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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Joint written statement* submitted by International Council Supporting Fair Trial and Human Rights, Khiam Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture, Organization for Defending Victims of Violence, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Freedom of Expression in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and The United Arab Emirates

We, welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and draw His Excellency's attention to the violations of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, and call on His Excellency to pay special attention to the violations of freedom in these countries.

Saudi Arabia

A. We draw the Special Rapporteur's attention to the sentencing of Abdulrahman al-Sadhan by a counterterrorism tribunal to 20 years in prison and a 20-year travel ban. Al-Sadhan was arrested and imprisoned by Saudi authorities in March 2018 for his activities in cyberspace and for having a satirical social network. It is noteworthy that his imprisonment was carried out without a warrant for his arrest or conviction¹.

B. We call on the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression to address the situation of Mohamed Al-Khodari. On May 1, 1400, Saudi security forces raided the home of Palestinian prisoner Mohamed Al-Khodari in Jeddah, arrested his 70-year-old wife and his daughter-in-law², and transferred them to a security center. The two women were detained for several hours and released after being forced by security officials to sign a pledge to remain silent about the health and imprisonment of Al-Khodari and his son, Hani (who is also in prison).

C. We express our deep concern at the doubling of heavy sentences for political prisoners in April compared to the first three months of 2021. Among them was media activist Abdulaziz Alaoudh, who was arrested in September last year for engaging in social media and sentenced to five years in prison. Twenty-two other prisoners of conscience and political prisoners were sentenced to life sentences for their statements regarding the former Saudi blockade of Qatar.

D. We express our concern on the continuation of the policy of threatening and repressing journalists by resorting to measures such as dismissal, imprisonment or even murder by Saudi officials. We reiterate that the pattern has put Saudi Arabia at the bottom of the World Press Freedom Index (170th out of 180 countries). Saudi Arabia continues to directly violate the rights of journalists and bloggers, and has detained at least 23 journalists (as of May 2021) while imprisoned journalists, face abuse in prison³.

Bahrain

A. We express our concern over the continued detention of Bahraini human rights defender Abdul-Hadi Abdulla Hubail al-Khawaja. Al-Khawaja, is currently serving a life sentence for his peaceful human rights activities. On 5 April 2021, he marked his 10th year in prison. On 9 April 2011, al-Khawaja was arrested and tried as part of a campaign of repression by the Bahraini authorities following pro-democracy protests in the Bahraini uprising. Al-Khawaja was sentenced on 22 June 2011, along with eight other activists, to life imprisonment.

B. We express concern over the arrest and conviction of Hassan Mohammad Qambar, a photographer and journalist. He was sentenced to more than 100 years in prison, for filming the crackdown on the 2011 protests⁴.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-saudi-aidworker-int-idUSKBN2BT1NC>

² Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor

³ <https://www.esohr.org/en/?p=3895>

⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/news/tenth-anniversary-bahraini-bloggers-arrest>

C. We express concerns over the decision of Bahraini authorities to dissolve al-Wefaq, the country's largest peaceful political opposition party, confiscation of its assets and arrest of its leaders, including Shaikh Ali Salman, who is currently serving a life term in jail on alleged espionage charges.

D. We are concerned with the situation of several public figures who have been prosecuted merely for their social media activity, including prominent lawyer Abdullah Hashim.

E. We are alarmed by the fact that no independent media have operated in Bahrain since the Information Affairs Ministry suspended Al Wasat, the country's only independent newspaper, in 2017.

F. We condemn the isolation law which deprives members of dissolved political societies (opposition) of running for parliamentary elections.

The United Arab Emirates

A. We call on the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression to pay attention to the situation of Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, who has been sentenced by the United Arab Emirates to 10 years in prison only for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression. In March 2017, he was accused of committing hostile acts against a foreign country for publishing tweets criticizing Egyptian officials in connection with the 2013 killing of Rabaa Square in that country and he was sentenced to imprisonment⁵.

B. We also express concern about the situation of Amina al-Abdali, a female activist. He was sentenced to five years in prison for publishing tweets after disappearing for eight months and failing to access legal counsel or contact outside prison. It should be noted that her imprisonment term ended in November 2020 while she is illegally denied freedom and is still being held in a prison in Abu Dhabi.

C. While expressing serious concern about the violation of freedom of expression in the United Arab Emirates in 2020, we draw the Special Rapporteur's attention to the incarceration of more than 25 prisoners of conscience and political prisoners for their peaceful political criticism. Among them are lawyers such as Mohammed al- Roken and Mohammed al- Mansoori, former heads of the UAE Jurists Association, who were convicted in a so-called UAE-94 trial⁶.

Recommendations:

We call on the Human Rights Council and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression to call on all countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates:

A. To abide by their human rights obligations, in particular the obligations defined by the various conventions adopted by them.

B. Ensure that fair judgments are rendered in fair courts and during fair trials.

C. Refrain from using the policy of intimidation and repression against journalists, lawyers and civil society activists.

⁵ <https://icjhr.org/on-the-fourth-anniversary-of-his-trial-icjhr-renews-its-call-for-the-release-of-emirati-academic-dr-nasser-bin-ghaith/>

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/united-arab-emirates/report-united-arab-emirates/>