

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

### Nabeel Rajab: Bahraini Human Rights Defender Banned from Traveling Abroad

Nabeel Rajab is a Bahraini human rights defender subjected to a travel ban and threatened with prosecution for speech-related charges. He is the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, the founding director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, deputy secretary general of the International Federation for Human Rights, and a member of the Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa advisory committee.

Rajab served two years in prison between 2012 and 2014 for charges related to his participation in peaceful gatherings advocating for fundamental freedoms and democracy. In late 2014 and early 2015 he was subjected to a series of other charges and arrests including for posts on Twitter critiquing the Bahraini military for provoking extremist ideologies, denouncing the torture of detainees at Jaw Prison, and raising concerns about air strikes in Yemen by the Saudi Arabia–led coalition.

He was arrested in April 2015, sentenced to six months in prison, but then released in July 2015 for medical reasons. However, Rajab remains subject to a travel ban related to some of the speech-related charges, which have not yet been dropped. His petitions to lift the ban have not been successful.

#### **CLOSING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE AND DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN BAHRAIN**

The Bahraini authorities have closed off avenues for peaceful expression of critiques, grievances, and



dissent both online and offline. What would pass for a casual remark in more open societies may be treated, in Bahrain, as grounds for years of imprisonment. The courts serve as a vehicle for the harassment of civil society leaders like Rajab. Frivolous prosecutions and travel bans hinder their legitimate work.

For Rajab, the prosecutors' refusal to close the files on outstanding charges means that he perpetually faces the risk of re-arrest and prosecution, for which he could face up to ten more years in prison. This persistent threat casts a shadow over his legitimate work to raise awareness about rights violations.

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

As a core component of its initiatives to counter violent extremism, the U.S. government is launching messaging campaigns with partners and allies to

speak out on social media against extremism. Yet some of these very same allies use harsh and violent tactics to repress peaceful dissent online.

When Rajab was arrested in April 2015, the State Department spokesperson expressed “deep concern” over the Twitter-related charges, urging for all of the charges to be dropped and Rajab to be immediately released. He continued: “We believe that societies are strengthened and not threatened by peaceful expressions of opinion and dissent.”

Yet the United States could do more to consistently raise concerns about the travel ban on Rajab and the harassment and detention of other human rights defenders in Bahrain. When senior U.S. officials visit Bahrain, whatever the primary purpose of their visit, they are instructed through a 2014 presidential memorandum to meet with civil society organizations and activists, particularly those at risk due to their work. Prioritizing meetings with civil society sends a clear message to repressive regimes that their actions are harmful and counter to U.S. interests.