

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

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Ms Federica Mogherini

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security  
Policy /Vice President of the European Commission  
European Commission  
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200  
1049 Brussels  
Belgium

Brussels, July 15, 2016

Dear High Representative / Vice-President Mogherini,

I write to urge you to take the opportunity of the EU-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Ministerial Meeting on July 18 in Brussels to press your GCC counterparts on key human rights issues, in particular the increasing restrictions on and punishments for exercising freedom of expression and association. We encourage you to publicly call for the immediate and unconditional release of the region's peaceful dissidents and human rights activists.

The situation has deteriorated steadily since the last EU-GCC Ministerial, in Doha in 2015. Despite this deterioration and the escalating human rights crises in many GCC countries, the EU has failed to articulate an unambiguous EU call for the release of these imprisoned dissidents and human rights activists, badly undermining the EU's stated commitment to human rights.

Since 2011, GCC governments have responded to political challenges and peaceful online criticism with repression. They have jailed hundreds of dissidents, including political activists, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and bloggers, many after unfair trials and allegations of torture in pre-trial detention. GCC rulers' sweeping campaigns against civil society activists and political dissidents have included criminal investigations and prosecutions and withdrawal of citizenship.

Part of this GCC repression has involved expanding existing legislation and promulgating abusive new laws with a view to further silencing all manner of dissent and punishing speech deemed "criminal" by GCC governments, particularly online and via social media networks. GCC

governments have enacted vaguely-worded and repressive counterterrorism and cybercrime laws designed to limit and punish peaceful expression critical not only of their own leaders but those of other GCC states and policies as well. These laws have had a chilling effect on freedom of expression, in some cases branding government critics as “terrorists.”

We encourage you in particular to press for the release of the following human rights and peaceful political activists, whose cases are emblematic of the crisis and deserve your unstinting support:

In **Bahrain**, human rights activists **Nabeel Rajab** is again in jail and facing charges of “disseminating false news in times of war” and “insulting a statutory body” after he Tweeted about the alleged torture of detainees in Jau Prison and Bahrain’s participation in the Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen that have killed thousands of civilians -- if convicted he could face up to 13 years in prison. Two Bahrainis who also are EU citizens -- **Abdulhadi al-Khawaja** (Danish) and **Shaikh Mohamed Habib Almuqdad** (Swedish) – are amongst 13 high profile activists 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.

**Kuwaiti** blogger and journalist **Ayyad al-Harbi** has been in prison since October 2014. Authorities arrested him on November 14, 2012 for articles and tweets in which he denounced what he called government corruption and repressive policies. One of his characteristic tweets stated, “Damn any ruler who jails his people. Damn any ruler that has more opposition than supporters.”

**Talib al-Maamari** is a former **Omani** parliamentarian currently serving a four-year prison sentence for protesting against environmental pollution in his hometown of Liwa, in northern Oman. The case stemmed from an incident in August 2013 when police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators who had blocked the entrance to the port of Sohar in protest against industrial pollution at the port. Authorities arrested al-Maamari two days after the protest, denying him access to a lawyer for over two weeks. Later a court sentenced al-Maamari to a four-year prison term and a fine of 600 Omani Riyals (approximately \$1,500) after convicting him of “illegal gathering” and “blocking traffic.”

**Waleed Abu al-Khair** is a lawyer and the founder of the group Monitor of Human Rights in **Saudi Arabia**. In 2009 Abu al-Khair acted as defense lawyer for one of the “Jeddah reformists,” a group of 16 men, including political and human rights activists, whom police detained after they met to establish a human rights organization. On July 6, 2014 the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, set up to address crimes related to terrorism, sentenced him to 15 years in prison and a 15-year ban on foreign travel. The charges against him included “disobeying the ruler and seeking to remove his legitimacy,” “insulting the judiciary and questioning the integrity of judges,” “setting

up an unlicensed organization,” “harming the reputation of the state by communicating with international organizations,” as well as vague provisions of the country’s 2007 cybercrime law.

**Mohamed al-Roken** is a university professor, human rights lawyer, and former president of the **United Arab Emirates** Jurist’s Association. Authorities arrested al-Roken on July 17, 2012. In July 2013 the Federal Supreme Court of Abu Dhabi convicted him alongside 68 other individuals accused of attempting to overthrow the government in the “UAE 94” trial and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. Prior to his conviction in 2013, al-Roken was repeatedly arrested and harassed for his work as a prominent human rights lawyer, his criticism of the UAE’s human rights record, and his calls for democratic reforms.

These cases illustrate the GCC states’ contempt for principles that the EU routinely claims to support, yet there has been no sign that the EU intends to throw any of its diplomatic weight behind these advocates of liberty, democracy and human rights, as EU foreign ministers claimed they would when they adopted the EU’s Strategic Framework for Human Rights and Democracy in June 2012.

We call on you to provide the necessary leadership and uphold the principles of the EU Strategic Framework by using the EU-GCC Ministerial Meeting to publicly as well as privately press GCC states to release these courageous individuals, immediately and unconditionally, as well as all other Gulf nationals wrongfully imprisoned solely for exercising their fundamental human rights, and repeal abusive security laws that inherently violate rights.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this pressing matter.

Sincerely,

Lotte Leicht  
EU Director  
Human Rights Watch