

Human Rights Defenders and Political Prisoners in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain

Naji Fateel: Imprisoned in Bahrain Based on Coerced Confessions

Naji Fateel is a blogger and human rights defender who co-founded the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights. He is serving a fifteen-year sentence in prison for terrorism-related charges, related to his participation in peaceful protests in 2011 and his work to monitor human rights violations during Bahrain's uprising. His trial in September 2013 was marred by due process violations, the evidence against him constituted coerced confessions obtained under torture, and he reportedly did not receive adequate medical treatment for injuries sustained while in prison in 2015.

Fateel had faced earlier death threats on social media for his peaceful role in the 2011 protests. He has been held incommunicado for multiple periods, and his family has at times been denied visits.

THE MISUSE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM LAWS AND DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN BAHRAIN

The Bahraini government manipulates anti-terror laws to criminalize peaceful expression and legitimate human rights work. But its coercive and repressive tactics do nothing to address underlying grievances. Torture and mistreatment of political prisoners including Fateel exacerbate societal discontent.

Human rights defenders arrested on politicized charges in Bahrain face a grave risk of torture, particularly as the authorities seek to extract coerced confessions when no evidence exists for the alleged



crime. Fateel and others in similar circumstances have little recourse when they are denied access to their lawyers, their exculpatory evidence is ignored, and their proof of torture in detention is disregarded.

Yet peaceful civil society leaders like Fateel are exactly the people Bahrain needs to be out of jail so that they can engage in political reforms and drive reconciliation.

THE U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In February 2016, the State Department released a statement marking the fifth anniversary of the popular uprising and government crackdown in Bahrain. This statement emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to continuing to raise concerns about "limitations on peaceful assembly and political activism, and the criminalization of free

expression.” But these words have not been sufficient to release wrongfully imprisoned activists.

The U.S. government should consistently call for charges against vital independent civil society activists to be dropped if they are politicized or based on evidence obtained through torture.