



1 November 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary Tillerson,

We write to raise serious concerns over the United States Government's deepening security ties with the Kingdom of Bahrain amid a disastrous crackdown on human rights, and to call for a thorough review of American connections to leading Bahraini officials implicated in torture and corruption, namely Royal Guard Commander Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa.

Between 16 and 18 October, the Bahraini government hosted the first annual Bahrain International Defence Exhibition and Conference (BIDEC) with the presence of 180 international exhibitors from 60 countries, including [21 American companies](#). The US also sent an official delegation to the expo, with American speakers and military units participating in BIDEC events, culminating in the [signing](#) of a multibillion-dollar F-16 sale between the Bahraini government and Lockheed Martin. While [problematic](#) on [its face](#), this expansion of the [US-Bahraini defense partnership](#) has also come at a conference organized and chaired by Sheikh Nasser – a leading member of the kingdom's royal family and security establishment who is so deeply implicated in the torture of political prisoners that the British High Court [revoked](#) his diplomatic immunity.

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) deeply regrets the State Department's decision to approve the approximately \$3.8 billion unconditional arms package to Bahrain, but – if it is to proceed – we strongly urge the US Government to take all possible precautions to ensure that any weapons, equipment, and training provided to Bahraini forces is not used to perpetrate further violations or sow greater instability. This is why we are gravely concerned by the US Government's open association with Bahraini military officials like Sheikh Nasser, whose leading role in defense procurement and record of malfeasance render him a particularly high risk for further corruption and abuse.

We therefore call on your department to review Sheikh Nasser's reported role in gross human rights violations and corruption – and to thoroughly vet all Bahraini security units associated with him – with a view toward ensuring that American engagement with the prince does not violate US law. Pending a comprehensive investigation, we additionally call on the State Department to suspend all diplomatic visas for Sheikh Nasser and to consider following the precedent set by the UK in revoking his diplomatic immunity.

Torture Allegations

Following the government's violent suppression of the 2011 pro-democracy movement, credible [evidence](#) emerged that Sheikh Nasser directed the arbitrary detention and torture of protesters, opposition activists, and athletes. Two opposition leaders and members of the "Bahrain 13" – a set of prominent prisoners of conscience initially imprisoned by military courts in 2011 – have also [reported](#) that Sheikh Nasser personally tortured them at a Ministry of Interior facility in Manama. Opposition figures, including Mohammed Habib al-Miqdad, accuse the prince of flogging and beating them all over their bodies. They [allege](#) the torture sessions sometimes lasted for nearly 12 hours.

In his capacity as the President of the Olympic Committee, Prince Nasser also [created a special commission](#) to identify and punish more than 150 members of the sporting community who had peacefully demonstrated. He indicated that the commission was specifically intended to carry out reprisals, [publicly calling](#) for “a wall to fall on [protesters’] heads ... even if they are an athlete...Bahrain is an island and there is nowhere to escape,” and [tweeting](#) “If it was up to me, I’d give them all life [in prison].”

In 2012, a Bahraini refugee known as FF [brought a case](#) against Sheikh Nasser to the United Kingdom’s Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which refused to investigate his allegations on grounds the prince had immunity from prosecution. FF alleged he had been tortured in Bahrain as a result of his participation in the 2011 protests and pursued the arrest and prosecution of Sheikh Nasser for overseeing the campaign of reprisals.

In 2014, FF [challenged](#) the original decision, and with the support of the CPS, who stated they could “no longer maintain [their] position that the prince could have immunity,” the High Court in London [ruled](#) that Sheikh Nasser does not have immunity against arrest and prosecution in the UK. The court found that Sheikh Nasser can therefore face arrest in the UK for his alleged role in the torture of the pro-democracy protestors.

Sheikh Nasser has never been subject to investigation or prosecution in Bahrain.

Appointed to the Supreme Defense Council

Nevertheless, in September 2017, Bahrain’s king [appointed](#) Sheikh Nasser to serve as a member of the Supreme Defense Council (SDC) – the country’s highest defense authority, which presides over major national security decisions and is composed entirely by members of the Al Khalifa ruling family. As a brigadier [educated](#) at the UK’s Sandhurst military academy and at the US Marine Corps University, Sheikh Nasser’s appointment further advances his position in Bahrain’s security establishment after he assumed command of the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF) Royal Guard in June 2011. In recent years, Sheikh Nasser personally [led](#) a contingent of the Royal Guard’s [Special Forces](#) as part of Saudi Arabia’s coalition in Yemen, which has been repeatedly accused of war crimes that have deepened the humanitarian crisis in that country. Since the Saudi-led coalition entered the [Yemen conflict](#), over 13,000 civilians have been killed. The coalition’s devastating blockade and its destruction of critical infrastructure has created one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, with over half a million Yemenis affected by an outbreak of cholera and 20.7 million Yemenis – including 11 million children – in need of humanitarian assistance.

Links to Corruption

As a virtual absolute monarchy, the details of Bahrain’s public finances are extremely opaque, and there is evidence of extensive corruption within the ruling family, from soliciting bribes to [dubious land](#) reclamation projects. Anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International [ranks](#) Bahrain as the 70th most corrupt country in the world, with a score of 43/100 (where 0 represents total corruption), and the GAN Business Anti-Corruption Portal – an anti-corruption tool [supported](#) by the European Commission – finds that Bahrain’s anti-corruption “enforcement is poor and officials have engaged in corruption with impunity.” In a prominent recent case, a close advisor of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, formally [admitted](#) to a British court that “illicit payments were made to the state-run aluminium company ALBA with the prime minister’s knowledge and approval.” The case never made it to trial, but it cast light on the role of Sheikh Khalifa, the king’s uncle, and other members of the royal family in driving a “Pay for Play” culture of corruption in the kingdom.

Although Sheikh Nasser has not been directly implicated in these corruption allegations, his increasingly prominent position in Bahrain's security establishment – and his direct involvement in military acquisition as the chairman of the BIDEC – renders him a high-risk actor. Transparency International has [found](#) that Bahrain's defense and security sector is at the “highest risk category” for corruption due to rampant nepotism, loose restrictions on intermediaries, and the near-total lack of transparency in budgeting and procurement processes. Specifically, it notes that a major source of potential corruption is the SDC, to which Sheikh Nasser has now been appointed, as it alone reviews military procurement. These reviews occur in secret, with no records or independent oversight from the National Assembly or the National Audit Court. Altogether, Sheikh Nasser and the other members of the royal family on the SDC wield almost boundless authority over procurement and military financing, generating extensive opportunities for corruption.

Furthermore, in addition to his military roles, Sheikh Nasser is a leading figure in Bahrain's athletic bureaucracy, [serving](#) as head of the Bahrain Olympic Committee, the Bahrain Royal Equestrian and Endurance Federation, and the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports. Funding for these programs is equally opaque, and Sheikh Nasser routinely uses these mandates to travel internationally and engage in [“sports diplomacy”](#) – often with the apparent goal of obscuring or distracting from ongoing human rights violations.

Deepening Ties with the US

Despite the numerous and credible torture allegations brought against Sheikh Nasser, the US Government has continued to engage with the prince and allow him to enter the country. In June 2011 – months after he reportedly oversaw the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters – the prince [graduated](#) with honors from the US Marine Corps University. Later, in 2013, Sheikh Nasser and his brother Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa, commander of the Royal Guard's Special Forces, participated in the [IRONMAN Florida Triathlon](#). Just last month, September 2017, the prince [visited](#) the US as part of the Bahraini government's campaign around the king's recent declaration on the importance of religious freedom, taking part on a tour at Los Angeles' Museum of Tolerance. The declaration – which disingenuously called for the protection of both minority and majority religious groups – failed to acknowledge that the Bahraini government has long persecuted the country's Shia Muslim community, which accounts for approximately 70 percent of the population. A month earlier, on 15 August, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson directly contradicted the claims of Sheikh Nasser and the king, listing Bahrain among the worst violators of religious freedom in the world and [asserting](#) that the government “must stop discriminating against the Shia communities.”

Now, most recently, the US has played an active role in the BIDEC expo, led by [Chairman of the Higher Organising Committee](#) Sheikh Nasser. Major American sponsors include Lockheed Martin and Bell Helicopter, while former NATO commander General Wesley Clark, Lockheed Martin CEO Robert Harward, and Vice Admiral John Aquilino – the new commander of the Fifth Fleet and Naval Central Command – were [among](#) keynote speakers. American warships were on display and the US Navy SEALs [appeared](#) to be the only foreign military unit to participate in demonstrations alongside Bahrain's armed forces, including the Ministry of Interior police, which remain [under informal US arms restrictions](#) due to human rights concerns.

Conclusion

Although ADHRB strongly disapproves of the renewed US arms sales to Bahrain, we are particularly concerned by deepening American connections to figures with known links to rights violations such as Sheikh Nasser. We therefore call on American authorities to thoroughly vet any agreements that entail training or arms transfers to the prince's Royal Guard, or to any other Bahraini unit implicated in

corruption and abuse. Furthermore, ADHRB calls on the US State Department to suspend diplomatic visas for Sheikh Nasser pending a comprehensive investigation into corruption and allegations of severe human rights abuses made against him. Future security assistance to Bahrain should be made contingent on the outcome of such reviews and the demonstration of genuine reform progress in the kingdom, including release and redress for all victims of torture and prisoners of conscience.

Sincerely,



Husain Abdulla
Executive Director
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)