



4 September 2019

The Honorable Justin Siberell
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Ambassador Siberell,

This month marks the two-year anniversary of your confirmation as United States (US) Ambassador to Bahrain. At your confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, we were very pleased to hear your pledge to monitor the November 2018 parliamentary elections; ensure a robust dialogue with the Bahraini government with a view toward advancing human rights reforms; and prevent the authorities from misusing anti-terror measures to “conflate legitimate political speech with terrorism.” Despite this welcome break from previous State Department positions, Mr. Ambassador, we have yet to see you fulfill these commitments. On the contrary, during the two years of your tenure, Bahrain’s human rights situation has continued to rapidly deteriorate, and there is little evidence that the US Embassy in Manama has kept pace.

In the past two years, the Government of Bahrain has vastly intensified its crackdown on civil and political space. In the lead up to the 2018 elections, the Bahraini government dismantled all political opposition and virtually closed independent political space. On the same day the king accepted your credentials, Bahraini prosecutors formally launched a [new case against](#) Sheikh Ali Salman, the already imprisoned leader of the opposition group Al-Wefaq, on baseless charges stemming from the US State Department’s own mediation attempt in 2011. He was [sentenced](#) to life imprisonment two weeks before the elections took place. The international community, including the [US Congress](#), and the [European, United Kingdom, Irish, and Italian](#) Parliaments, raised concerns regarding the political environment in Bahrain, yet the State Department publically [praised](#) Bahrain’s elections.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) documenting this escalating repression continue to be targeted by Bahraini authorities. Nabeel Rajab, Bahrain’s leading HRD, was sentenced on 21 February 2018 to five years in prison for tweeting about torture in Bahraini prisons and criticizing Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Yemen, and his sentence was [upheld](#) on 31 December 2018. Bahrain has further criminalized free expression and online activism in recent months. In May 2019, the King of Bahrain [amended](#) Article 11 of Bahrain’s counter-terror legislation to extend outside of Bahrain’s territory and to include criminal liability for anyone who possesses statements allegedly supporting terrorism “for a purpose of distributing it or informing others about it.” In practice, this now allows Bahraini authorities to charge individuals with “promoting terrorism” for simply liking a tweet or following an account that criticizes the government or “damages national unity.”

Additionally, during your time as Ambassador, the occurrence of unfair mass trials has dramatically increased in Bahrain. In the past two years, Bahrain has conducted five separate mass trials, and convicted 505 individuals in these cases alone. These trials have all been marred by allegations of torture to produce confessions, denial of access to legal counsel, *in absentia* hearings, and other fair trial rights violations. In one of these mass trials, on 31 January 2018, the Bahraini Fourth High Criminal Court convicted 58 of 60 defendants, which included [sentencing](#) Ali AlArab and Ahmed AlMalali to death. In late July this year, the Government of Bahrain [executed](#) Ali AlArab and Ahmed AlMalali, along with a [Bangladeshi individual](#), despite [international concerns](#). These were the first executions to be conducted in over two years and Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard [referred](#) to their executions as “arbitrary killings,” and stated that she was “appalled” that their executions had been carried out. Presently, there are eight other Bahrainis at imminent risk of execution, with ten other individuals on death row still undergoing appeals of their cases.



In the face of all these abuses, however, you have made few public statements on human rights concerns in Bahrain and have failed to indicate how the US Embassy is promoting reform. You have hosted business events and educational conferences, but launched no comparable initiatives on human rights and democracy. Despite the promise of your confirmation hearing, you have even remained silent in comparison to your colleagues elsewhere in the State Department. [Both](#) the Department of State Spokesperson and the US Mission to the UN condemned the detention of Nabeel Rajab and called on the Bahraini government to release him, for example. The State Department also [urged](#) Bahraini prosecutors not to pursue an appeal of the judge's initial ruling to acquit Sheikh Ali Salman. Yet you issued no statement and there is virtually no mention of Nabeel Rajab or Sheikh Ali Salman on the US Embassy's main website or Twitter account.

Instead, the Embassy has highlighted your tour of the National Institution for Human Rights (NIHR), [where](#) you “affirmed the important role that NIHR plays in reinforcing and protecting human rights in Bahrain.” Rather than acknowledge ongoing abuse, you have chosen to lend legitimacy to an oversight institution that [has failed](#) to fully comply with its international governing standards, known as the Paris Principles. You have also given legitimacy to abusive units and individuals in Bahrain's Ministry of Interior (MOI), which has been [involved](#) in over 1,000 discrete incidents of abuse comprising more than 3,000 specific rights violations since 2011. In 2018, you were pictured sitting with the General Directorate of Anti-Corruption, Economic, and Electronic Security (GDAEES) Director-General Bassam al-Muraj – a senior MOI commander repeatedly implicated in torture and other abuses. You also allegedly “[praised](#) the efforts exerted by the MOI and other security services” and “thanked the Minister of Interior for guiding the event and the police chief [Maj. Gen. Tariq al-Hassan] for his patronage” in relation to a training on counter-terrorism.

Bahrain's 2018 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) designation, and your [praise](#) for the kingdom's “clear and bold leadership on these issues,” is also extremely problematic. The kingdom's upgrade to a Tier 1 ranking appears to be a political decision stemming largely from the Embassy, and as such it was a highly [inappropriate move](#) that lacks sufficient basis in demonstrable progress. There remain persistent concerns over the efficacy of sponsorship reforms as well as broader human rights violations in Bahrain. The State Department's decision to keep Bahrain on Tier 1 in its 2019 report is equally concerning, as is your continued [unwarranted praise](#). These reports fail to comprehensively assess how the wider deterioration of human rights protections in Bahrain – in addition to the general persistence of labor abuses – undermines nominal reforms to combat human trafficking.

Your public image as ambassador suggests US approval of the Bahraini government's ever-increasing suppression of dissent, and the Embassy in Manama appears unwilling to add its voice to raise human rights concerns. We would therefore like to remind you of the commitments you made to human rights in Bahrain during your confirmation two years ago. We urge you to keep your promises by publically calling on the Government of Bahrain to restore political opposition groups, amend its broad anti-terror legislation, release all prisoners of conscience, and end harassment of human rights defenders. We also urge you to ensure any potential Bahraini beneficiaries of US security assistance are properly vetted for Leahy Law compliance and to support the implementation of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and section 7031(c) of the Fiscal Year 2019 Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Act to impose financial sanctions and visa restrictions on Bahraini officials responsible for severe human rights violations.

Sincerely,

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