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Written statement* submitted by the Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, 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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The Rising Level of Reprisals against Bahrain's Civil Society

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) would like to take this opportunity at the 35th Session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) to raise concerns over a pattern of reprisals carried out against civil society actors by the Government of Bahrain. Bahraini authorities have specifically targeted members of independent civil society organizations (CSOs) in retaliation for their engagement with the UN system and its human rights mechanisms.

Domestic Restrictions on Civil Society Space

In recent years, the Government of Bahrain has instituted a series of extensive restrictions on the rights to free expression, assembly, and association, many of which heavily circumscribe society space and undermine the activity of civil society organizations (CSOs). Bahraini authorities consistently utilize the country's Law of Associations and its CSO registration process as a means of rejecting, monitoring, and/or dissolving human rights organizations or CSOs they deem to be critical of the government. The Government of Bahrain has imposed similar limitations on political groups under the Law of Political Societies, subjecting them to judicial harassment including arbitrary suspensions, asset seizures, and forced dissolution. Most recently, Bahraini authorities dissolved the country's largest political society, Al-Wefaq, and launched legal proceedings to dissolve the second-largest opposition group, Wa'ad. Since the government's violent suppression of pro-reform demonstrations in 2011, the government has imprisoned hundreds of human rights defenders, journalists, political activists, and religious leaders on charges related solely to civil society organizing or the exercise of basic human rights; it is estimated that between 3,500 and 4,000 political prisoners are currently incarcerated in Bahrain.

Reprisals for International Engagement

Bahraini authorities have increasingly targeted civil society actors who engage with, or attempt to engage with, the UN system and the international community. In May 2012, for example, the government harassed Bahraini human rights defenders who provided information to the UN Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) ahead of the country's second-cycle review. The country's Ministry of Interior reportedly threatened activists returning from Geneva with interrogation over allegations that they slandered Bahrain. Upon their return, many were subjected to a public smear campaign.

In September 2014, prominent human rights defender and president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) **Nabeel Rajab** traveled across Europe on an extended human rights advocacy tour. During this time, Rajab engaged with several international human rights mechanisms and institutions, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and participated in the 27th Session of the HRC. When he returned to Bahrain, authorities arrested Rajab and charged him with "publicly insulting official institutions." Many observers, including multiple UN Special Procedures mandate holders, considered the Bahraini government's actions to be an act of reprisal for Rajab's cooperation with the UN and its human rights mechanisms.

The frequency of such reprisals has escalated over the last three years. In March 2015, during a side event organized by ADHRB at the 28th session of the HRC, then-Chairman of the Bahraini parliament's Human Rights Committee Khalid Abdulaziz Alshaer publicly threatened to use his influence over the interior ministry to bring charges against Bahraini human rights defender **Abdulnabi al-Ekri**, who was present at the event. Alshaer also later accosted ADHRB's Executive Director, **Husain Abdulla**, and threatened members of Abdulla's family in Bahrain if he continued his international human rights-related activities.

In August 2015, Bahraini authorities arrested interfaith activist and human rights defender **Sheikh Maytham al-Salman** as he returned from Tunisia after attending an OHCHR-organized conference on hate speech. The Bahraini government charged Sheikh al-Salman with "inciting hatred against the system of government" and placed him under a travel ban.

In early 2016, the Government of Bahrain cut funding to the **Bahrain Women's Union (BWU)**, an umbrella organization of 13 women's rights groups. Members of the BWU alleged that the funding cuts came in reprisal for a critical shadow report on Bahrain's adherence to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that the organization had submitted to the UN in 2014. Due to the consequent funding deficiency, many of these women's groups were reportedly forced to curtail the support services they offered to Bahraini women, including legal and social services for victims of abuse.

In May 2016, an OHCHR team visited Bahrain and held training sessions for Bahraini civil society actors that focused on how to engage with the HRC and its human rights mechanisms. Soon after the visit, the Government of Bahrain began systematically imposing travel bans on civil society actors that had participated in these training sessions and/or sought to engage these same mechanisms. In June 2016, Bahraini authorities barred **13 activists**, including an entire Bahraini civil society delegation to the 32nd HRC session, from travelling internationally. That same month, security forces re-arrested BCHR president **Nabeel Rajab** on charges stemming from tweets, newspaper articles, and television interviews in which he discussed topics like torture and the conflict in Yemen. Rajab remains detained and could face up to 18 years in prison on these charges.

Ahead of the 33rd HRC session in September 2016, the Bahraini government again imposed blanket travel bans on activists in order to prevent their participation in the Council. In total, Bahraini authorities barred nearly **30 activists** from international travel between June and September 2016.

In November 2016, security forces detained prominent human rights lawyer **Mohamed al-Tajer** and charged him with "insulting government institutions, inciting hatred of a religious sect, and misusing a telecommunications device" over a private WhatsApp message allegedly sent by al-Tajer in early 2016. Tajer, who has frequently worked with OHCHR and its Special Procedures, believes the charges are in reprisal for his engagement with the UN system.

In March 2017, the Government of Bahrain intimidated, arrested, detained, and tortured family members of Bahraini activists participating in the 34th session of the HRC. Among those targeted were **Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei**, Director of Advocacy at the UK-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, and **Ebtesam al-Saegh**, an activist still living in Bahrain. Bahraini security forces detained **Alwadaei's brother-in-law and mother-in-law** while the Council session was underway. The government charged both of them with planting "fake bombs," and tortured Alwadaei's brother-in-law, telling him that they were seeking revenge for Alwadaei's actions as a human rights activist. Also while the HRC session was underway, Bahraini authorities summoned al-Saegh's sister, **Bassima**, to a local police station and questioned her about al-Saegh's activities at the HRC. When al-Saegh herself returned to Bahrain after participating in the Council session, Bahraini authorities detained her for seven hours, questioned her about her work, and threatened her family.

On 1 May 2017, Bahrain underwent its third-cycle UPR in Geneva. In the run-up to the review, the Bahraini government conducted what appeared to be a targeted campaign of judicial harassment directed at a range of civil society actors, including activists, human rights defenders, journalists, union members, political figures, and lawyers. Bahraini authorities summoned **at least 30 such individuals** for interrogation and subjected at least 32 to travel bans, preventing them from attending both the UPR pre-session events and the session itself. As a result of the government's campaign of reprisals, the number of Bahraini civil society actors able to attend the country's UPR sessions fell from 47 at the second cycle in 2012 to only two in 2017.

Citizenship Revocation and Forced Exile

Over the last several years, the government has also dramatically increased its use of arbitrary citizenship revocation as a means of retaliation against civil society actors. As a result of amendments to the country's citizenship and anti-terror legislation, Bahraini officials are able to strip citizens of their nationality on ambiguous grounds, such as having "harm[ed] the interests of the Kingdom." In practice, the authorities have interpreted such language as sufficient legal justification to deprive Bahrainis of their citizenship for acts of peaceful free expression like government criticism. Since 2011, the Government of Bahrain has stripped **approximately 400 people** of their citizenship, including human

rights defenders, journalists, academics, political leaders, and religious figures. Some of these individuals have been rendered stateless and forcibly deported.

Additionally, Bahraini authorities have forced other civil society actors into exile. For example, **Maryam al-Khawaja** and **Zainab al-Khawaja**, both of whom are daughters of imprisoned human rights defender **Abdulhadi al-Khawaja**, have fled the country for Denmark after being repeatedly arrested and harassed by the Bahraini government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite its rhetorical commitment to UN engagement, the Bahraini government has consistently failed to cooperate meaningfully with international human rights institutions like the OHCHR, and it has retaliated against civil society actors for attempting such engagement themselves. We therefore urge the international community to call on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Immediately lift all travel bans and cease all forms of interference with civil society actors;
 - Restore all arbitrarily revoked citizenships and amend the nationality law to restrict these practices;
 - Release all prisoners of conscience;
 - Facilitate a country visit by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders;
 - Fully and transparently implement all recommendations of the Third UPR Cycle.
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