

Letter From a Bahraini Jail

By NABEEL RAJAB SEPT. 4, 2016

RIFFA, Bahrain — I write this from a Bahraini jail cell where I have been detained, largely in isolation, since the beginning of summer. This is not new to me: I have been here before, from 2012 to 2014, in 2015, and now again, all because of my work as a human rights defender.

Nor am I alone: There are some [4,000 political prisoners](#) in [Bahrain](#), which has the [highest](#) prison population per capita in the Middle East. This is a country that has subjected its people to imprisonment, torture and even death for daring to desire democracy. My close colleague Abdulhadi al-Khawaja was [tortured](#) and sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for his human rights work.

No one has been properly held to account for systematic abuses that have affected thousands. In 2015, I was arrested on new charges of “insulting a statutory body” and “spreading rumors during a time of war” for posts on Twitter. The police held me from April to July last year. I was [released](#) only after the king of Bahrain issued a pardon in an earlier case, also related to views I had expressed.

Despite the pardon, the 2015 charges and a travel ban remained in place, and I was threatened with further action. The head of the cybercrimes unit at the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Bahrain summoned me and my family to a meeting, where — in front of my children — he warned me that if I didn’t stop my advocacy work, I would [face up](#) to 15 years in prison.

That threat became reality when I was arrested in June. The warrant came from the same cybercrimes unit chief who threatened me last year, and I now face prosecution for my work exposing human rights abuses. The authorities even added a third charge of “insulting a neighboring country,” meaning Saudi Arabia. They have also laid a new charge against me of spreading “false news,” in relation to interviews [I’ve given](#) to the news media. It’s quite the rap sheet.

My supposed “insult” to Saudi Arabia relates to tweets I posted calling for an end to the war in Yemen, a war escalated by the Saudi-led coalition to which Bahrain belongs and for which the United States provides support. The United States has [authorized](#) multibillion-dollar arms sales to the Saudis since the war began last year.

From the beginning, I was against the war. The civilian death toll was immediate and catastrophic, and I spoke out against the unfolding humanitarian crisis, calling for peace. Now, I am paying the price.

I met Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) on his visit to Bahrain earlier this year and was glad to talk with him about our difficult situation. Mr. Kerry criticized the boycott of the 2014 election by opposition parties, although the opposition’s demand was simply for a constitutional monarchy in place of

Bahrain's autocratic system. Since that election, the leader of the largest opposition group, the [Wefaq National Islamic Society](#), was [sentenced to nine years](#) for "promoting violence," and the society was suspended and its assets frozen.

I would like to ask Mr. Kerry now: Is this the kind of ally America wants? The kind that punishes its people for thinking, that prevents its citizens from exercising their basic rights?

The government has gone after me not only for my comments on Yemen, but also for my domestic activism. One of my charges, "insulting a statutory body," concerns my work shedding light on the [torture](#) of hundreds of prisoners in Jaw Prison in March 2015. The State Department has highlighted the same problem, but last year [lifted](#) the arms embargo it had placed on Bahrain since the repressions that followed the 2011 Arab Spring protests, citing "meaningful progress on human rights reforms." Really?

After I met Mr. Kerry, I was interrogated at the Interior Ministry by the chief of the cybercrimes unit, the one who later ordered my arrest. He wanted to know everything about my conversation with the secretary of state. That official interrogated me again in April after I signed an open letter, with 25 other activists, calling on President Obama to discuss human rights and the plight of activists in the Middle East when he [visited](#) Saudi Arabia earlier this year.

The Bahraini government tried to pressure me into publicly disavowing the letter. I refused.

Recent American [statements](#) on Bahrain's human rights problems have been strong, and that is good. But unless the United States is willing to use its leverage, fine words have little effect. America's actions, on the other hand, have emboldened the government to detain me and other rights advocates: Its unconditional support for Saudi Arabia and its lifting of the arms ban on Bahrain have direct consequences for the activists struggling for dignity in these countries.

Instead of fanning the flames in Yemen by supplying arms to the Saudi coalition, Mr. Obama's administration should use its leverage to resolve the conflict. Working to secure the release of people who call for peace, and are trying to build democracy in the region, would serve that aim.

***Update:** After this Op-Ed essay was published, [Nabeel Rajab was charged](#) with publishing "false news and statements and malicious rumors that undermine the prestige of the kingdom."*

Nabeel Rajab is the president of the [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#) and an advisory committee member for Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/opinion/letter-from-a-bahraini-jail.html>