

Federica Mogherini

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Vice President of the European Commission
European Commission
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1049 Brussels

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



European Institutions Office

Brussels, 22 May 2015

Our Ref: B1683

Dear High Representative Mogherini,

URGENT: EU-GCC MINISTERIAL MEETING, 24 MAY 2015

Amnesty International is writing to urge you to raise key human rights concerns during the European Union (EU) - Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ministerial meeting on 24 May. Following President Obama's meeting with GCC leaders last week, this week's ministerial meeting offers you a unique opportunity to advocate for an end to repression and human rights violations within each GCC country.

The governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman all routinely violate the human rights of their citizens and the people who live within their borders. Their systems of law also permit and even facilitate human rights abuses by non-state actors against women, migrant workers, and other population groups. Whilst the ministerial is taking place, countless people will continue to sit in prison cells simply for having peacefully exercised their human rights.

The EU's strategic framework and action plan on human rights make the clear commitment to raise human rights violations in political dialogues at all levels. However, the EU and its member states have kept largely silent when it comes to GCC countries, seemingly prioritising geopolitics, military alliances, and access to oil over the respect of basic freedoms and human rights. The EU's failure to raise human rights violations seriously with GCC countries allows violations to continue and risks undermining the principle of universality. In this context, we reiterate our call made in our letter of 3 February 2015 that the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries be placed on the Foreign Affairs Council agenda.

Please find attached a compendium of key human rights concerns and the names of prisoners of conscience currently detained or imprisoned by each of the GCC governments. We urge you to raise these during the ministerial and clearly reference concerns in official statements. In addition, as the GCC increases policy coordination in areas of security and policing, we urge you to call on the Secretariat of the GCC to ensure that all GCC initiatives are in line with international human rights standards.

We look forward to your reply and stand ready to provide any further information you may require.

Yours sincerely,

Iverna McGowan
Director of Programmes
Acting Director

ANNEX: HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS AND CASES IN GCC COUNTRIES

SAUDI ARABIA

Cases to Raise:

Prisoners of conscience include blogger Raif Badawi, human rights defenders Waleed Abu al-Khair and Fadhel al-Manasif, and imprisoned members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA).

Key Human Rights Concerns:

Over the past two years, the Saudi Arabian authorities have shut down all independent human rights organizations and imprisoned the country's most prominent human rights activists. Scores of other activists have also either been threatened into silence or have fled the country. The Saudi Arabian authorities have also harassed and intimidated activists as well as family members of victims of human rights violations to prevent them from revealing the true nature of human rights violations in the country by contacting Amnesty International and other international organizations.

Saudi Arabian women are systematically discriminated against both in law and practice, and women demonstrators have been exposed to arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment for opposing driving bans and protesting the incommunicado detention of male family members. Migrant workers remain one of the most vulnerable groups in the country, as they suffer both discrimination at the hands of the authorities and abuse by their employers. Migrant workers also continue to be subjected disproportionately to the death penalty and executions, which have in the past year reached unprecedented levels. In many cases persons, including juveniles, have been sentenced to death and executed after grossly unfair trials.

BAHRAIN:

Cases to Raise:

Prisoners of conscience include Sheikh Ali Salman, the Secretary General of al-Wefaq National Islamic Society; Nabeel Rajab, Mahdi Issa, Mahdi Abu Dheeb, a group known widely as the 13 opposition activists, along with Ahmad Mshaima.

Key Human Rights Concerns:

Four years after Bahrain's 2011 uprising, authorities continue to curtail the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Bahrain's government regularly imprisons critics and opponents solely for their peaceful exercise of these and other rights. Bahraini authorities have arrested hundreds of mostly young men and imprisoned them on charges of "illegal gathering", "rioting," or "arson" after trials that failed to comply with international fair trial standards. In some cases, the authorities have even revoked the Bahraini nationality of individuals.

The Bahrain government's institutional and legal reforms have largely failed to prevent human rights violations by state authorities or ensure full accountability for abuses. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remain rife, and only a very small number of security officers have been prosecuted for abuses.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:

Cases to Raise:

Prisoners of conscience include human rights lawyer Dr Mohammed al-Roken, convicted in the grossly unfair "UAE 94" mass trial of 94 activists, including judges, lawyers, academics and student leaders. Twitter activist Osama al-Najjar, who met the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers during her visit to the country in February 2014, was arrested a month later and taken to a secret detention facility where he was denied access to a lawyer, tortured, and questioned about their meeting. In November 2014, he was convicted, following an unfair trial, of charges including "offending the State" and "contacting foreign organizations and presenting inaccurate information" about the detention and unfair mass trial of 94 activists, including his father, a prisoner of conscience.

Key Human Rights Concerns:

Since the UAE authorities began a crackdown on dissent in 2011, scores of peaceful activists and critics of the government have been targeted for harassment, arrest, torture and other ill-treatment. The authorities have prosecuted or imprisoned more than 100 peaceful activists and critics of the government on broad and sweeping national security-related or cybercrimes charges following unfair trials. People prosecuted or imprisoned include prominent lawyers, judges, and academics.

The UAE government has passed repressive cybercrime and counter-terror laws that criminalize peaceful dissent. "Confessions" extracted under torture or other duress are routinely accepted as evidence of guilt in proceedings that fail to meet international fair trial standards.

KUWAIT:

Cases to Raise:

Prisoners of conscience include journalist 'Ayad Khaled al-Harbi and Hamad al-Naqi, who posted comments criticizing the leaders of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as well as other comments considered offensive to religion by some members of Kuwait's majority Sunni Muslim population.

Key Human Rights Concerns:

Kuwait's government continues to restrict freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Critics of the government, including those using social media, continue to be arbitrarily arrested and sentenced to prison terms. Kuwait should amend vague penal and other provisions, sometimes linked to national security, that restrict freedom of expression, notably Article 25 of Law 31 on 1971, which criminalizes 'undermining' the Amir. Other provisions effectively prohibit peaceful criticism of government figures and the judiciary.

More than 100,000 stateless Bidun, long-term residents of Kuwait, continue to be denied nationality and thus access to health care, education and employment. Women continue to face discrimination in law and practice, and migrant domestic workers are exploited and otherwise abused by their employers.

QATAR:

Cases to Raise:

Poet Mohammed al-'Ajami (also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb) is a prisoner of conscience serving a 15-year sentence for writing and reciting a poem considered critical of the ruling family.

Key Human Rights Concerns:

With regards to civil and political rights, laws relating to “insulting the Amir” exemplify how freedom of expression is strictly controlled. Press self-censorship is common as a result. Despite recent changes to legislation on torture and other ill-treatment, incidents of torture continue to occur, including against detainees. Corporal punishment continues to be reported, and Amnesty International has found evidence of “flogging” being used as punishment in detention.

In Qatar, domestic laws on the rights of migrant workers are discriminatory and open to abuse. This facilitates labor exploitation, which can rise to forced labor and human trafficking. Migrant domestic workers and others report gender-based and sexual violence. Domestic violence is not specifically illegal, and survivors of sexual abuse may be deterred from reporting sexual abuse to the authorities for fear of being charged with “illicit relations.”

OMAN:

Cases to Raise:

Prisoners of conscience include Talib al-Ma'mari, a member of the Shura Council, who Amnesty International believes was imprisoned following his role in an anti-pollution demonstration in Liwa. Blogger Saeed Jaddad faces multiple prison sentences that must be quashed.

Key Human Rights Concerns:

Oman authorities continue to restrict freedom of expression, including in the media and online. Freedom of assembly is not permitted, and women continue to face discrimination in law and practice. The Penal Code provides for imprisonment for “undermining the prestige of the state,” “incitement to protest,” and “using social media to disseminate information.”