Bahrain*, 19 July 2016, [www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20284&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20284&LangID=E)

16 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *UN rights experts urge Bahrain to end the persecution of Shias*, 16 August 2016, [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20375&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20375&LangID=E)

17 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Bahrain must end worsening human rights clampdown, UN experts say*, 16 June 2017, [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21762&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21762&LangID=E)

18 UK Government, *Universal Periodic Review 27: UK Statement – Bahrain*, 2 May 2017, [www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/universal-periodic-review-27-uk-statement-bahrain](http://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/universal-periodic-review-27-uk-statement-bahrain)

19 The UK has publicly expressed some human rights concerns such as the executions that took place in January 2017, see Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Executions in Bahrain*, 15 January 2017, [www.gov.uk/government/news/executions-in-bahrain](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/executions-in-bahrain)

to leave the European Union in June 2016, goes some way to explaining the UK's muted response.<sup>20</sup> The USA had been strongly critical of Bahrain's human rights record during the administration of President Barack Obama and conditioned sales of fighter jets to Bahrain in September 2016 on "progress on human rights".<sup>21</sup> However, its foreign policy has shifted since the election of President Donald Trump, who lifted the conditions on the sale of jets in March 2017.<sup>22</sup> Two months later, President Trump told King Hamad "there won't be strain with this administration", which Bahrain appeared to interpret as a green light to pursue its repression, violently crushing the Duraz protests only two days later.<sup>23</sup> Switzerland, for its part, had previously led five joint statements on Bahrain at the UN Human Rights Council, but has failed to do so since the situation deteriorated in 2016.

This increased repressive environment and a parallel weak international response has had a chilling effect on human rights defenders and the wider civil society, with many jailed and others frightened into silence. As of June 2017, with prominent human rights defenders imprisoned and recent credible reports of the torture in detention of others, the vast majority of activists feel that the risk of speaking out is now too high. Some have chosen to live in exile or seek asylum abroad. Several have been forcibly expelled and others outside the country feel they cannot return. While writing the report, several human rights defenders withdrew the consent they had previously given Amnesty International to publish details of their case out of fear of further reprisals.

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<sup>20</sup> *Express*, "£30billion: Trade deals that Theresa May is doing in the Gulf post-Brexit", 5 December 2016,

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<sup>21</sup> Bloomberg, "Bahrain's Lockheed F-16 Buy Said to Come With U.S. Strings", 30 September 2016,

[www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-09-30/bahrain-s-lockheed-f-16-purchase-said-to-come-with-u-s-strings](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-09-30/bahrain-s-lockheed-f-16-purchase-said-to-come-with-u-s-strings)

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, "Rex Tillerson to Lift Human Rights Conditions on Arms Sale to Bahrain", 29 March 2017,

[www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-bahrain-weapons-sales.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/world/middleeast/rex-tillerson-bahrain-weapons-sales.html?_r=1)

<sup>23</sup> Reuters, "Trump says ties with Bahrain won't be strained anymore", 21 May 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-saudi-bahrain-idUSKCN18H05Y](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-saudi-bahrain-idUSKCN18H05Y)

# 4. CLAMPDOWN ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

**“Most of us are really afraid of what will happen. We are just waiting to be arrested. We know that’s the future. They are targeting everyone now.”**

Human rights defender who has requested anonymity, speaking to Amnesty International in May 2017

According to Amnesty International’s calculations, the Bahraini authorities subjected at least 169 peaceful critics or their relatives to one or more of the following measures for speaking out against the authorities between June 2016 and June 2017: summons, arrest, interrogation, prosecution, imprisonment, travel ban, and threat of imprisonment or torture of them or their relatives. Human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, political activists and leaders, Shi’a clerics, and peaceful protesters have been particularly targeted.

Inside Bahrain, the authorities have increasingly resorted to using provisions in Bahrain’s Penal Code which criminalize freedom of expression, trying scores of people for merely expressing their opinion.<sup>24</sup> The most commonly used charges have included “insulting publicly official institutions”, “insulting the King”, “spreading false reports, statements or malicious rumours” and “inciting hatred against the regime” or “incitement to overthrow the regime”.

The Bahraini authorities have also continued to imprison or threaten legal action against critics of Bahrain’s “brotherly nations”, in particular Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, during the dispute pitting Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) against Qatar that began in June 2017, the authorities threatened legal action against anyone who voiced support for Qatar. Security forces arrested lawyer **Issa al-Burshaid** on 13 June after he shared a message on Facebook that he had filed a lawsuit against the Bahraini government related to the measures taken against Qatar. He was released on 21 June.

In parallel, the Bahraini authorities have targeted the only independent newspaper in Bahrain, *al-Wasat*, temporarily suspending its online edition in January 2017 and arbitrarily closing it down entirely in June.

Bahraini human rights defenders and activists outside the country have also been targeted. In some cases, they have been threatened on social media by individuals who appear to be state agents. In other cases, the authorities have detained or harassed their relatives in Bahrain.

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<sup>24</sup> Notably Articles 134, 214-216, 160, 165 and 168.

## 4.1 REPRESSIVE TACTICS AGAINST PEACEFUL CRITICS IN BAHRAIN

**“The [NSA] men told me ‘no one can protect you’. They took away my humanity, I was weak prey to them.”**

Woman human rights defender Ebtisam al-Saegh recounting to Amnesty International in May 2017 her treatment by the NSA

The main target in this far-reaching repression are human rights defenders and other peaceful critics of the government, with the authorities deploying a wide range of tactics in their efforts to instil fear and effectively silence them.

### 4.1.1 JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

The most common tactic used by the authorities has been the judicial harassment of human rights defenders and other peaceful critics, by way of relentlessly summoning them for interrogation, before either charging or releasing them. Between June 2016 and June 2017, Amnesty International documented the cases of 26 peaceful critics who were summoned for interrogation by the NSA, Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) or public prosecution, in some cases up to four times. Following their interrogation, the majority of them were either charged with participation in an “illegal gathering” or “inciting hatred against the regime” and then released, or were released without charge. Four were referred to trial. In November 2016, scores of human rights and political activists were summoned for allegedly taking part in a peaceful sit-in; most denied that they had done so, but were charged with “illegal gathering” and banned from travelling outside the country.<sup>25</sup> In April, days ahead of Bahrain’s examination by the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review Working Group in Geneva, 32 activists were summoned by the public prosecution; similarly, the majority were charged with “illegal gathering” and given travel bans.<sup>26</sup>

 ↓ Hussain Radhi © Private



<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International, *End the systematic muzzling of peaceful dissenting voices* (Index: MDE 11/5394/2016).

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain: 32 dissidents rounded up within days in clampdown ahead of UN human rights session* ([Press Release](#), 25 April 2017).

The authorities have used trumped-up charges to justify the imposition of travel bans on peaceful critics. The charges also serve to silence the critics, who know the charges can be activated at any time as a basis to refer them to trial. Some have been charged with participation in an “illegal gathering” in Duraz at a time when they could not have entered the village to demonstrate given the blockade in place since June 2016. Others have been charged with “inciting hatred of the regime” in relation to statements that Amnesty International has examined and found to be merely peaceful expressions of criticism of the authorities. Many have told Amnesty International they live in constant fear that at any point they will receive a summons or that security officers will arrest them in their homes in the middle of the night.



 ↑ Sayed Hadi al-Mousawi © Private

Human rights defender **Jalila al-Salman** was summoned for interrogation by the public prosecution on 10

November 2016 and again on 23 April 2017, and charged with “illegal gathering in al-Daih and in Duraz” – a charge she denied. She was also prevented from travelling abroad in June 2016.

Human rights defender **Hussain Radhi** was prevented from travelling abroad at Bahrain International Airport on 20 April 2017, when he was told by an immigration officer that the public prosecution had imposed a travel ban on him on 14 April. On 24 April he was summoned to the public prosecution for interrogation the



 ↑ Asma Darwish © Private

next day. On 25 April, he was charged with participation in an “illegal gathering in Duraz”. Hussain Radhi had also been prevented from travelling to Geneva with other activists to participate in the UN Human Rights Council session in June.<sup>27</sup>

**Sayed Hadi al-Mousawi**, a human rights defender and former member of al-Wefaq’s human rights department, was summoned on 24 April 2017 for interrogation the next day. On 25 April, he was charged with participation in an “illegal gathering in Duraz”, “attempting to cause unrest” and “participating in an assault on security officers”. He had also been prevented from travelling to Geneva on 5 April ahead of Bahrain’s examination by the Universal Periodic Review.

On 16 November 2016, masked officers in civilian clothing and riot police surrounded the home of human rights defender **Asma Darwish** in Sitra with a summons for her to appear before the public prosecution the following day on the charge of participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz” in August 2016. She had been living outside of Bahrain at the time.

## 4.1.2 ARBITRARY ARREST, PROSECUTION AND IMPRISONMENT

Another common tactic used by the authorities has been to arbitrarily arrest and detain human rights defenders and other critics for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International documented 34 such cases between June 2016 and June 2017. In 15 of the cases, the individuals were prosecuted and imprisoned.

<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Authorities must halt repression after weeks of intensified clampdown on human right* (Index: MDE 11/4312/2016).

Prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab, who is president of the BCHR, has been in and out of prison since 2012 and has been one of the most targeted human rights defenders in Bahrain. He has also been subjected to a travel ban since November 2014.

Just before his re-arrest in June 2016, Nabeel Rajab told Amnesty International:

**“I was jailed five times in the past year... Most of the time I’m banned from travelling, targeted, jailed, tortured, and my house targeted, attacked by rubber bullets and teargas... My children [have been] targeted by the government, [as have] my wife, my family, my mother whom I lost while I was in jail and I was not allowed to see her before she died... I know they [Bahraini authorities] are serious about targeting me or silencing me. I guarantee that they will leave me alone if I keep quiet. But I know myself I will never keep quiet.”<sup>28</sup>**

Nabeel Rajab has been imprisoned since his re-arrest on 13 June 2016. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience. On 14 June 2016, the public prosecution charged him with “deliberately spreading false information and rumours in televised interviews with the aim of discrediting the state”, a charge he denies. While in detention, he learned that he would also stand trial for comments he posted on Twitter relating to the war in Yemen and allegations of torture in Jaw prison. During a hearing on the Twitter charges on 28 December 2016, a court ordered his release, pending trial. However, the authorities kept him in custody to face trial on the charge related to his televised interviews and, on 10 July 2017, he was sentenced to two years in prison. At the time of writing, the trial in relation to the tweets is ongoing; he faces an additional 15-year sentence. He also faces a further two sets of charges in relation to articles published in his name in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* in September and December 2016, for which he may also be put on trial.<sup>29</sup>



Nabeel Rajab © Amnesty International

Nabeel Rajab was held in solitary confinement for over nine months at East and West Riffaa police stations between June 2016 and April 2017. Such prolonged solitary confinement violates the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.<sup>30</sup> On 5 April, Nabeel Rajab underwent major surgery on his lower back, leaving him with a large open wound which the doctors said had to be left open and required daily cleaning supervised by medically qualified personnel. However, two days later he was taken back to his cell, causing his wound to inflame and bleed. On 8 April, Nabeel Rajab was taken back to the Ministry of Interior hospital in al-Qalaa, where doctors advised that he should remain hospitalized due to his health condition. He underwent surgery again on 5 May and remains in hospital at the time of writing.

Despite his fast-deteriorating health, the judge in both trials refused his lawyers’ repeated requests for his release and for his trial to be postponed on the grounds that he was unable to attend the hearings due to his ill health. In one of the hearings, on 14 June 2017, Nabeel Rajab’s lawyers walked out of the court in protest at the fact that he had been deprived of the right to attend it and listen himself to evidence.

**Munir Mshaima**, the brother of one of three men executed by the Bahraini authorities in January 2017, was arrested immediately after his brother’s funeral, interrogated and accused of “insulting the King” and released the following day. He was unable to ascertain whether he had been officially charged with this offence.

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International UK, *In their own words: Nabeel Rajab*, 4 March 2016, [www.amnesty.org.uk/podcast-in-their-own-words-nabeel-rajab-bahrain](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/podcast-in-their-own-words-nabeel-rajab-bahrain)

<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International, *New sentence against human rights defender: Nabeel Rajab* (Index: MDE 11/6716/2017).

<sup>30</sup> UN News Centre, *Solitary confinement should be banned in most cases, UN expert says*, 18 October 2011, [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40097#.WVpQRITyupo](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40097#.WVpQRITyupo)

Prisoner of conscience **Yaser Mawali** was arrested on 29 May 2017 and charged the following day with “insulting the King” for retweeting two posts criticizing Bahrain’s royal family. His trial is ongoing.<sup>31</sup>

Prominent journalist **Nazeera Saeed** was put on trial in July 2016, and convicted of “practising information work without renewing the permit issued by the Information Affairs Authority” on 25 May 2017. She had applied for her accreditation renewal in March 2016 when it was due to expire, expecting that her accreditation would be renewed, as it had been in previous years. However, she received a letter from the Information Affairs Authority on 20 June 2016 stating that it had not been renewed because she had only attended 10% of the events organized in Bahrain that she was expected to attend as a journalist”, an accusation she denies. That day she stopped working as a journalist. According to court documents, the case brought against her related to her reporting as a France 24 correspondent in May and June 2016. The documents state that her accreditation was not renewed because “her performance [was] not satisfactory with regards to covering of events and carrying out of correspondent duties overall”, a vaguely worded accusation which she denies.<sup>32</sup> Nazeera Saeed was also subjected to an arbitrary travel ban between June and August 2016.<sup>33</sup>



 ↑ Nazeera Saeed © Private

### 4.1.3 NATIONALITY REVOCATION AND EXPULSION

Another tactic the authorities have used to target and silence opponents, albeit less frequently, is the arbitrary revocation of nationality, in most cases rendering those targeted stateless. Some have subsequently been forcibly expelled from Bahrain. The daily lives of those deprived of their nationality are deeply affected at multiple levels; they are unable to access public services or their bank account or, in the case of males, to pass their nationality to their children (women are unable to pass their nationality to their children even in normal circumstances). Between June 2016 and June 2017, Amnesty International documented one case of a government critic whose nationality was arbitrarily revoked and another who was forcibly expelled. It had recorded three other cases of individuals whose nationality was revoked and who were then forcibly expelled from Bahrain in February and March 2016.

Human rights lawyer **Taimoor Karimi**, who was arbitrarily stripped of his nationality and rendered stateless in 2012, was forcibly expelled from Bahrain on 26 June 2016. That day, he was summoned by the Nationality, Passports and Residence Affairs Office of the Department of Immigration, and told he would be deported to Iraq. He was then immediately taken to the airport to board the plane.<sup>34</sup>

On 20 June 2016, the authorities arbitrarily revoked the nationality of Sheikh Isa Qassem, the country’s most prominent Shi’a cleric and spiritual leader of al-Wefaq, rendering him stateless and at risk of being forcibly expelled. Sheikh Isa Qassem was put on trial on 27 July 2016. On 21 May 2017, he was sentenced to one year in prison, suspended for three years, in connection to his receipt of *khums*, a religious obligation for Shi’a Muslims to donate a fifth of their yearly profits to their spiritual leader or his representative, who distributes it to the poor.

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31 Amnesty International, *Bahrain activist risks seven years in jail for retweets* (Index: MDE 11/6825/2017).

32 Nazeera Saeed’s court documents are on file with Amnesty International.

33 Amnesty International, *Bahrain authorities must rescind decision to close only independent newspaper al-Wasat and cease all-out campaign to end independent reporting* (Index: MDE 11/6741/2017).

34 Amnesty International, *Stateless lawyer at imminent risk of expulsion: Taimoor Karimi* (Index: MDE11/4091/2017).

## 4.1.4 TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

During the period between June 2016 and June 2017, Amnesty International received reports of nine cases of government critics being subjected to torture in detention, including eight between 23 and 28 May 2017 alone. The authorities had largely not used torture and other ill-treatment against human rights defenders and activists since 2011. The reported torture, including sexual assault, of a woman human rights defender in May has since significantly impacted the wider civil society, striking fear amongst both male and female activists as to the new lengths the authorities could go to in order to silence them.

With regard to the eight cases recorded in May 2017, Amnesty International documented a pattern in which the political activists and human rights defenders concerned received a call from an NSA official, who ordered them to present themselves to their office in Muharraq, without sending an official summons. This in effect meant that there would be no official trace of the individual's detention and interrogation there, increasing their exposure to torture and other ill-treatment. According to Amnesty International's information, they were indeed tortured or otherwise ill-treated and threatened. These developments followed the expansion of the NSA's mandate to once again include arrest and interrogation after nearly six years of a mandate limited to intelligence gathering in line with the BICI recommendations. Decree 1 of 2017, issued in January 2017, authorized the NSA to conduct arrests and interrogations in cases linked to "terrorist crimes"; for all other "crimes", "the NSA will refer cases that warrant any arrests or detentions to the Interior Ministry to take legal action prescribed to them."<sup>35</sup> The NSA was responsible for systematically torturing detainees during the 2011 uprising, according to Amnesty International's findings.



Ebtisam al-Saegh © Private



One of the eight cases in May 2017 is that of woman human rights defender Ebtisam al-Saegh. On 25 May, she received a phone call from the NSA telling her to present herself to their office in Muharraq the following afternoon. She told Amnesty International that when she arrived she was blindfolded and, in the subsequent hours, sexually assaulted, beaten and kept standing for most of the seven hours she was being interrogated.

**"They beat me on my nose and they kicked me in the stomach, knowing that I had undergone surgery on my nose and that I was suffering from my colon. I could hear an electric device next to me, which was to scare me. I fainted twice and was woken up with cold water thrown on me. I was threatened that they would harm my family and that they would bring my husband and torture and electrocute him. The men told me 'no one can protect you'. They took away my humanity, I was weak prey to them."**<sup>36</sup>

During her interrogation, Ebtisam al-Saegh said she was questioned about the Duraz crackdown, about which she had been outspoken, about other human rights defenders she knew, and about her participation at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2017. She was also told to cease all her human rights activities or she would be further targeted. Ebtisam al-Saegh was released from NSA custody at around 23:00. After continuing her human rights work, Ebtisam al-Saegh was re-arrested from her home on 3 July and taken into custody by the NSA, where she says she was beaten and interrogated. She was charged with terrorism-related offences on 18 July and ordered to be detained for six months, pending further investigation.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Decree 1 of 2017 amending Law 14 of 2002 establishing the NSA.

<sup>36</sup> Interview on internet-based messaging service with Ebtisam al-Saegh, 30 May 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Human rights defender charged with terrorism* (Press Release, 19 July 2017).

## 4.1.5 SURVEILLANCE THREATS AND OFFERS TO WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Amnesty International has documented several cases of human rights defenders and political activists who have been subjected to physical surveillance, or threats through social media and phone calls, between June 2016 and June 2017. Some have also received offers to work for the government in exchange for their silence.

One activist described to Amnesty International having received a call at the end of 2016 from a person they believed to be an agent of the NSA or CID, and who asked to meet unofficially. The caller listed all the activities the activist had undertaken, inquired about other activists and asked them to work with them. When the activist refused, they were threatened with consequences if they did not lower their profile. Another activist said that the NSA and high-ranking officials offered them work at the office of the Ombudsman of the Ministry of Interior, the SIU or the National Institution for Human Rights in exchange for their silence.

**Sheikh Maytham al-Salman**, a cleric and human rights defender, was summoned and interrogated on multiple occasions between June 2016 and March 2017, and subjected to a de facto travel ban between January 2016 and February 2017, as he had to wait 13 months, an exceptional amount of time, for the authorities to renew his passport. During one of his interrogations, on 10 October 2016 at Samaheej police station, where he was questioned in relation to a religious speech he made on the occasion of the Shi'a festival of Ashoura, officers took his mobile phone and kept it for 12 hours. He was questioned about information that he says he had not made public, but was stored on his phone. He stopped using the device afterwards as he was worried that the officers had managed to insert a surveillance device in it.

 ↓ *Sheikh Maytham al-Salman © Amnesty International*

He told Amnesty International:

**“I have received many threats through social media and in emails including threatening tweets from a deputy in the Prime Minister’s office [Dr Ebrahim Al-Dossary, Assistant Undersecretary in the Prime Minister’s Court] saying that I should be punished for ruining the image of Bahrain. I have also been followed into cafés where I was meeting diplomats or relatives of victims, and the person that followed me was taking photos of me or attempting to record the conversation I was having.”<sup>38</sup>**



In a tweet sent on 20 April 2017, the same official posted an edited version of a publicly available photograph that Amnesty International had taken of Sheikh Maytham al-Salman standing with some of the organization’s staff in London in April 2017; a red circle had been added around the image of his head. The official commented that it was now clear why Sheikh Maytham al-Salman was not going back to Bahrain and that those in the photograph were “sheep” who believed him.<sup>39</sup>

38 Interview on internet-based messaging service with Sheikh Maytham al-Salman, 16 June 2017.

39 Twitter, Dr E Al-Dossary, 20 April 2017, [twitter.com/dredossary/status/855074735264342017](https://twitter.com/dredossary/status/855074735264342017)

## 4.1.6 INTERROGATION BEFORE PUBLIC PROSECUTION'S TERRORISM UNIT

At least 11 of the 32 human rights defenders and political activists who were interrogated and charged with participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz” in April 2017 were interrogated by the terrorism unit of the public prosecution office. This unit was established by Decree 68 of 2014, amending the existing anti-terrorism law (Law 58 of 2006), to investigate terrorism-related offences.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that interrogations of such individuals are being carried out by a public prosecution unit that is supposed to deal solely with terrorism-related cases has sparked fears that the authorities are interpreting “illegal gathering” charges as a terrorist crime. Those fears have been exacerbated by the manner of the summons. Some of those who have been interrogated by this unit have received summons from a large number of armed police officers travelling in jeeps and accompanied by riot police.

At 07:30 on 21 April 2017, six police cars and one civilian car arrived outside the house of human rights defender **Fatima al-Halwachi**, scaring her family. Men in civilian clothing, flanked by riot police, handed her a summons to report to the public prosecution's terrorism unit on 24 April, where she was charged with participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz”, a charge she denied.

At the same time and date, around 10 police cars arrived outside the house of human rights lawyer **Fatima Moutawa**. Four armed policemen stood by while another policeman presented a summons which she was told to sign and a sixth filmed her with a video camera. On 23 April, she was questioned before the public prosecution's terrorism unit, where she was charged with participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz” outside Sheikh Isa Qassem's house and “being a leader and organizer of marches”, charges which she denied.

Fatima Moutawa told the prosecution that as a lawyer she knew she should not have been summoned by armed police or videoed when presented with the summons. The prosecution responded that it was the procedure as “it was for protection as this is a dangerous area”. When she asked why she had been brought before the terrorism unit, she was told that “this is a special case” as “there is a person [Sheikh Isa Qassem] who is supposed to be deported and the terrorists are blocking this”.

Amnesty International is concerned that, following the King's ratification of a vaguely worded amendment to the constitution in April 2017 allowing civilians to be tried before military courts, any critic deemed to be a threat to Bahrain's national security, including – as was the case in 2011 – peaceful activists prosecuted on trumped-up charges, could be tried in grossly unfair trials before military courts.

## 4.2 REPRESSIVE TACTICS AGAINST CRITICS OUTSIDE BAHRAIN

**“If Yusuf continues his activities, you are going to be the target as we can't catch him outside Bahrain.”**

A threat reportedly made by a police officer to the father and sister of exiled activist Yusuf AlHoori in May 2017

The authorities have expanded the range of targets since June 2016 to include critics abroad and their family members in Bahrain, as part of their campaign to silence dissenting and critical voices.

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<sup>40</sup> This unit charged Ebtisam al-Saegh on 18 July with terrorism-related offences and ordered her to be detained for six months.

## 4.2.1 REPRISALS AGAINST FAMILY MEMBERS IN BAHRAIN

Since October 2016, the families of at least four human rights defenders and activists residing outside of Bahrain have been subjected to reprisals, including arrest, threats, alleged torture or other ill-treatment, including sexual assault, and prosecution. These reprisals have generally taken place before, during or after their relatives participated in protests in the UK and Germany.

 ↓ *Hajer Mansoor Hasan and Sayed Nizar Alwadaei © Private*



Several family members of **Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei**, the Director of Advocacy at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy in London, were targeted for harassment after he had taken part in a protest in London on 26 October 2016, when King Hamad was meeting with UK Prime Minister Theresa May. That evening, his wife, **Duaa Alwadaei**, and their two-year-old son were prevented from boarding their flight back to the UK and detained at Bahrain International Airport. Duaa Alwadaei was interrogated for seven hours, during which she says she was beaten by a policewoman, told that the authorities were going after her husband and asked whether she knew about her husband's plans to protest against the King's visit. She was released and was able to travel back to the UK on 1 November 2016. The Bahraini embassy in the UK justified the interrogation in a statement it circulated by email to Amnesty International and others on 29 October: it said that, in view of "the visit of His Majesty the King to the United Kingdom last week, precautionary security measures were

 ↓ *Mahmood Marzooq Mansoor © Private*

necessary".<sup>41</sup> The embassy then stated on its Twitter account on 1 November that she had "failed to cooperate with airport security" and "assaulted a female police officer".<sup>42</sup> Duaa Alwadaei's arrest and interrogation appear to have been a direct reprisal for her husband's protest against the King's visit to the UK.

Sayed Alwadaei's brother-in-law, **Sayed Nizar Alwadaei**, his mother-in-law, **Hajer Mansoor Hassan**, and his cousin **Mahmood Marzooq Mansoor** were arrested in March 2017 and taken to the CID premises in Manama for interrogation without the presence of their lawyers. They told the public prosecutor they that were tortured or otherwise ill-treated, and coerced into "confessing" their involvement in "planting fake bombs". They were also interrogated about Sayed Alwadaei's activities in the UK. On 8 March the public prosecution charged all three with "planting and carrying with unknown others an object similar to an improvised explosive in



<sup>41</sup> The statement is on file with Amnesty International.

<sup>42</sup> Twitter, Bahrain Embassy UK, 1 November 2016, [twitter.com/BahrainEmbUK/status/793484507882094592](https://twitter.com/BahrainEmbUK/status/793484507882094592)

a public place, for the purpose of terrorism”, a charge they deny. Sayed Nizar Alwadaei was also charged in relation to another “fake bomb” case. Their trials continue.<sup>43</sup>

Sayed Alwadaei’s sister, **Entisar Alwadaei**, was summoned and interrogated at Muharraq police station three times between March and May 2017, where she was questioned about her brother’s activities in the UK, and told that she should work for the CID or her younger brother would be brought in for interrogation. Her husband was interrogated separately on two occasions in the same period, during which he was also threatened. Sayed Alwadaei’s father was summoned and interrogated twice in April, and told that “Bahrain might take matters into their own hands if Sayed doesn’t discontinue his campaigning”. On 24 April his father was interrogated for five hours by two officers who told him he could not leave until he called his son on his phone so they could speak to him. When he refused, the officers summoned his daughter, Entisar Alwadaei, to the police station. She was brought into the same room and they were pressured to sign a piece of paper pledging co-operation with the officers and denouncing Sayed Alwadaei.

On the morning of 13 May, the day of the UK’s Royal Windsor Horse Show, which is sponsored by Bahrain and attended by King Hamad, Entisar Alwadaei and her husband were again summoned and interrogated for several hours about her brother.

 Isa al-Aali © Private



 Yusuf AlHoori © Private

**Haider al-Aali**, the father of UK-based activist **Isa al-Aali**, was arrested and interrogated twice in reprisal for his son’s activities in the UK. On 5 April, Haider al-Aali was interrogated for up to three hours at Muharraq police station during which officers shouted: “All his family is here in Bahrain: his mother, sister, brother. Send this message [that his family in Bahrain can be targeted] to Isa because he is following our leader and protesting in London.” He said he would do so and was released. On the morning of the Royal Windsor Horse Show on 13 May, Isa al-Aali’s father called him, said he was at the police station and told Isa to go home. When Isa al-Aali said he was already at home, he heard other voices in the background on the phone saying: “He is lying! Tell him to go home.” Isa al-Aali repeated that he was at home and his father said “OK” and the line was cut. After his release, his father said the officers asked him about his son’s whereabouts and about different members of his family.

According to Germany-based activist **Yusuf AlHoori**, his sister and father were arrested by security forces in direct reprisal for his activities and his sister was sexually assaulted. On 13 May, Yusuf Alhoori received a call from his father, **Omran Jasim Omran Abdullah**, who told him he was under arrest and that he had to delete his tweets, close his Twitter account and publish a letter of apology to the King. When he asked his father

43 Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Halt the targeting of critic living abroad through the harassment of his family in Bahrain* (Index: MDE 11/6486/2017).



 [Saber al-Salatna](#) © Private

who had asked him to do this, the line was cut. Yusuf AlHoori received another call from his father's phone 30 seconds later but this time it was someone he presumed to be a police officer threatening him. "If you don't publish an apology to the King, close your Twitter account and delete your tweets, we are going to kill your father," the voice said. Yusuf AlHoori replied that he would not do this. One hour later his sister, **Zainab Omran Jasim Omran Abdullah**, called him from her phone, told him she was at the police station and that he should close his Twitter account and stop his human rights activities, before the line was cut. One minute later, his father called again telling him to stop his activities, before the line was cut again. One minute later, he received a call from his sister, who was crying and told him, "They want to put me under pressure." Yusuf AlHoori heard voices in the background telling his father what to say. During their nine-hour interrogation the officers apparently told his sister and father: "If Yusuf continues his activities, you are going to be the target as we can't catch him outside Bahrain." Yusuf AlHoori told Amnesty International: "My sister was brought into a dark room with four officers – the ceilings, walls and floor were all black. They closed the door and touched my sister's body in places."

The sister of UK-based activist **Saber al-Salatna** and the three sisters of his wife were summoned and interrogated at Muharrag police station between March and May 2017, in reprisal for his activities. His sister was interrogated for three hours at Muharrag police station on 6 March about her brother, and she was also asked about other members of her family. The officers told her they wanted him to stop protesting in the UK, saying: "Saber is making trouble, stop him or else." She was interrogated again on 13 May, the day of the Royal Windsor Horse Show. During the interrogation of his wife's three sisters on 17 May, the officers told them to ask Saber to cease his activities. The sisters were released after being warned that they might be asked to come back.

## 4.2.2 THREATS AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

According to Amnesty International's research, at least nine human rights defenders and political activists based outside of Bahrain either have received threats from people they believe are state agents, through phone calls, on social media or in person, or have been subjected to smear campaigns by the Bahraini embassy in the UK or individuals they believe to be state agents since June 2016. These threats have been issued particularly before or after they had participated in protests in the UK or Germany.

In some cases, the threats have been made using the phones of their family members during their interrogation, presumably by the security force officers questioning them. In others, the threats have come through direct phone calls from Bahraini individuals identifying themselves as being "from the government".

Germany-based human rights defender **Sayed Yousif Almuhafdah** told Amnesty International that he received a call in March 2017 from a Bahraini man who said he had obtained his number from his brother and told him he was calling from the government and wanted to meet. Sayed Yousif asked the man for his name and position, but the man refused to say. Sayed Yousif blocked the number, but then received an email from the same person telling him he was "very serious about meeting".<sup>44</sup>

On 26 April 2017 Sayed Alwadaei received two calls from a man who said he was calling from Bahrain and wanted to meet him in London. Amnesty International has listened to a recording of the conversation. Sayed

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<sup>44</sup> Interview on internet-based messaging service with Sayed Yousif Almuhafdah, 1 June 2017.

Alwadaei asked him repeatedly who he was, who he worked with and how he had obtained his number. The man's response was: "You will know in time where I work." The man said he had obtained Sayed's number from his sister at Muharraq police station the day before and that he "was the one that was sat with her". After repeated questions from Sayed about Muharraq police station and his sister, the man said he had nothing to do with the police station and the call ended.

Some human rights defenders and other activists outside Bahrain have received threatening messages from the Twitter accounts of a member of the Bahraini royal family and an official in the Prime Minister's office. Others have received such messages from Twitter and Instagram accounts whose owners are not identifiable.

The content of the messages varies from defamatory remarks about "links" they are claimed to have to Iran or the Lebanese Shi'a group Hizbullah to threats of rape and death. They have also been targeted through smear campaigns in pro-government newspapers.



  Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei © Moosa Satrawi

Three of the several threatening tweets received by Yusuf AlHoori and seen by Amnesty International were from the account of Dr Ebrahim El-Dossary, Assistant Undersecretary in the Prime Minister's Court. On 5 March 2017, when he was participating in the Human Rights Council session at the time, a tweet posted from the account called Yusuf AlHoori a "terrorist" who "receives huge funding from Iran to defame Bahrain's reputation".<sup>45</sup>

Yusuf AlHoori has also been the target of a smear campaign in pro-government newspapers, including an article in *Al Ayam* on 25 March 2017 which labelled him a terrorist and claimed he was defaming Bahrain.<sup>46</sup> He also relayed to Amnesty International that, after conducting advocacy meetings with German members of parliament regarding the situation in Bahrain, they then received messages on Twitter from different accounts with unidentifiable owners, asking them why they had met with a "terrorist".

Sayed Alwadaei also received messages from accounts with unidentifiable owners that threatened him with rape and death in October 2016 and April 2017 and mentioned his infant son and his mother. In addition, he received insulting comments about him being Shi'a from the Instagram account of Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, a member of the royal family.<sup>47</sup>

Sayed Yousif Almuhafdah has received several threats through social media, mostly through Instagram, including a death threat against his brother from an Instagram account owned by "Salman\_ssfc". SSFC are the initials of the Special Security Force Command of Bahrain.<sup>48</sup> The post on 1 June 2017 featured a photograph of detainees who were arrested during the crackdown in Duraz on 23 May and said: "We are going to wipe you out. If you do not delete the account and become a man, we will bring your brothers and assassinate them." Sayed Yousif Almuhafdah reported the account to Instagram, which then closed it.

The Bahraini embassy in the UK has subjected Sayed Alwadaei to a smear campaign since October 2016. It stated in a statement dated 29 October 2016 that it circulated by email to Amnesty International and others that the detention of his wife at Bahrain International Airport on 26 October was due to "Mr. Alwadaei's

<sup>45</sup> Twitter, Dr E Al-Dossary, 5 March 2017, [twitter.com/dredossary/status/838468891726725122](https://twitter.com/dredossary/status/838468891726725122)

<sup>46</sup> Said al-Hamad, "ما عتيف يولدين جوالكسز اوعلي-جواجمانتقاي-ة", *Al Ayam*, 25 March 2017,

<sup>47</sup> Amnesty International have these Instagram comments on file.

<sup>48</sup> SSFC officers were seen in verified footage of the crackdown in Duraz on 23 May 2017.

history of being involved in and supporting terrorist acts”.<sup>49</sup> This false accusation was repeated in a statement issued by the embassy on 16 March 2017, which stated: “It is no secret that Sayed Ahmed Al-Wedaei [Alwadaei] and members of his family have been operating for a long time on the edge of legality.”<sup>50</sup> Sayed Alwadaei was convicted in 2011 of participating in peaceful protests in 2011 but has never been charged with involvement in or support for any terrorist acts. Sayed Alwadaei and other Bahraini and UK activists were labelled “terrorists” after an egg was thrown at Saudi Arabian General Ahmed al-Asiri on 31 March 2017 in London in protest at Saudi Arabia’s role in the war in Yemen. The Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the incident the following day as a “barbaric assault... by a group of terrorists”.<sup>51</sup>

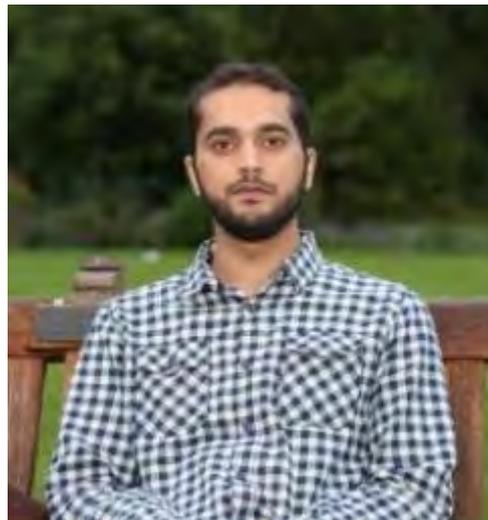
On 20 January 2017 activist **Ali Mushaima** took part in a protest outside the Bahraini embassy in London which turned confrontational; police officers had to separate the embassy staff from the activists. In video footage of the incident that Amnesty International has viewed, an individual identifiable as an embassy staff member can be seen approaching Ali Mushaima and asking him, “How is your father doing?” Ali Mushaima’s father is Hasan Mushaima, one of 13 opposition activists imprisoned since 2011 and considered by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience. The tone of the individual’s voice and his body language indicated that the question was intended to be threatening.

### 4.2.3 PHYSICAL SURVEILLANCE OUTSIDE BAHRAIN

Three human rights activists residing outside of Bahrain and a UK journalist were followed by men they believe to have been members of Bahraini intelligence services, after they participated in a protest at the Royal Windsor Horse Show in the UK on 13 May 2017.

Ali Mushaima, Saber al-Salatna and Isa al-Aali told Amnesty International that, while they were protesting outside the Horse Show, they noticed four or five men, each of whom had their mouth and nose covered with a scarf and wearing a hat, watching them and taking photographs of them. Isa al-Aali said he was sure they were Bahraini intelligence because when he passed by them, he tried to film them on his phone and they reacted by saying in Arabic, in a Bahraini accent, “Fine, you will see!” The men then followed them to the train station. Saber al-Salatna told Amnesty International: “They followed us onto the same train carriage as us and we recognized they were the same men we saw earlier. It was really scary.”<sup>52</sup>

 Ali Mushaima © Private



When they arrived at Paddington train station in London, UK, three of the Bahraini men followed them off the train. The activists confronted them, asking them why they were following them. Two of them ran off but the activists managed to restrain one of them and called the police. When a police officer arrived, the officer took down all their details, and then let the man go.

49 The statement is on file with Amnesty International.

50 Embassy of the Kingdom of Bahrain, London, *Embassy Statement Concerning Allegations of Targeting of Relatives of Sayed Ahmed Al-Wedaei*, 16 March 2017, [us12.campaign-archive2.com/?u=adae2d71fee280549ad890919&id=0a59523624](https://www.us12.campaign-archive2.com/?u=adae2d71fee280549ad890919&id=0a59523624)

51 Kingdom of Bahrain, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Bahrain’s Foreign Ministry condemns attempted attack on Maj. Gen. Ahmed Al-Assiri by group of terrorists in London*, 1 April 2017, [www.mofa.gov.bh/Default.aspx?tabid=7824&language=en-US&ItemId=7269](http://www.mofa.gov.bh/Default.aspx?tabid=7824&language=en-US&ItemId=7269)

52 Interview on internet-based messaging service with Saber al-Salatna, 22 May 2017.

UK journalist **Jason Parkinson** filmed activists protesting at the Royal Windsor Horse Show before they were removed by plain-clothed individuals. He told Amnesty International that, when he left the grounds of the show, he saw a man following him.<sup>53</sup> He briefly went to a nearby pub to edit the footage he had taken, but left after he was contacted by a Bahraini activist who said he was being followed on his train back to London. Four men then followed him onto his train carriage, one of whom he recognized as having followed him earlier. The men sat at the table in front of him, looking directly at him throughout the journey and loudly said, “We can get to anyone, no one is safe.” At Paddington station, they stopped following him.

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<sup>53</sup> Telephone interview with Jason Parkinson, 19 May 2017.

# 5. CLAMPDOWN ON FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

**“The shot went off and it hit his head from the back. He was not facing [the armed men]... He fell on his face and bled.”**

Eyewitness who saw Mustapha Hamdan shot in Duraz on 26 January 2017

Following the arbitrary revocation of Sheikh Isa Qassem’s nationality on 20 June 2016, large protests erupted, particularly in Duraz, where he lives, and continued throughout the following 11 months. Large protests in other villages also took place during periods of tension such as that following the execution of three men in January 2017. In response the Bahraini authorities intensified their clampdown on peaceful assembly through the heightened use of legislation criminalizing the right to peaceful assembly. Over 70 protesters, Shi’a clerics and activists were charged with participating in an “illegal gathering” between June and November 2016 and some of them were prosecuted and imprisoned. The authorities also charged scores of human rights defenders and other peaceful critics with participating in an “illegal gathering” in order to justify travel bans imposed on them.<sup>54</sup> Security officers used excessive and arbitrary force, including live ammunition, against protesters.

## 5.1 JUDICIAL HARASSMENT OF PEACEFUL PROTESTERS AND BANS

The Bahraini authorities have maintained an indefinite ban on peaceful demonstrations in Manama since August 2013. Demonstrations also continue to be banned near hospitals, airports, commercial compounds and any other areas that have security measures in place. Demonstrations outside Manama can be held if the organizers obtain prior written permission from the Head of Public Security or his deputy, but very few have succeeded in doing so during the same period.<sup>55</sup> Article 178 of Bahrain’s Penal Code penalizes any unauthorized public gathering of five or more people with up to two years in prison and/or a fine of 200 Bahraini dinars.

Between June 2016 and June 2017, dozens of peaceful protesters were charged with participating in an “illegal gathering”. Some were prosecuted and imprisoned. The authorities also continued to prosecute and imprison those charged in relation to peaceful protests that took place in previous years.

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<sup>54</sup> See section 4.2.

<sup>55</sup> The Law on Public Gatherings has onerous procedures for applying for permission and empowers the authorities to ban protests on grounds that go beyond what is permissible under international law.

Bahraini activist **Nader Abdulemam** was arrested and taken to Jaw prison on 18 February 2017 after an appeal court upheld the six-month prison sentence he received in April 2016 for “participating in an illegal gathering” and “inciting people to attend an illegal gathering in Manama” on Twitter in 2013. He was released on 30 June after completing his sentence.

Bahrain has a duty to uphold the right to peaceful assembly, enshrined in Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has explained that this means that “there is a presumption in favour of holding peaceful assemblies. Assemblies should be presumed lawful, subject to the permissible limitations set out in article 21”.<sup>56</sup> These limitations must be necessary and proportionate, meaning that there must be a pressing social need, in order to protect a legitimate concern (national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals, the protection of the rights and freedoms of others). And the restriction must be the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate objective being pursued by the authorities. Indefinite bans on peaceful



 ↑ Nader Abdulemam © Private

assemblies covering entire cities are not proportionate. Further, as the Special Rapporteur has pointed out, “Freedom of peaceful assembly is a right and not a privilege and as such its exercise should not be subject to prior authorization by the authorities. State authorities may put in place a system of prior notification, where the objective is to allow State authorities an opportunity to facilitate the exercise of the right, to take measures to protect public safety and/or public order and to protect the rights and freedoms of others.”<sup>57</sup> Finally, it is the right to peaceful assemblies that is protected. This right “is held by each individual participating in an assembly. Acts of sporadic violence or offences by some should not be attributed to others whose intentions and behaviour remain peaceful in nature.”<sup>58</sup>

Between August and November 2016, scores of peaceful protesters and at least 70 Shi’a clerics were summoned for questioning about protests in Duraz, some on several occasions. The majority of the clerics were charged with participating in an “illegal gathering”; others were charged with “inciting hatred of the regime”. At least 20 of the clerics were put on trial and sentenced to between one and two years in prison for participating in an “illegal gathering”.<sup>59</sup>

**Dr Taha al-Derazi**, a neurosurgeon and member of the NGO Bahrain Human Rights Monitor, was summoned on 14 August 2016 alongside 12 other men and five women and charged with participating in an “illegal gathering” in Duraz in July 2016. He was released 10 days later pending trial. He was then sentenced to six months in prison in February, a term reduced to three months on 24 May, the day he was taken to Jaw prison to serve his sentence. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience.

Taha al-Derazi was prevented from leaving Bahrain with his wife in June 2016 and was summoned and charged alongside other human rights defenders in November 2016 and April 2017.<sup>60</sup>

56 Joint report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions on the proper management of assemblies, A/Human Rights Council/31/66, para. 18.

57 A/Human Rights Council/31/66, para. 21.

58 A/Human Rights Council/31/66, para. 20.

59 Amnesty International, *Bahrain: End heightened crackdown on peaceful critics* (Index: MDE 11/4749/2016).

60 See section 4.2.

## 5.2 VIOLENT REPRESSION OF PROTESTS

Protests took place in Duraz and several other villages. Confrontations and clashes pitting police and security forces, including NSA members, against protesters escalated in early 2017. Amnesty International's assessment is that excessive and arbitrary force was used to disperse protesters, resulting in six deaths, including of one child, and hundreds of people injured. Some journalists and photographers who attempted to observe the protests were arrested or injured.

### INTERNATIONAL POLICING STANDARDS

Under international policing standards, tear gas should never be fired directly at any person and should only be used when the level of violence has reached such a degree that law enforcement officials cannot contain the threat by directly targeting violent persons only.

Pellet-firing shotguns present a high risk of causing serious injuries including life-changing eye injuries and their use should therefore be prohibited in law enforcement.

Firearms may be used only as a last resort and when strictly necessary to protect law enforcement officials or others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury. Bahrain's Code of Conduct for Police Officers is based closely on these international standards but unlawful deaths and injuries as a result of the use of firearms and less-lethal weapons and equipment by police or other security have occurred. In addition, police continue to use tear gas against demonstrators in confined spaces, including in people's homes, leading to a danger of asphyxiation, and have caused serious injuries by firing tear gas canisters directly at protesters and at close range.

### 5.2.1 VIOLENT CLASHES IN JANUARY 2017



  Armed men in Duraz believed to be NSA agents, 26 January 2017 © Private

The execution of three men on 15 January 2017 sparked protests in over 20 villages across Bahrain, with hundreds of people taking part. While some of the protests were peaceful, others turned violent. Security forces used tear gas and shotguns firing birdshot against protesters and, in some cases, less-lethal projectiles and live ammunition, injuring scores of protesters. They arrested many more. The largest protests erupted in the villages of Sanabis, Duraz, Sitra and al-Daih, followed by smaller protests in 19 other villages. One eyewitness told Amnesty International that officers warned protesters in Sanabis on 15 January that they would be “executed like the three men”.<sup>61</sup> The following day, eyewitnesses said they saw security officers in Sanabis fire tear

gas canisters aimed directly at protesters and causing injuries. On 18 January, two armoured vehicles drove directly towards a protest in Sanabis, stopping just short of the protesters; no injuries were caused.<sup>62</sup>

Amnesty International has seen video footage of armed men wearing black balaclavas firing Benelli semi-automatic shotguns during clashes in Duraz on 26 January. It is unclear whether they were firing live ammunition or less-lethal riot control projectiles. Amnesty International could see other masked men

61 Interview on internet-based messaging service with eyewitness, 15 January 2017.

62 Amnesty International has verified video footage of this, taken on 18 January 2017 in Sanabis.

carrying drawn semi-automatic handguns and another carrying an MP-7 Personal Defence Weapon. It is unclear which authority these armed men belonged to, but, according to those interviewed by Amnesty International, they may have been from the NSA.

 → The funeral of Mustapha Hamdan in Karbabad village, 25 March 2017 © SIPA USA/PA Images

That morning, **Mustapha Hamdan**, 18, was shot in the back of his head in Duraz. One eyewitness told Amnesty International:

**“At 2.30am, 12 civilian cars arrived near where our brothers were sitting by the electricity box which is in the square at the back of Sheikh Isa Qassem’s house. When they got out of the car they immediately attacked them [the “brothers”]. The young men fled, running. Four of them were arrested and they [the armed men] ran after the remaining ones who had run away. There were screams and shots were fired at those who ran away. Mustapha and some others went the opposite way to those running away. Then there was a gun shot. They [the armed men] were by the electricity box and Mustapha was at the level of the last house in the middle of the square. The shot went off and it hit his head from the back. He was not facing [the armed men]. The hit was from the back, near the ear. He fell on his face and bled. I saw the blood from where he fell to the house of those who tried to save him.”<sup>63</sup>**



 ↑ Armoured vehicle driven at protesters, 12 February 2017 © Private

Mustapha Hamdan was taken to Salmaniya Medical Complex where he died on 24 March.<sup>64</sup> On 31 January Bahrain’s public prosecutor had stated that his office was investigating the circumstances of Mustapha Hamdan’s head injury, but no findings have been released to date.

Security forces were not the only ones using violence in these clashes. Molotov cocktails were thrown at security forces, tyres were burned, and a municipal building was set alight in Shamalia. At

least two officers were injured during the clashes. One police officer was shot in Bani Jamra on 14 January and later died and one off-duty police officer was shot and killed in Bilad al-Qadem on 29 January. Another police officer was killed on 1 January during the escape of several prisoners from Jaw prison.

## 5.2.2 EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH 2017 PROTESTS

On the evening of 12 February 2017, hundreds of protesters took to the streets in several villages, in protest against the authorities’ ban of religious funeral rituals for three men who were killed by coastguard forces on 9 February after they had escaped from Jaw prison on 1 January. Some protests remained peaceful, while

<sup>63</sup> Interview on internet-based messaging service with eyewitness, 27 January 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Amnesty International has verified video footage recorded in Duraz at around 04:00-05:00 on 26 January 2017 which shows a person running and then falling to the ground.



baton, another officer then slapping him in the face, a third officer hitting the protester with his elbow, and a fourth officer beating him with his shield.<sup>67</sup>

Amnesty International verified the timestamp and location of footage taken that day of one security officer in Duraz holding a Heckler & Koch MP-5 9mm submachine gun, and of other officers carrying shotguns, and the organization's weapons' expert identified the types of guns. It also verified the time stamp and location of other footage showing another officer carrying a firearm while raiding a house in Duraz.

**Mohamed Kazem Mohsen Zayn al-Deen, Mohammad Ali Ibrahim Ahmad al-Sari, Ahmad Jamil Ahmad Mohammad al-Asfoor, Ahmad Hassan Mohammad Hamdan and 17-year-old Mohamed Abdulnabi al-Ekri** were killed by security forces that day. Mohamed al-Deen died from injuries to his head caused by birdshot. According to one source he may have been trying to block security forces from entering Sheikh Isa Qassem's house when he was shot. Amnesty International has verified video footage taken on 23 May near Sheikh Isa Qassem's house of one man lying face down on the ground while at least 20 SSFC officers walk past his motionless body, including one who goes to pick something up from the ground about one metre from the body.<sup>68</sup> The same footage shows another man lying motionless on the floor with blood on his T-shirt, whilst SSFC officers walking past him. There does not appear to be any weapon near either of the two bodies. Amnesty International understands that these two men were among the five killed that day.



 ↑ SSFC officers walk past a motionless body in Duraz, 23 May 2017 © Private

Sources who were present that day told Amnesty International that those who were not severely injured did not go to hospital out of fear that they would be arrested on charges of participating in an “illegal gathering” and instead chose to receive assistance from first aid trained volunteers.

Amnesty International fully recognizes the Bahraini authorities' duty to uphold the safety of the public and ensure public order, and the challenges they face with policing situations that include disturbances and confrontations involving violence. At all times, however, including while policing demonstrations, Bahraini law enforcement officers should comply with international policing standards which govern the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials and ensure respect for the right to life and security of person.

Once an assembly is underway, individuals do not lose their right to freedom of assembly if there is sporadic or isolated violence or other unlawful behaviour by some within the crowd. In such a situation, law enforcement officers should act to protect the peaceful protesters rather than use the violent acts of a few as a pretext to restrict or impede the rights of the majority.<sup>69</sup>

67 YouTube, [مجزرة الدراز: نشر طاقبج بين الوثائق عن تدهيل الضرب على رجل من أعزل - 23 مايو 2017](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRgzZ2KgdXc&feature=youtu.be)، 6 June 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRgzZ2KgdXc&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRgzZ2KgdXc&feature=youtu.be)

68 YouTube, RevolutionBahrain, “مجزرة الدراز : 24 مايو 2017”, 24 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD2z9v3uNjA&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD2z9v3uNjA&feature=youtu.be)

69 Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, UN Doc. A/Human Rights Council/17/28 (2011) para. 42.

## DURAZ VILLAGE: ARBITRARY CURTAILMENT OF RIGHTS TO FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY, MOVEMENT AND INFORMATION AND EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

Between 20 June 2016 and 23 May 2017, a peaceful continuous sit-in took place outside the home of Sheikh Isa Qassem in Duraz in protest at the arbitrary revocation of his nationality and his prosecution. In response, the Ministry of Interior warned that “legal action would be taken”<sup>70</sup> and, during the same period, closed all roads entering Duraz, with the exception of two roads where checkpoints were set up, controlling access into the village. Persons without identification showing they were residents of Duraz were prohibited from entering, including those wanting to visit family or attend prayers there. Schoolchildren on school buses arriving in Duraz had to alight from the bus outside Duraz and walk to school in Duraz. For at least one month at the end of 2016, Amnesty International obtained information indicating that water companies were not allowed to deliver drinking water or food to businesses in the village. Shopkeepers had to travel to the outskirts of the village to collect their deliveries. Internet access was blocked every day from between 18:30 and 19:00 to 01:00, the usual time for protests. The NGO Bahrain Watch found that two Bahraini internet service providers, Batelco and Zain, had disabled their 4G and 3G networks in Duraz and turned off mobile data services on 2G networks and that Batelco had deliberately disrupted the fixed-line internet connections in Duraz between exactly 19:00 and 01:00 every night.<sup>71</sup> As the disruption is co-ordinated across several telecom companies, Bahrain Watch speculates that it may be the result of a Service Restriction Order issued by the Bahraini government.<sup>72</sup> According to residents, the block on the internet was not lifted on 23 May when the roads were reopened, and at the time of writing continues to be blocked from 18:30 to 01:30.

These restrictions on the right to freedom of movement and information have been disproportionate and punitive in their effect on all residents of Duraz and anyone wishing to travel there.

Security officers, reportedly including NSA members, used excessive and arbitrary force during clashes with protesters in the village between January and May 2017, resulting in the killing of five men and one child, and injuring hundreds in the village. Large quantities of tear gas were used in Duraz during that time period including some fired into a school. Amnesty International has verified footage of tear gas being shot into the Duraz Intermediate Boys School around 12:00 on 4 April.<sup>73</sup>

After 23 May, the roads were opened and travel in and out of Duraz was allowed. However, on 18 June 2017, security forces in dozens of armoured vehicles entered Duraz and that night set up checkpoints at all entrances to the village and in several other locations in the village. That evening, a bomb blast killed one police officer and injured two others. People are allowed to enter and leave Duraz but one resident told Amnesty International anyone could be stopped and have their car searched, especially young people. Security officials have since conducted house raids and arrested scores of residents, in particular young men.

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70 Twitter, Ministry of Interior, 20 June 2016, [twitter.com/moi\\_bahrain/status/744904710264590336](https://twitter.com/moi_bahrain/status/744904710264590336)

71 Bahrain Watch, “Time for some Internet Problems in Duraz”: Bahraini ISPs Impose Internet Curfew in Protest Village, 3 August 2016, [bahrainwatch.org/blog/2016/08/03/bahrain-internet-curfew/](http://bahrainwatch.org/blog/2016/08/03/bahrain-internet-curfew/)

72 Bahrain Watch, Internet shutdown has cost residents more than 100,000 Bahraini Dinar (about 265,000 USD), 10 November 2016, [bahrainwatch.org/blog/2016/11/10/duraz-internet-shutdown-has-cost-residents-more-than-100000-bahraini-dinars-about-265000-usd/](http://bahrainwatch.org/blog/2016/11/10/duraz-internet-shutdown-has-cost-residents-more-than-100000-bahraini-dinars-about-265000-usd/)

73 YouTube, BahrainMirrorTv, “مدرسة الدراز اعمى #حصار الدراز #البحرين”, 4 April 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJXFQEYd5Vk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJXFQEYd5Vk)

# 6. DISMANTLING OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION

**“Only now has the country grown confident enough of a muted response to its repression that it has moved to completely criminalize all opposition.”**

Ali al-Aswad, former al-Wefaq member of parliament, talking to Amnesty International in June 2017

## 6.1 RESTRICTIONS AND BANS ON OPPOSITION GROUPS

The Bahraini authorities have a long history of targeting political opposition groups, their leaders and members. However, it was not until June 2016 that the largest opposition group, al-Wefaq, was shut down.<sup>74</sup>

From 2014, the Minister of Justice was empowered by the Law on Political Associations to file court cases to close political associations for up to three months or, in the case of a “serious breach”, to close the association. The law fails to define what constitutes a “serious breach” leaving a level of ambiguity.

In parallel, an amendment made to the law in June 2016 prohibited members of a political society from engaging in religious preaching and its leaders from giving religious speeches, sermons or guidance. Such restrictions violate the right to freedom of association, and are in breach of Bahrain’s international obligations under Article 22 of the ICCPR.

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<sup>74</sup> The Minister of Justice previously filed several lawsuits against al-Wefaq and Waad, which were later lifted.

On 14 June 2016, the Minister of Justice filed a request to dissolve al-Wefaq for violating the Law on Political Associations. Two hours later, the High Administrative Court ordered the suspension of al-Wefaq's activities, the closure of its offices and headquarters and the seizure of its accounts and assets. On 21 June, al-Wefaq's lawyer was notified that the next court session had been moved forward from October to 23 June. On 17 July, the court ruled to dissolve al-Wefaq.



 Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society © Amnesty

The court ruling, seen by Amnesty International, declared that al-Wefaq “challeng[ed] the legitimacy of the constitution of Bahrain”, “supported violence by posting [on Twitter] pictures of terrorists holding sharp objects to depict them as peaceful protesters” and expressed its “solidarity” with its Secretary General, **Sheikh Ali Salman**.<sup>75</sup> The court also stated that al-Wefaq called “for foreign intervention” and “turned places of worship into political forums” and also referred to al-Wefaq’s call for a general boycott in January 2015 in protest at the opening of Sheikh Ali Salman’s trial.<sup>76</sup>

On 30 August, al-Wefaq filed an appeal before the High Civil Appeals Court, which rejected the request. Al-Wefaq then filed a final appeal before the Court of Cassation, which confirmed the original verdict to dissolve the association on 6 February 2017.

Encouraging peaceful protests and boycotts, expressing solidarity with its Secretary General, whom Amnesty International considers to be a prisoner of conscience, peacefully criticizing the Bahraini authorities and its constitutional legitimacy, calling for the intervention of the international community and using religious forums to give political messages are all legitimate forms of freedom of association and expression. The court judgement provides no clear reasoning to support the assertion that the Twitter posts in question, made on 12 and 14 February 2015 and viewed by Amnesty International, “supported” or incited violence.

On 6 March 2017, the Ministry of Justice filed a lawsuit against secular opposition group, Waad, for violating the Law on Political Associations. The court documents, seen by Amnesty International, charged Waad with “advocating violence, supporting terrorism and incitement to encourage crimes and lawlessness” on account of peaceful statements it had made since 2002 “delegitimizing the regime”, “systematically challenging” and “inciting disrespect” to the “legitimacy of the constitution” and “rule of law”. The Ministry of Justice accused Waad of “advocating and inciting terrorism” after it condemned the execution of three men on 15 January – referring to them as “martyrs” – and referred to other men who died or were killed by security forces in February in the same way. It also censured Waad for electing **Ebrahim Sharif**, a former prisoner of conscience, as a member of its Central Committee despite his having “lost his civil and political rights” when he was charged in 2011, and of supporting al-Wefaq and its Secretary General.

On 31 May, the High Administrative Court ordered the dissolution of Waad and the liquidation of its funds. Security officers surrounded its headquarters that evening to prevent members entering. Waad submitted an appeal against the verdict, which is scheduled to be heard before the High Civil Appeals Court on 11 October 2017.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> The court ruling is on file with Amnesty International.

<sup>76</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain ramps up assault on human rights by dissolving leading political group* (Index: MDE 11/4484/2016).

<sup>77</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain heading for ‘total suppression’ of human rights as secular opposition group banned* (Press Release, 31 May 2017).

The leaders of Waad and al-Wefaq have repeatedly stated their opposition to violence and commitment to peaceful means. Both parties also signed the National Declaration of Non-Violence Principles in 2012 and have repeatedly condemned calls for violence and acts of violence against security forces. The Bahraini authorities have presented no credible evidence to show that al-Wefaq and Waad are anything but peaceful opposition movements. Amnesty International considers the charges and allegations by the Ministry of Justice to be baseless and believes the decision to dissolve al-Wefaq and Waad to be an assault on freedom of expression and association.

## 6.2 IMPRISONMENT AND TARGETING OF OPPOSITION LEADERS AND MEMBERS

**“Every time I hear the doorbell ring, I expect the police handing me a summons. Or my car might get burnt.”**

Political activist who requested anonymity speaking to Amnesty International in May 2017

Bahrain has a long history of imprisoning leaders of opposition parties, including during the brutal crackdown in 2011, which saw several opposition activists arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. Some remain imprisoned as prisoners of conscience. More arrests followed the boycott by the main opposition groups of the November 2014 elections. Sheikh Ali Salman of al-Wefaq was arrested in December 2014 and **Fadhel Abbas Mahdi Mohamed**, then Secretary General of al-Wahdawi, was arrested in March 2015. Both of these men, whom Amnesty International considers to be prisoners of conscience, remain behind bars.<sup>78</sup> Other leading members of Waad and al-Wefaq have repeatedly been summoned for questioning or detained.

 ↓ *Fadhel Abbas Mahdi Mohamed © Private*



 ↓ *Sheikh Ali Salman © Private*



**Khalil al-Marzooq**, Deputy Secretary General of al-Wefaq, was summoned for interrogation on 7 August 2016 accused of participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz”. He was released that day after he had signed a document stating that he would not participate in any gathering. He was summoned again on 15 November and accused of participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz” but was not charged.

Ebrahim Sharif, former Secretary General of Waad, has been in and out of prison as a prisoner of conscience since 2011 and has been repeatedly summoned for questioning, charged or been under a travel ban. After being imprisoned in March 2011, he was released in June 2015. One month later he was arrested again after having given a speech

<sup>78</sup> Fadhel Abbas Mahdi Mohamed’s prison sentence was reduced to three years in October 2016. See: Amnesty International, *Activist’s prison sentence reduced to three years: Fadhel Abbas Mahdi Mohamed* (Index: MDE 11/5063/2016).

calling for peaceful reform, and was imprisoned until July 2016. In November he was charged in connection with an interview he gave to the Associated Press news agency; the case was later dropped. Ebrahim Sharif was interrogated a second time in November, in relation to a meeting he had with UK embassy staff, but he was not charged. On 20 March 2017, he was interrogated again and charged with “incitement to hatred against the regime” over a series of tweets, one of which included an Amnesty International social media graphic. This case has not yet been referred to trial.<sup>79</sup> He was summoned again on 24 April for interrogation by the prosecution unit for terrorism crimes, along with his wife **Farida Ghulam**, Vice Secretary of Waad’s Central Committee, and both were charged with participating in an “illegal gathering in Duraz”, which they denied doing.<sup>80</sup>



 ↑ Farida Ghulam and Ebrahim Sharif © Private

On 30 May 2016, the Court of Appeal increased Sheikh Ali Salman’s four-year prison sentence to nine years for peaceful speeches he made between 2012 and 2014.

Following a retrial ordered by the Court of Cassation, an appeal court upheld again on 12 December his nine-year prison sentence. On 3 April 2017, the Court of Cassation reduced his prison sentence again to four years.<sup>81</sup> While serving his sentence, Sheikh Ali Salman was summoned on 15 September 2016 for interrogation over an oral intervention delivered on his behalf during the 33<sup>rd</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2016.

In May 2017, the authorities stepped up their attempt to silence political activists or opposition party members by summoning, arbitrarily detaining and interrogating before releasing them. There are reports some were threatened or tortured and otherwise ill-treated.

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<sup>79</sup> Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Prominent opposition figure charged for tweets ‘inciting hatred’ against government* (Press Release, 20 March 2017).

<sup>80</sup> See section 4.1.6 documenting the same judicial harassment against others.

<sup>81</sup> Amnesty International, *Opposition leader’s sentenced reduced again: Sheikh Ali Salman* (Index: MDE 11/6068/2017).

# 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past few years, the Bahraini authorities have been backtracking on their promises of reform and improvements to the human rights situation in the country, but it was not until mid-2016 that the country saw a rapid deterioration of the situation leading to a full-blown human rights crisis.

Since June 2016, the authorities have dramatically stepped up their clampdown on freedom of expression by arresting, harassing, threatening, prosecuting and imprisoning peaceful critics, in particular human rights defenders and political activists, as well as lawyers, journalists and Shi'a clerics. Amnesty International's research concludes that the security forces have even resorted to torturing or otherwise ill-treating human rights defenders, both men and women, a practice that has not been prevalent in Bahrain since the height of the crackdown that followed the 2011 uprising. The authorities have also targeted Bahraini activists residing outside Bahrain, subjecting their families to interrogation and imprisonment in reprisal for their relatives' human rights activities or participation in protests abroad. This has culminated in a chilling effect on Bahrain's civil society, with few willing or able to speak out either because they have been imprisoned or now believe that the risks of imprisonment, torture or reprisals against their families are too high.

Peaceful assembly has been severely restricted. The authorities have charged or imprisoned scores of individuals for "illegal gathering". Security forces and the NSA have crushed mass protests using excessive force, resulting in six deaths and hundreds of injuries between January and May 2017. The authorities also dismantled the political opposition, imprisoned or otherwise targeted its leaders and members and closed the only independent newspaper in Bahrain.

The authorities have appeared more eager to prevent reporting of alleged violations than to investigate, address and stop them. They have blocked access to international human rights monitors. Despite the rapid deterioration, the authorities have maintained their rhetoric that human rights are upheld and protected. King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa even went as far as saying in May 2017, after the violent repression in Duraz, that "Bahrain is an oasis of security and stability" and "a beacon of... tolerance".<sup>82</sup>

The heightened crackdown should be understood within the wider geopolitical context. The election of President Trump and his new administration's apparent deprioritization of human rights in US foreign policy seems to have encouraged Bahrain's government to be bolder in its attempts to silence dissent. Two days after President Trump told King Hamad that the USA's relationship with Bahrain would no longer be strained, security forces violently repressed protests in Duraz. Further, the UK, which has heavily invested in Bahrain's reform programme and which has a "special" relationship with Bahrain, has looked to ensure closer trade ties with Gulf countries since the UK voted to leave the European Union. This goes some way to explaining the UK's weak response to the deterioration of human rights in Bahrain. This, coupled with the lack of bilateral criticism by fellow member states in UN forums, has emboldened Bahrain further.

Bahrain's authorities should take urgent steps to cease their crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as the reprisals against human rights defenders,

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<sup>82</sup> Bahrain News Agency, "HM King: Bahrain will remain oasis of peace", 29 May 2017, [www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/788105](http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/788105)

other peaceful critics and their relatives. The UK in particular needs to strengthen its response to the deteriorating situation, and publicly criticize any further human rights setbacks in the country. They and other countries with influence in Bahrain, such as the USA, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, all of which have political alliances and trade links with Bahrain, should pressure the authorities to reverse the downward human rights trends.

## 7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO BAHRAINI AUTHORITIES

Amnesty International urges the Bahraini authorities to take the following steps in a number of key areas.

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, PEACEFUL CRITICS AND ARBITRARY DETENTION

- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, that is all those imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.
- Immediately end the harassment and other targeting of human rights defenders, political activists, Shi'a clerics, journalists and other peaceful critics in Bahrain and the reprisals against family members of activists residing outside Bahrain.
- Repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, vaguely worded provisions of the Penal Code that criminalize the exercise of freedom of expression including Articles 134, 160, 165, 168, 214, 215, 216 and 310.
- Rescind the decision to close the *al-Wasat* newspaper and ensure that journalists are able to work without harassment or arbitrary interference, in accordance with the right to freedom of expression.

### FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

- Immediately lift the ban on all peaceful protests and ensure that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is protected.
- Remove restrictions on peaceful assembly that are inconsistent with international human rights law and standards, including those in the Law on Public Gatherings and Law 18 of 1973 and its amendments, in line with Bahrain's obligations under Articles 19 and 21 of the ICCPR.
- Repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, vaguely worded provisions of the Penal Code that criminalize the exercise of peaceful assembly, including Articles 178, 179 and 180 of the Penal Code.
- Ensure that those charged with criminal offences related to the clashes and disturbances during protests in Bahrain are tried in civilian courts in proceedings that respect fair trial standards and with no possibility of the death penalty, and that military courts have no jurisdiction over civilians in any circumstances.

### USE OF FORCE

- Instruct all police officers and other members of the security forces engaged in policing public gatherings and demonstrations or performing other law enforcement duties that they must comply at all times with relevant international standards, particularly the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. Clarify that any failure to do so will result in sanctions against them.

- Ensure that all members of security forces including the NSA do not use force unless other means are ineffective in achieving the legitimate objective. They must not use lethal force or firearms except as a last resort and when strictly necessary to protect themselves and others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury. Weapons deploying kinetic impact projectiles – including shotguns firing birdshot or rubber bullets – are inherently indiscriminate and their use should be prohibited. Chemical irritants, such as tear gas, should never be used in confined spaces and projectiles containing chemical irritants should never be fired directly at individuals.
- Require all members of the police and other security forces, including the NSA, who engaged in policing operations and arrests to wear and display their official identification at all times.
- In line with international standards, ensure prompt, thorough, impartial and independent investigations by independent bodies into all deaths and serious injuries believed to have been caused by law enforcement officers, both those that occurred between June 2016 and June 2017 and previous ones occurring since the beginning of the February 2011 protests. Ensure those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials.

## **TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT**

- Publicly order all security forces to abide the prohibition against torture and other ill-treatment.
- Remove the power of the NSA, which was responsible for systematic torture of detainees in the 2011 uprising and which has been accused by certain human rights defenders and political activists of torturing them in May 2017, to arrest and interrogate suspects, at least until it can be shown that safeguards that would prevent the torture and other ill-treatment of NSA detainees have been put in place.
- Conduct prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials and that their victims receive full reparation.
- Ensure that any detainee alleging torture or other ill-treatment is promptly examined by an independent doctor, and that all necessary treatment is provided to them.
- Amend the Penal Code so as to ensure that, where an allegation is made that incriminatory or other evidence was obtained by torture or other ill-treatment, courts require the prosecuting authorities seeking to admit that evidence to bear the burden of disproving the allegation of torture.
- Ensure that any statement which is established to have been made as a result of torture or other ill-treatment is not invoked as evidence in any proceedings, except against a person accused of torture as evidence that the statement was made.
- End immediately the use of prolonged solitary confinement, incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance and ensure that the families of those detained are informed promptly of the place of detention of their relatives, and any subsequent transfers to other places of detention, without delay.

## **FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION**

- Immediately rescind the decision to dissolve al-Wefaq and Waad.
- Remove restrictions on freedom of association that are inconsistent with international human rights law, including those in the Law on Political Associations (Law 26 of 2005 and its amendments), in line with Bahrain's obligations under Article 22 of the ICCPR.

## **ARBITRARY NATIONALITY REVOCATION AND FORCED EXPULSION**

- Halt any planned forced expulsion of Bahrainis and allow those who have been forcibly expelled to return to Bahrain.
- End the practice of arbitrary deprivation of nationality, including all cases that would render individuals stateless. Reinstatement of the Bahraini nationality of all those arbitrarily deprived of nationality and of anyone who has been rendered stateless.

## **REPARATION FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

- Provide all victims of human rights violations and their families full reparation including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.
- Issue a formal apology at the highest level of the state to victims of human rights violations.

## **ACCESS TO BAHRAIN**

- As a matter of urgency allow the Special Rapporteurs on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, on the situation of human rights defenders, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, as well as international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, to visit Bahrain at their earliest convenience.

## **7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

Amnesty International urges states within the international community that have influence in Bahrain, in particular France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, to:

- Urge the authorities to implement the recommendations in this report;
- Publicly and privately condemn the crackdown in Bahrain and call for the release of prisoners of conscience and the protection of all human rights defenders and their relatives.

Amnesty International also urges states supplying equipment to Bahrain that could be used for internal repression, including firearms, less lethal equipment and armoured vehicles, to take action. Belgium, Brazil, Cyprus, France, Italy, Turkey, the UAE and USA have all supplied equipment to Bahrain since 2014. They should cease transfers to Bahraini law enforcement agencies until the Bahraini authorities allow prompt, independent and impartial investigations into the allegations of abusive or arbitrary use of force and demonstrate a commitment to their use in accordance with international standards.

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL  
IS A GLOBAL MOVEMENT  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.  
WHEN INJUSTICE HAPPENS  
TO ONE PERSON, IT  
MATTERS TO US ALL.**

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# 'NO ONE CAN PROTECT YOU'

## BAHRAIN'S YEAR OF CRUSHING DISSENT

Since June 2016, Bahrain has rapidly deteriorated into a full-blown human rights crisis. The authorities have dramatically stepped up their clampdown on freedom of expression. They have subjected over 160 peaceful critics to arrest, prosecution and imprisonment, as well as other forms of harassments. Those particularly targeted have been human rights defenders and political activists, as well as lawyers, journalists and Shi'a clerics. Credible reports indicate that security forces have subjected several of them to torture or other ill-treatment in custody. The authorities have also targeted Bahraini activists residing outside Bahrain, subjecting their families to interrogation and prosecution in reprisal for their relatives' human rights activities or participation in protests abroad.

Security forces, in particular the National Security Agency, have used violent and excessive force against peaceful protesters, killing five men and a child and injuring hundreds of others. By June 2017, opposition groups and independent media had been banned and prominent human rights defenders and political leaders were behind bars. This has culminated in a chilling effect on Bahrain's civil society, with very few willing or able to speak out either because they have been imprisoned or out of fear for reprisals on them or their families.