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Written statement* submitted by the Alsalam Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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A Year in Review: Spiraling Repression in Bahrain

Alsalam Foundation, together with Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), and the European Center for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR) would like to take this opportunity at the 34th Session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) to discuss intensified violations of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, association, and belief in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

In the past year, the Bahraini government has carried out extrajudicial executions, suppressed political opposition societies, judicially harassed dozens of Shia religious leaders, further restricted independent media, and targeted activists for reprisal. Together, these actions represent an escalation of repression unprecedented since the 2011 State of National Safety.

1. Executions

On 15 January 2017, the Bahraini government executed Sami Mushaima, Ali al-Singace, and Abbas al-Samea – the country's first executions since 2010 and the first execution of Bahrainis since 1996. Officials arrested the three men in March 2014 on charges of allegedly conducting a bombing that led to the death of three police officers. On 26 February 2015, after a trial marred by judicial irregularities and credible allegations of torture, Bahrain's High Criminal Court revoked their citizenship and sentenced the three men to death. Bahrain's highest court upheld the death sentences on 9 January 2017 and within a week the king authorized the executions, leading to widespread protests across the country. As a result of the extensive due process violations, including the use of coerced confessions obtained under torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions condemned the executions as extrajudicial killings.

The government's decision to carry out these executions has heightened fears that two other death row inmates, Mohamed Ramadan and Husain Ali Moosa, could be executed at any time. Authorities arrested Moosa and Ramadan in 2014 for allegedly planting a bomb that injured two police officers, one of whom later died. The two men claim they were tortured into providing false confessions that, apart from the testimony of other police officers, was used as the primary basis of their conviction. Despite credible evidence of abuse, a court sentenced Ramadan and Moosa to death on 29 December 2014. The country's highest court later upheld their death sentences, leaving them at imminent risk of execution.

2. Persecution the Shia Community

Since June 2016, Bahraini authorities harassed, interrogated, arrested, denaturalized, or deported at least 75 Shia religious leaders. Many face charges related to the content of their sermons and for their involvement in a Shia-specific practice of collecting religious donations, known as *khums*. While the government claims it is prosecuting Shia clerics for alleged criminal activity, five UN Special Rapporteurs released a joint statement on 16 August 2016 that found "Shias are clearly being targeted on the basis of their religion." Among the Shia religious figures judicially harassed by the government are Sheikh Mohammed Khojasta, Sheikh Isa al-Moamen, Sheikh Maytham al-Salman, and Sayed Majeed Misha'al.

On 20 June 2016, the Bahraini government revoked the citizenship of Sheikh Isa Qassim, the most prominent Shia cleric in the country. Soon after, the authorities additionally charged him with money laundering for his involvement in the practice of *khums*.

Since Sheikh Qassim's denaturalization, hundreds of Bahrainis have participated in a peaceful sit-in around his home in Diraz. In response to the ongoing demonstrations, security forces have surrounded the village, restricting the movement of its some 20,000 inhabitants and preventing religious leaders, medical personnel, and even supplies from entering. Diraz residents have reported the deliberate disruption of telephone, water, and gas services, as well as Internet access. The authorities have also repeatedly attacked the sit-in. On 26 January 2017, security forces fired live ammunition at the demonstrators, causing critical injuries.

3. Suppression of Political Opposition

The Bahraini government escalated its judicial harassment of political opposition societies and their members in 2016. After an appeals hearing and an abrupt retrial, Bahraini courts increased the prison term of Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary-General of the *Al-Wefaq* National Islamic Society, from four to nine years. During this same period the authorities formally dissolved *Al-Wefaq*, which is the largest political society in the country, after seizing its headquarters, freezing its assets, and blocking its website.

The government has also arrested and charged members of secular leftist societies, such as *Al-Wahdawi* and *Wa'ad*. Fadhel Abbas, the former Secretary-General of *Al-Wahdawi*, is currently serving a three-year prison sentence on charges related to his society's criticism of Saudi-led military operations in Yemen. In June 2016, Ebrahim Sharif, the former Secretary-General of *Wa'ad*, completed a prison term on charges stemming from a political speech. However, on 14 November 2016, the government charged Sharif with "inciting hatred against the [government]" after he was interviewed by the Associated Press. The authorities later dropped the charge amid international pressure.

4. Restrictions on Independent Media

Bahraini authorities continued to restrict freedom of the press in 2016. In February, security forces arrested and deported Anna Day, an American reporter, and three cameramen. Several months later, the government refused to renew the reporting license of Nazeeha Saeed, a journalist for France24 and Radio Monte Carlo Doualiya, and later charged her with "illegal reporting." On 3 February, an appellate court upheld a three-month prison sentence against photojournalist Ahmed al-Fardan, who was originally arrested and tortured over charges of "illegal assembly" and "attempting to protest" in 2013.

Most recently, just after the executions of Mushaima, al-Singace, and al-Samea, the Bahraini government temporarily suspended the online edition of *al-Wasat*, the only independent newspaper in the country.

5. Reprisals

The government consistently subjects activists to reprisal for their work, such as citizenship revocations and travel bans. Since 2011, Bahraini authorities have stripped at least 348 people of their citizenship, including human rights defenders, journalists, academics, political and religious figures. Some of these individuals have been forcibly deported.

The government has imposed travel bans to prevent activists from leaving the country and participating in international events, including the UN HRC in Geneva. In June and September 2016, the Bahraini government prevented dozens of individuals from travelling to the respective sessions of the HRC.

The government has also retaliated against lawyers. In November 2016, authorities charged human rights lawyer Mohamed al-Tajer with crimes such as "misuse of a telephone" for private messages he allegedly sent on social media. Al-Tajer believes the charges are in reprisal for his work as a human rights lawyer and with the UN.

6. Ongoing Case Against Nabeel Rajab

On 13 June 2016, security forces rearrested Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. Rajab faces numerous cases against him, including for charges stemming from tweets and retweets he allegedly posted in 2015 about the war in Yemen and torture in Jau Prison. He also faces charges related to a September 2016 editorial in the *New York Times*, and the authorities similarly interrogated him over a December 2016 letter published in *Le Monde*. Although a court ordered Rajab's provisional release on 28 December, officials immediately re-arrested him pending an investigation into a separate case related to television interviews Rajab gave in 2014 and 2015. The government has postponed Rajab's trials eight consecutive times. During his extended pre-trial detention, authorities have held Rajab in unhygienic conditions and in solitary confinement, contributing to the deterioration of his health. Rajab has been rushed to a hospital multiple times for a new and worsening heart condition.

7. National Security Agency and Military Courts

The government has also regressed on key reforms. On 5 January 2017, the king restored domestic law enforcement authority to the National Security Agency (NSA), an intelligence body that oversaw the torture of protestors in 2011. The royal decree specifically empowers the NSA to enforce Bahrain's excessively broad counter-terror legislation, which has been used to prosecute activists and political figures. This decision reverses one of only two recommendations issued by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) that had been fully implemented by the government. Moreover, the government is currently considering an amendment to Bahrain's constitution that could enable military courts to try civilians, a move unseen since the State of National Safety in 2011.

8. Recommendations

Rather than fulfill its obligation to address the deteriorating human rights situation, the Bahraini government has further suppressed basic freedoms. We wholly agree with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that "repression will not end people's grievances," and we therefore call on the international community to urge the Government of Bahrain to:

- Release Nabeel Rajab and all prisoners of conscience
- Reinstatement of Sheikh Isa Qassim's citizenship and cease all judicial harassment of Shia clerics
- Lift restrictions on independent journalists and media outlets
- End reprisals, such as travel bans, against civil society and reinstate all individuals arbitrarily deprived of nationality
- Institute an immediate moratorium on the death penalty with a view to abolition and commute the death penalty in cases involving credible allegations of torture, such as those of Mohammed Ramadan and Husain Ali Moosa
- Guarantee that civilians may never be tried in military courts.