



## **Cut Off From the World: Systematic Reprisals Against Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region for Engaging with the United Nations**

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) calls attention to recent government-led attacks, acts of intimidation, and defamation of character that may constitute incitement to hate and violence, carried out by the governments of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Oman against human rights defenders for their cooperation with United Nations human rights mechanisms.

Over the last two years, human rights defenders and organizations sought to bring attention to the worsening human rights situation in the Gulf through increased engagement at the United Nations.

Gulf countries have responded with a campaign of intimidation and retribution against those who denounce rights violations in their countries at the UN, whether local or international human rights defenders. These attacks have included defamation and smear campaigns in government-controlled media outlets, death threats, physical assaults, criminal charges, arbitrary arrests, detention, and prison sentences. In some instances, the public smear campaigns propagated by the governments and government-affiliated media against human rights activists have incited hatred and violence, placing the very safety of these individuals at risk. Such acts constitute reprisals as defined by UN resolution A/HRC/18/19 and violate Article 12(2) of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The following is an overview of some of the attacks which following the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the UN HRC.

- **UAE:**

Reprisals against Emirati human rights defenders who cooperate with the UN human rights system are closely related to the government's campaign of intimidation and arrests which targets the country's reform activists and which escalated dramatically throughout 2012 and continues today.

On 17 September, Ahmed Mansoor, well-known rights activist and blogger in the UAE and member of the Human Rights Watch MENA advisory committee,<sup>1</sup> was physically attacked by an unidentified person at Ajman University following his participation in a side event co-sponsored by CIHRS at the 21<sup>st</sup> session of HRC via a video which he had previously recorded, as Mansour

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Mansoor is a victim of an unfair trial last year in a case that came to be known as the UAE 5 case. He was found guilty of insulting the political figures in the country, after he, along with other individuals, arranged for and signed a petition calling for greater political participation via an elected parliament with legislative and regulatory powers. In November 2011, he was sentenced to 3 years in prison and was then released on presidential pardon one day following the verdict, and after spending nearly 8 months in detention. Since then, Mansoor has been subjected to several harassments and defamation campaigns believed to be instigated by the government.

was unable to travel to Geneva due to a *de facto* travel ban against him. There are strong reasons to believe that the government's security apparatus was behind the attack.

A fierce defamation campaign in dozens of pro-government newspapers and on social media began as soon as Mansoor's participation in the side event became public. The campaign included defaming statements against the organizers of the event, including allegations circulated by individuals and newspapers known for their connections to the government that the organizers have connections with Iran. It was also claimed that the event was prepared to defame the UAE and other Gulf countries as part of a larger conspiracy to topple governments in the Gulf and instigate chaos and instability. Given the sensitive political situation in the country, these accusations constitute direct incitement to hatred and violence against Mansoor and could be considered to have resulted in his physical attack on 17 September.

- **Bahrain:**

As highlighted in the Secretary-General's report on reprisals, submitted to the Council's 21<sup>st</sup> session, reprisals against Bahraini human rights defenders who engage with the UN human rights system have occurred regularly.

Despite the clear recommendations published in the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry calling on the Bahraini authorities to immediately release political prisoners and commute their sentences - most of whom are prominent human rights activists - this has not been carried out. Instead, Bahraini authorities continue to systematically target human rights defenders, including through additional prison sentences against well-known rights defenders, brief arrests, physical assaults, death threats, teargas attacks on their homes, smear campaigns, and travel bans. Several international human rights defenders have been prevented from entering Bahrain.

Similar to the UAE, government-affiliated media defamed members of Bahraini civil society who attended HRC's 21<sup>st</sup> session. Dozens of government-affiliated outlets circulated false information and threats of formal libel charges and imprisonment as a result of their participation at HRC.

Reprisals included death threats against Mohamed Al-Maskati, a well-known rights activist and President of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights. He received dozens of death threats and threats against his family in Bahrain from anonymous phone calls after he announced his participation at the HRC session on Twitter. On 17 October, upon his return to Bahrain, Maskati was called before Bahrain's public prosecutor on charges of participating in illegal protests.

Similarly, Sayed Yousif al-Mahafdha, head of monitoring unit and acting Vice President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested and interrogated several times and faces charges of spreading false news over Twitter following his participation at the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the HRC. He had been a speaker at a side event and delivered a statement before the Council.

On 17 September, a number of journalists and members accredited with the Bahraini government's delegation harassed speakers at the above-mentioned side event at HRC on the Gulf region. On 18 September, during another side event on Bahrain, the same individuals interrupted the event and took actions meant to harass, intimidate, and defame the participants of the event, leading one of

these individuals to be escorted out of the room by UN security and a police report on his acts of harassment to be filed.

- **Oman:**

On 31 May 2012, the arrest of three human rights defenders while conducting a field mission to a protest site marked the beginning of an ongoing crackdown against the activist community in Oman. This was followed by a statement from the Public Prosecutor threatening prison sentences and legal action against activists practicing their right to free opinion and speech as well as the arrest, trial, and sentencing to prison of dozens of activists, including writers, bloggers, rights defenders, and protesters.

Among the detainees is human rights defender Mukhtar al-Hinaei, who is a founding member of the Omani Group for Human Rights, well-known activist, blogger, and journalist. In December 2012, the Appeals Court upheld six-month prison sentences originally issued by the Court of First Instance against eleven activists, including rights defender al-Hinaei, based on charges of illegal gathering. In January 2013, the same court upheld another one-year sentence against al-Hanaie and others on charges of defaming the Sultan and violating Oman's information crimes law for having published "defamatory information" on social media websites.

According to al-Hanaie's personal testimony, during his first month in detention he was kept in a secret state security prison, known in Oman as the "Black Prison," where he was repeatedly questioned on his connections to a number of regional and international human rights organizations. In particular, he was repeatedly questioned about a training workshop on UN human rights mechanisms organized by CIHRS which he had attended in Egypt only ten days before his arrest, including about the organizers and e-mail correspondences with CIHRS staff. He was also questioned about information which he had sent to CIHRS regarding the arrest of his colleagues to be shared with the UN Special Procedures.

- **Saudi Arabia:**

Rights activists in Saudi Arabia work under highly repressive conditions, often facing threats, intimidation, detention, interrogation, travel bans, and trials before exceptional courts. Charges used against activists typically include "distorting the reputation of the country," "affiliation with suspicious groups," "establishing organizations without authorization," "stirring up civil strife and inciting public opinion against government institutions," "calling for demonstrations," or, most recently, "provoking international organizations to adopt stances against the Kingdom." These violations are exacerbated by a judicial system characterized by its allegiance to the executive.

On 18 June 2012, Dr. Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, one of the most prominent rights advocates in Saudi Arabia and co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, was presented with 11 politically motivated charges for his advocacy work, including the charge of communicating "false" information with the UN human rights mechanisms, and brought before a special criminal court in Riyadh.<sup>2</sup>

Failure to address previously reported reprisals against activists who engage with UN human rights mechanisms has facilitated this current crackdown.

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<sup>2</sup> The UN Secretary General's report on reprisals cites the case of Dr. a-Qahtani.

Such reprisals, including inside UN premises, should be immediately and seriously examined by the HRC, relevant UN bodies, and UN member states to ensure non-reoccurrence and full protection for the human rights defenders involved. CIHRS asks that the HRC take strong and concrete steps against governments who target activists and NGOs for cooperating with its mechanisms and asserts that committing such acts should automatically trigger reconsideration of a state's HRC membership.

The extent and repeated nature of reprisals by governments in the Gulf against local human rights defenders should also be urgently and publicly addressed by the OHCHR at the highest levels, including by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.