

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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HRW.org

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Dear High Representative Mogherini,

I write to urge you to take the opportunity of the GCC-EU Ministerial Meeting on May 24 in Doha to press the Gulf Cooperation Council states on key human rights issues, in particular the crackdown on freedom of expression and association that has resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of activists and dissidents, and that you publicly press for their immediate and unconditional release.

In June 2014, EU Foreign Ministers committed to “intensify” the EU’s “political and material support to human rights defenders and step up its efforts against all form of reprisals.” Such efforts are particularly required in relation to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where the authorities’ aggressive repression of civil society has led to widespread rights violations that risk undermining the stability of the region.

GCC governments have responded to growing citizen use of social media as a tool to speak their minds by resorting to repressive laws and in some cases by enacting new, more draconian, ones. As a result, the jails of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in particular, now contain many men and women whose only offense was to peacefully demand political reform or criticize their government. Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman have also assumed greater powers to strip dissidents of their citizenship. GCC governments have taken these steps in the name of national security, despite overwhelming evidence that these laws affect ordinary citizens rather than those suspected of terrorism offences.

In Bahrain, the rights situation continues to deteriorate. While some EU member states and Members of the European Parliament have called for the immediate and unconditional release of prominent rights activist Nabeel Rajab, the EU has yet to make a specific call for his release or that of 13 other high-profile activists –including two EU citizens Abdulhadi al-Khawaja (Danish) and Shaikh Mohamed Habib Almuqdad (Swedish) – serving long-term, including life, prison sentences on charges that relate solely to their peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association.

In Saudi Arabia, the Interior Ministry issued a counterterrorism regulation in 2014 that designates certain groups as terrorist organizations and contains other provisions that proscribe acts such as “calling for atheist thought,” throw[ing] away loyalty to the country’s rulers,” “contact or correspondence with any groups, currents [of thought], or individuals hostile to the kingdom,” and participating in or calling for protests or demonstrations. Human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair and blogger Raif Badawi are among those serving lengthy prison sentences for their criticism of the authorities.

In the United Arab Emirates, which claims to be a world leader in combating extremist ideologies, a 2014 counter-terrorism law has empowered the country’s courts to impose death sentences for existing offenses used to prosecute peaceful critics of the government and people they consider opposed to Islamic principles. If the law had been in force in 2013, it could have been used to execute human rights lawyers Mohamed al-Roken and Mohamed al-Mansoori; in the event, they

and 67 other defendants received prison sentences after a court convicted them of attempting to overthrow the state in a mass trial undermined by due process violations and credible allegations that some defendants were tortured.

These are only some of the many examples of GCC countries using national security and counterterrorism laws to stifle dissent. Worryingly, five of the six GCC member countries have also ratified the November 2012 GCC Security Agreement, which includes a vaguely worded article that would suppress “interference in the domestic affairs” of other GCC countries, which could be used to criminalize criticism of GCC countries or rulers. Another provision provides for sharing citizens’ and residents’ personal data between GCC states at the discretion of GCC Interior Ministry officials.

Since 2011, GCC governments have also investigated and prosecuted their citizens for criticizing other GCC states or their rulers. A Kuwaiti appeals court, for example, on October 28, 2013 upheld a 10-year prison sentence against a local blogger for comments on Twitter that the court determined insulted, among others, the kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia’s terrorism court on June 24, 2013 convicted seven government critics and sentenced them to prison for allegedly inciting protests and harming public order after they posted commentary on Facebook; four also faced the charge of “supporting those who are called ‘revolutionaries of Bahrain’ and calling for solidarity with them and challenging the [GCC] Peninsula Shield forces stationed there.”

Following the adoption of the GCC Security Agreement by GCC states at their December 2012 Summit in Manama, GCC Secretary-General Abdullatif Al-Zayani acknowledged that the agreement is intended to curb domestic dissent as well as terrorism and other crime. He said: “The security pact will empower each GCC country to take legal action, based on its own legislation, against citizens or residents or organized groups that are linked to crime, terrorism, or dissension...”

When adopting the EU’s Strategic Framework for Human Rights and Democracy in June 2012, EU foreign ministers pledged that the EU will continue “to throw its full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy and human rights throughout the world,” but the EU and its member states have yet to express a strong, collective response to the GCC states’ increasing disregard for their citizens’ rights to free expression, association, peaceful assembly, and nationality, and have failed to embark on a substantive strategy to press for and ensure releases of imprisoned human rights defenders

The EU needs to move beyond general expressions of support for courageous human rights activists and translate its stated commitments to human rights and those who defend them into concrete action and policy demands. In this spirit, we call on you to use the GCC-EU Ministerial Meeting to press GCC states to release, immediately and unconditionally, all those wrongfully imprisoned for exercising their human rights, and repeal abusive security laws that inherently violate rights. Anything less would seriously undermine the EU’s stated commitments.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this pressing matter.

Sincerely,

Lotte Leicht
EU Director