



**human rights *first***

American ideals. Universal values.

BLUEPRINT

# How to Reverse Five Years of Failure on Bahrain

**BLUEPRINT FOR U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY**

**February 2016**

# Human Rights First

## American ideals. Universal values.

On human rights, the United States must be a beacon. Activists fighting for freedom around the globe continue to look to us for inspiration and count on us for support. Upholding human rights is not only a moral obligation; it's a vital national interest. America is strongest when our policies and actions match our values.

Human Rights First is an independent advocacy and action organization that challenges America to live up to its ideals. We believe American leadership is essential in the struggle for human rights so we press the U.S. government and private companies to respect human rights and the rule of law. When they don't, we step in to demand reform, accountability and justice. Around the world, we work where we can best harness American influence to secure core freedoms.

We know that it is not enough to expose and protest injustice, so we create the political environment and policy solutions necessary to ensure consistent respect for human rights. Whether we are protecting refugees, combating torture, or defending persecuted minorities, we focus not on making a point, but on making a difference. For over 30 years, we've built bipartisan coalitions and teamed up with frontline activists and lawyers to tackle issues that demand American leadership.

*Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in New York and Washington D.C. To maintain our independence, we accept no government funding.*

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*“[M]ass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain’s citizens, and such steps will not make legitimate calls for reform go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can’t have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail.”*

– President Barack Obama, May 19, 2011

# Bahrain Timeline 2010–2016

**COLOR KEY:** ■ **EVENTS IN BAHRAIN** ■ **HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST REPORTS** ■ **U.S. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS/STATEMENTS**

**2010**

**2011**

**DECEMBER 3**



Secretary Clinton after meeting with Bahrain Foreign Minister in Manama: "I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain's walking on."

**FEBRUARY 14–16:** Mass protests break out in Bahrain, voicing a range of grievances including political and socio-economic concerns. Police open fire killing two protestors.

**FEBRUARY 17:** Police clear the Pearl Roundabout. Hundreds of protestors are injured and three are killed by police using shotguns. Al Wefaq, the political society with the largest amount of seats in Parliament, announces it will suspend its participation in Parliament.

**FEBRUARY 18–MAY 30:** King Hamad declares a three month state of emergency. Hundreds of peaceful dissidents, opposition leaders, and medics are arrested and many tortured.

**MARCH 14:** The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) agrees to send troops at the request of the Bahraini Government. Saudi Arabian troops arrive and are joined by security forces from the UAE.

**MARCH 16:** Secretary Clinton: "We find what's happening in Bahrain alarming. We think that there is no security answer to the aspirations and demands of the demonstrators."

**MARCH 18:** Government forces demolish the Pearl Roundabout Monument.

**APRIL 1–11:** At least four individuals are tortured to death while in custody.

**APRIL 4–OCTOBER:** Military trials begin for civilians who participated in the uprisings. Hundreds of Bahrainis are tried and sentenced in these "National Safety Courts."

**APRIL–MAY:** The government destroys dozens of Shi'a mosques and religious sites.

**MAY:** *Bahrain: Speaking Softly*

**MAY 19:** President Obama: "And for this season of change to succeed, Coptic Christians must have the right to worship freely in Cairo, just as Shia must never have their mosques destroyed in Bahrain... The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail."

**JUNE 22:** Thirteen leading opposition figures, rights activists, bloggers, and Shi'a clerics known as the "Bahrain 13" are convicted on charges of terrorism by a military court.

**JUNE 29:** King Hamad establishes an Independent Commission chaired by international lawyer Cherif Bassiouni to investigate and report on the events which occurred earlier in the year.

**JULY:** *Bahrain: A Tortuous Process*

**SEPTEMBER 14:** The Pentagon approves a proposed \$53 million arms sale for Bahrain.

**SEPTEMBER 24–OCTOBER 1:** Parliamentary elections held to replace the seats vacated by Al-Wefaq. Al-Wefaq and the rest of the opposition societies boycott the election.

**SEPTEMBER 29:** Twenty Bahraini medical professionals arrested on felony charges after treating protestors at the Salmaniya Medical Complex are handed jail terms of up to twenty years on charges of anti-government activity.

**SEPTEMBER 29:** State Department: "We are deeply disturbed by the sentencing today of 20 medical professionals by the National Safety Court in Bahrain."

**OCTOBER 12–13:** Members of Congress including Senators Wyden, Casey, Durbin, Menendez, Cardin, and Rubio urge Secretary Clinton to suspend the \$53 million arms deal to Bahrain.

**NOVEMBER:** The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report is released confirming the torture of detainees, the lethal force by public security forces on civilians, and the lack of accountability of officials within the security system.

**NOVEMBER 23:** Secretary Clinton: "We are deeply concerned about the abuses identified in the [BICI] report, and urge the Government and all elements of Bahraini society to address them in a prompt and systematic manner."



## 2012

**FEBRUARY:** *Bahrain: The Gathering Storm*

**MAY 5**



Authorities arrest leading human rights activist Nabeel Rajab and detain him for 24 days.

**MAY:** *Bahrain's Reforms—No Backdown on Crackdown*

**MAY 11**



U.S. senior administration officials: "Now in light of our own U.S. national security interests, the United States has decided, as the press statement noted, to release additional items and services for the Bahraini Defense Forces, Bahrain's Coast Guard, and Bahrain's National Guard."

**JUNE 14:** Bahraini court confirms the convictions against eleven of the twenty medics arrested on felony charges and acquits nine.

**JULY 7–DECEMBER:** Authorities re-arrest Nabeel Rajab. Rajab is tried, retried, and receives two years in prison.

**AUGUST:** *Human Rights First Lantos Testimony on Bahrain*

**AUGUST 8:** DRL Assistant Secretary Michael H. Posner testimony at the Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights: "We are concerned that more than a year after the release of the BICI report, we see reports of continuing reprisals against Bahraini citizens who attempt to exercise their universal rights to free expression and assembly."

**SEPTEMBER 4:** State Department: "We are deeply troubled by today's developments in which an appeals court upheld the vast majority of convictions and sentences of 13 Bahraini activists."

**SEPTEMBER 28:** A military appeals court upholds the convictions for the Bahrain 13.

**NOVEMBER 9:** State Department spokesperson: "We welcome the 'Declaration of Principles of Nonviolence' issued by six opposition political societies in Bahrain on November 7... We urge the government and these six political societies to engage seriously and practically about ways to allow for the resumption of peaceful demonstrations as soon as possible."

## 2013

**FEBRUARY 10:** A new round of "reconciliation talks" begins, excluding key opposition figures still in prison.

**AUGUST:** State Department releases human rights report on Bahrain, simultaneously noting a failure to implement most of the recommendations while praising the King for "the commendable progress already underway."

**SEPTEMBER 18:** Khalil Marzooq, a leading figure in the opposition Al Wefaq political movement, is arrested on charges of inciting terrorism.

**NOVEMBER:** *Plan B for Bahrain: What the United States Government Should Do Next*

## 2014

**JULY 7**



State Department: "The U.S. is deeply concerned by the Government of the Kingdom of Bahrain's decision to demand the immediate departure of Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, from the country."

**AUGUST:** Congressman Jim McGovern refused entry to Bahrain.

**OCTOBER–NOVEMBER:** Authorities arrest Nabeel Rajab for online comments and detain him for one month.

**NOVEMBER:** A coalition of Bahrain's opposition parties, including Al-Wefaq, boycott the country's parliamentary elections, citing the country's failure to reform and disappointment with its national dialogue.

**DECEMBER 4:** Activist Zainab Al-Khawaja is sentenced to three years in prison for peaceful dissent.

**DECEMBER 28:** General Secretary of Al Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman, is arrested for speech-related offenses.

## 2015

**JANUARY 20:**

Court sentences Nabeel Rajab to 6 months in prison for online comments made in 2014.

**FEBRUARY:** *How to Bring Stability to Bahrain*

**JUNE 16:** Sheikh Ali Salman is sentenced to four years in prison.

**JUNE 19:** After four years in prison, activist and former leader of the secular opposition society Wa'ad, Ibrahim Sharif, is released.

**JUNE 29:** State Department Spokesperson John Kirby: "The Administration has decided to lift the holds on security assistance to the Bahrain Defense Force and National Guard... The government of Bahrain has made some meaningful progress on human rights reforms and reconciliation."

**JULY 12**

Ibrahim Sharif is rearrested three weeks



after his release from prison.

**AUGUST 6:** Senators Ron Wyden and Marco Rubio introduce S.2009, the BICI Accountability Act. The bill prohibits the selling or transferring to Bahrain of specified weapons and crowd control items until Bahrain implements all 26 recommendations set forth in the 2011 BICI report.

**SEPTEMBER 8:** Representatives Jim McGovern, Joe Pitts, and Hank Johnson introduce the House version of the BICI Accountability Act, H.R.3445.

**NOVEMBER:** *Recommendations to the U.S. Government on Bahrain*

## 2016

**JANUARY 12:**

Triggered by the global drop in oil price, the Bahraini government cuts subsidies on gasoline, raising the price by 60%.

**FEBRUARY:**

Increase in raids and arrests prior to the five-year anniversary of February 14th.



## Introduction

On the fifth anniversary of the mass protests in Bahrain that threatened to bring down the country's autocratic regime, Bahrainis continue to suffer severe repression and political instability. Although the scale of mass arrests and torture the government used to suppress the uprising in March, April, and May of 2011 has diminished, and there have been some largely cosmetic reforms introduced since then, arbitrary arrests and torture in custody continue. Leading human rights activists and peaceful opposition leaders who were able to work relatively unimpeded since 2011 are now in jail, forced into exile, or facing trumped-up charges.

The leading civil society and nonviolent political opposition figures arrested and tortured in 2011 remain in prison and there seems to be no prospect of any political dialogue between the government and opposition groups. The protests have not stopped, and a minority have taken on a violent edge, with over a dozen policemen killed since 2011. The country's prisons are bulging with political detainees, many of whom were sentenced in mass trials after an unfair judicial process.

This blueprint draws on dozens of interviews with Bahraini human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, academics, families of detainees, lawyers, U.S. government officials, and others. Despite repeated requests for permission to access Bahrain, Human Rights First has been denied entry to the country since 2012. This report examines conditions in Bahrain, the strengths and shortcomings of the U.S. response, and potential opportunities for the U.S. government to support civil society and strengthen respect for human rights.

Though the smallest country in the Middle East, Bahrain exemplifies several of the major challenges for U.S. policy in the region. 2016 promises to be a defining year as a series of issues converge to threaten Bahrain, including: sectarian tensions exploited by ISIL and other Sunni extremists and by Shi'a-dominated Iran; economic vulnerability linked to sharply falling oil prices; corruption and political instability; a lack of reform leaving the root grievances of the large scale public protests unresolved; and U.S. government support for an authoritarian status quo seen as the best way of protecting major military investments—in Bahrain's case, the U.S. Naval Fifth Fleet base.

This year will also be important as President Obama shapes his legacy in the Middle East.

In 2009, at the start of his presidency, he delivered a message of hope in Cairo: "America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere."

Much has changed in the intervening years. In his speech to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2015, President Obama opted for analysis rather than exhortation, noting, "repression cannot forge the social cohesion for nations to succeed. The history of the last two decades proves that in today's world, dictatorships are unstable. The strongmen of today become the spark of revolution

tomorrow.” He continued: “I believe a government that suppresses peaceful dissent is not showing strength; it is showing weakness and it is showing fear. History shows that regimes who fear their own people will eventually crumble, but strong institutions built on the consent of the governed endure long after any one individual is gone.”

Yet the U.S. government’s handling of the enduring crisis in Bahrain has too often failed to draw obvious conclusions from the administration’s own analysis of the detrimental impact of human rights violations on stability and progress. As a result, in the absence of actions and policies that would suggest the contrary, many in Bahrain and across the region view the Obama Administration as supportive of the repressive leadership in Manama. This support for the dictatorship is rendering Bahrain less stable, undermining U.S. efforts to prevent violent extremism, and further damaging Washington’s credibility in the region.

This blueprint follows a series of recent Human Rights First reports and testimony on Bahrain since the outbreak of mass protests in February 2011, including *Recommendations to the U.S. Government on Bahrain*, November 2015; *How to Bring Stability to Bahrain*, February 2015; *Plan B for Bahrain What the United States Government Should Do Next*, November 2013; *Human Rights First Lantos Testimony on Bahrain*, August 2012; *Bahrain’s Reforms—No Backdown on Crackdown*, May 2012; *Bahrain: The Gathering Storm*, February 2012; *Bahrain: A Tortuous Process*, July 2011; and *Bahrain: Speaking Softly*, May 2011.

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## Human Rights Crisis in Bahrain Continues

Almost daily reports of mass arrests, often in the name of countering terrorism, continue to emerge from Bahrain. So do reports of torture in custody. Leading human rights defenders including Abdulhadi al Khawaja and Naji Fateel are in prison. Others, including Maryam al Khawaja, Hussain Jawad, and Said Yousif Almuhaftah, have been forced into exile. Others in Bahrain, including Zainab Al Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, have charges against them and are unable to leave the country.

Leading civil society figures, including the leader of the Bahrain Teachers Association, Mahdi Abu Deeb, are also in prison. So too are medics Dr. Ali Alekry and Dr. Saeed Samahiji. Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of the largest political group, al-Wefaq, is in prison too, as is Ibrahim Sharif, leader of the secular liberal Wa’ad political group. He was released briefly in June 2015 before being rearrested some weeks later. All of those mentioned—and there are many more—have been harassed, charged, or jailed on speech-related charges.

Meanwhile, the Bahraini government continues to speak of reform and make token gestures to that end. A police code of conduct has been introduced, ombudsman offices have been set up, and some junior officers have been prosecuted for some of the torture that took place in custody in 2011. There has been some redistricting of electoral boundaries and minor reforms to how parliament works.

But the fundamental problems remain: an unelected ruling family controls the government; no senior official has been brought to account

for torture or killings since 2011; key peaceful political leaders and human rights activists remain in jail on politically motivated charges and without fair trials; members of civil society are harassed and intimidated across a number of fronts; peaceful political protests and other forms of dissent are almost never tolerated; political activists are among hundreds of people who have had their nationality stripped since 2012; and there has been a rise in the number of death sentences passed in recent years, leaving 10 men currently on Bahrain's death row. A much-vaunted national political dialogue that began in mid-2011 produced no meaningful results and appears dead. Local human rights organization the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) reported that 237 children under the age of 18 were detained in the year 2015.

There has recently been a sharp rise in sectarianism, fueled partly by government-loyal media, leading to increased polarization in Bahraini society between Sunni and Shi'a communities. The country's security forces remain overwhelmingly drawn from the Sunni sect, many of whom have recently arrived from other countries. Human Rights First has spoken to many people who report being attacked in their homes, including with tear gas, by Bahrain's security forces.

As the anniversary of the February 14, 2011 protests approaches there is increasing tension in the country. A fresh wave of protests broke out in Bahrain in reaction to Saudi Arabia's execution of leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr on January 2. On January 25, a Bahrain court sentenced 57 men to 15-year jail terms for their alleged part in disturbances in the country's notorious Jaw Prison in March 2015.

In the run-up to February 14 there is a significant security presence on the streets, local activists told Human Rights First. One who asked not to be identified for fear of arrest told Human Rights First in early February, "An increase in raids and arrests has begun in several villages these past few days, in Bani Jamra and Sanabis, in Duraz and Aali. The police come looking for young men."

Previous anniversaries of February 14 witnessed preemptive arrests and restrictions on assembly as the government fears protests to mark the 2011 demonstrations. One local human rights group told Human Rights First that 29 people, including some children, were arrested from various villages in the last week of January this year.

A human rights defender in Bahrain who asked not to be named in case of reprisals told Human Rights First that in early February police cars and tanks appeared at major intersections and in Shi'a villages. "I can't believe they are there," she said. "A tank taking up the whole narrow street in Budiya village."

Bahrain's wholesale denial of the right to assembly, and repression of freedom of association and freedom of expression, reduces space for political discussion and weakens the moderate, nonviolent critics essential for open, responsive governance. This vacuum provides fertile ground for violent extremism to take root and flourish. With few checks on the actions of state authorities, the victims of corruption, incompetence, or abuse have no redress—fueling grievances that can be exploited by violent extremists.



## U.S. Government Response

Washington's immediate response to the outbreak of the crisis in 2011 was a series of mixed messages to the government of Bahrain. The United States government scurried to cope with the repercussions of popular uprisings elsewhere in the region as its long-term repressive allies were overthrown by street protests, including President Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The Obama Administration's signals to Bahrain were as confused as they had been to Egypt, simultaneously supporting the right of peaceful protest and the repressive regime that was threatened by them. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted, "Bahrain, as the home base for the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf, was an exceptionally complicated case for us."

Then—Secretary of Defense Bob Gates said he immediately urged the King of Bahrain to "lift constraints on the media as well as on civil society and human rights groups; ... move forward in integrating the Shi'a into the security services and the Bahrain defense force; and promote basic civil rights in the social, media and political arenas." He urged, "Baby steps won't do... There can be no return to the status quo ante..."

Secretary Clinton's response on February 17, 2011 to Bahrain's crackdown on protestors was that "the United States strongly opposes the use of violence and strongly supports reform that moves toward democratic institution building and economic openness. I called my counterpart in Bahrain this morning and directly conveyed our deep concerns about the actions of the security forces... We believe that all people have universal rights, including the right

to peaceful assembly. And Bahrain is a friend and an ally, and has been for many years. And while all governments have a responsibility to provide citizens with security and stability, we call on restraint. We call on restraint from the government to keep its commitment to hold accountable those who have utilized excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, and we urge a return to a process that will result in real meaningful changes for the people there." She was, as she explained later, trying "to walk and chew gum at the same time" on Bahrain, meaning somehow attempting to balance the apparent contradictions of encouraging reform while supporting a dictatorship uninterested in sharing power.

Throughout much of 2011 the Obama Administration's public messaging was along these lines—offering strong political support for a "Major Non-NATO ally" while voicing concern at the torture and jailing of political dissidents, medics, and others.

The administration's high-water mark for public support for reform came in May 2011, when the president himself castigated Bahrain publicly in a speech, declaring "mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens, and such steps will not make legitimate calls for reform go away. The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail."

The peaceful opposition figures Obama referred to in his speech almost five years ago are all still in jail, and have been joined by others since, notably Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of the largest opposition group, al-Wefaq. Neither President Obama nor any other senior administration official have since publicly repeated this call for jailed opposition leaders to be released to join

political talks. Washington has retreated since 2011 from such public criticism of the regime despite a steadily worsening human rights and political crisis.

The Bahraini government appointed the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to investigate the events surrounding the mass protests. When BICI reported its findings and recommendations in November 2011, Secretary Clinton applauded them: “We are deeply concerned about the abuses identified in the report, and urge the Government and all elements of Bahraini society to address them in a prompt and systematic manner. The Government of Bahrain has committed to establish a follow-on committee to implement the report’s recommendations, and we urge full and expeditious implementation of these recommendations. The United States will continue to promote the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all of Bahrain’s citizens. We believe the BICI report offers a historic opportunity for all Bahrainis to participate in a healing process that will address long-standing grievances and move the nation onto a path of genuine, sustained reform.”

But in what would become a wearily familiar recitation about Bahrain’s foot-dragging approach to reform, the United States voiced disappointment at the slow pace of implementation of the BICI recommendations the following year.

“We are concerned that more than a year after the release of the BICI report, we see reports of continuing reprisals against Bahraini citizens who attempt to exercise their universal rights to free expression and assembly,” said the State Department. “Permits for organized demonstrations are often denied. Over the past month, Bahrain has stopped granting permits for organized demonstrations in central Manama,

and has announced a study to identify suitable locations for protests away from the downtown area.”

Yet the criticism turned out to be little more than handwringing in the face of Bahrain’s refusal to reform, and the Obama Administration’s reluctance to press it further publicly.

By September 2013 President Obama had changed course on his stated priorities of promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East, and set out his reasoning in his address to the United Nations General Assembly. His new priorities were the defense of other U.S. national interests, like energy security, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and countering terrorism. Promoting human rights and political reform, while still important, were no longer a top priority. Crucially, they became objectives that the United States would not pursue unilaterally.

While it is preferable that the United States should work multilaterally to achieve its foreign policy goals in almost all cases, the explicit demotion of human rights and democratic reform represented a shift. President Obama even conceded the need to “work with governments that do not meet the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests.”

The administration cannot escape the fact that this decision to sometimes overlook or downplay human rights concerns in deference to “core” interests contradicts the promises it made in early 2011, when President Obama noted the insufficiency of the “narrow pursuit” of core interests, and set the United States firmly against the unsustainable status quo of societies “held together by fear and repression.”

Bahrain is governed today by fear and repression, but it is repression that the Obama Administration has decided to support.

This shifting policy underlies the mixed messages on human rights and democracy that the administration has communicated over the last five years.

Privately, the Obama Administration has adopted an approach to encourage the reputedly reform wing of the ruling family, centered around Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa. Washington views the crown prince as an ally for reform and a natural partner in promoting U.S. interests, and has supported him in an effort to push the regime towards democracy and away from the repressive direction of the hardliners.

The logic of this approach is undermined by a lack of results. Former Defense Secretary Gates concluded that although the crown prince was “the voice of reason... he was powerless.”

And the crown prince has proved a far from reliable ally for Washington. In 2013 he joined the vilification of U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Thomas Krajeski, and in 2014 led a Bahraini government delegation to meet President Putin in the Kremlin at a time when the United States was trying to isolate President Putin over Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Washington’s cautious efforts in encouraging its military ally to bring stability by political reform and establishing the rule of law have generally been met with a hostile response or no response at all. In July 2014 the Bahraini government expelled Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski from the country after he met with opposition leaders. He was only able to return in December 2014.

And in August 2014 the Bahraini government denied permission for Congressman James McGovern (D-MA) to visit Bahrain with Human Rights First. For several years, U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Thomas Krajeski was regularly criticized by the pro-government press and Bahrain’s cabinet for his comments calling for reform.

By June 2015 the State Department announced it was lifting the restrictions on military sales to the Bahraini government, restrictions imposed at the end of 2011 in response to the regime’s human rights violations. The State Department cited “meaningful progress on human rights reforms and reconciliation. This includes implementation of many key recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, and the recent release of a number of prisoners charged with crimes related to their political association and expression.”

One of the prisoners released just before the lifting of the restrictions, political leader Ibrahim Sharif, was rearrested shortly after.

Some members of Congress, alarmed by the dangerously slow pace of change in Bahrain, introduced bipartisan legislation in August 2015 to reimpose the ban on the sale of small arms to Bahrain. S.2009, introduced by Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Ron Wyden (D-WA), would ban the sale of small arms and ammunition to Bahrain until the government fully implements all 26 recommendations made by the BICI. Representatives Joe Pitts (R-PA), Jim McGovern (D-MA), and Hank Johnson (D-GA) introduced the counterpart in the House (H.R.3445).

This is a significant step, sending the right message to the Bahraini government that U.S. political and military support cannot be unconditional, but depends on adopting meaningful reform.

## Inadequate Support for Human Rights Defenders

Human rights activists in Bahrain have long complained of a lack of U.S. government coherence when it comes to protecting and promoting civil societies abroad—with some parts of the administration supplying weapons and political support to the Bahrain dictatorship that has cracked down on civil society, and other parts of the U.S. government speaking out against the repression.

Several human rights defenders told Human Rights First they wanted more public statements of support from Washington, and that when the U.S. Embassy in Manama sends a trial observer to court hearings, the United States should release a public statement commenting on whether the process reaches acceptable international legal standards.

In May 2013, the State Department issued a document entitled “U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders,” which made headway in addressing concerns of inconsistent engagement by embassies with civil society and in setting realistic expectations about what the United States can and cannot do to assist human rights defenders. It is a useful document for diplomats and civil society in outlining the sorts of actions U.S. officials can take to support activists. But almost three years later, it has still not been translated into Arabic, the U.S. Embassy in Manama has not posted it on its website, and few Bahraini human rights defenders have even heard of it.

The presidential memorandum on “Deepening U.S. Government Efforts to Collaborate with and Strengthen Civil Society,” issued in September 2014, was another welcome measure, but its

effect on activists’ lived experience in Bahrain has been limited. The administration’s rhetorical commitment to help civil society, especially those in repressive countries, has not translated into engagement with Bahraini civil society by other parts of the U.S. government beyond the traditional elements in the State Department. The Department of Defense has not demonstrated its shared responsibility for challenging undue restrictions on civil society and continues to issue statements praising the military partnership between Bahrain and the United States.

## Recommendations

The United States should not surrender its values and further tarnish its international reputation as a global leader on human rights in its relationship with a key regional partner and longtime ally. U.S. efforts should be focused on using the significant leverage it still has, and on developing further avenues of influence in a critical relationship for U.S. interests in the region.

As part of its bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagement on Bahrain, the U.S. government should implement the following recommendations:

- The U.S. government should reaffirm, via public statements from senior officials, President Obama’s call to Bahrain in May 2011 that “The only way forward is for the government and the opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can’t have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail.”

- The White House should convene all relevant interagency officials to conduct a thorough review of the bilateral relationship with Bahrain, in consultation with international and Bahraini civil society organizations. This review should examine the full range of U.S. engagement with and influence on Bahrain—including bilateral military cooperation and arms sales, security assistance and training, as well as the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement, and the presidential memorandum on support for civil society, and targeted sanctions.
- The U.S. Ambassador should publicly state whether or not trials of political opponents and human rights activists observed by U.S. government officials meet international standards.
- The State Department should promote its March 2013 guidelines entitled “U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders,” and all relevant agencies should promote the September 2014 presidential directive on supporting civil society. They should be featured in Arabic and English on the U.S. Embassy website in Bahrain.
- The White House and Defense Department should withhold further arms sales and transfers to the police and military, contingent on human rights progress, starting with a request for the current representation levels of Shi’as in the police and military to be made publicly available along with recruitment and promotion targets for under-represented groups.
- Congress should support S.2009 and H.R.3445, a bipartisan bill that would ban the sale of small arms and ammunition to Bahrain until the government fully implements all 26 recommendations made by the 2011 Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).
- The United States, through the Departments of State, Defense, and/or Justice, should offer technical support and training in diversifying the security services.
- The State Department should press to reduce the influence of those responsible for human rights violations inside and outside of the government. It should consider imposing visa bans and freezing assets of those it believes guilty of human rights violations.
- The State Department should publicly call for international media and international human rights organizations to be afforded meaningful access to Bahrain.

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## Conclusion

Five years after Bahrain’s popular uprising began, the country’s human rights situation has worsened, and there has been no progress towards democracy. It is governed by a repressive regime that the Obama Administration has decided to support even though the current political conditions harm not only Bahraini but also U.S. interests. The U.S. government needs to fundamentally shift its approach and put human rights at the core of its relationship with Bahrain. ■





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