

To:

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
António Costa, President of the European Council
Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission

CC:

Mette Frederiksen, Prime Minister of Denmark
Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister of Sweden
Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Denmark
Maria Malmer Stenergard, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden

Brussels, 14 February 2025

Dear President von der Leyen,
Dear President Costa,
Dear High Representative / Vice-President Kallas,

RE: Urgent, high-level outreach to the King of Bahrain to release EU nationals Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad

We, the undersigned human rights groups, are writing to request your urgent and robust intervention with the Bahraini authorities to secure the release of two arbitrarily detained EU nationals, Danish-Bahraini [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#) and Swedish-Bahraini [Sheikh Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad](#).

Mr Al-Khawaja and Mr Al-Muqdad were arrested in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, which occurred between 14 February and 18 March 2011 and was [crushed by the Bahraini authorities](#), who unlawfully killed and beat protesters, and arrested, tortured, and prosecuted opposition activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists.

The EU has repeatedly raised these cases privately during human rights dialogues with Bahrain, and encouraged Bahrain to uphold its human rights obligations in two recent short statements at the [UN Human Rights Council](#). In February, [the High Representative](#) reiterated the EU's commitment to "call for the release of Mr Al-Khawaja and other human rights defenders in Bahrain through available diplomatic channels". But these efforts have ostensibly been insufficient, with the two remaining in jail for nearly 14 years at the time of writing.

We are also concerned that the EU's latest Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy 2023 paints a misleading and one-sided picture of the human rights and democracy situation in Bahrain. The report [claims](#) that '*Bahrain has continued to improve its human rights record, notably in the area of social and economic rights and women's rights*', but the report fails to mention the [torture](#) and [denial](#) of [medical care](#) for members of Bahrain's political opposition.

We also note that the EU and Bahrain signed a cooperation arrangement in 2021 to enhance bilateral relations. The agreement was signed despite the continued unjust imprisonment of two EU nationals, Mr Al-Khawaja and Mr Al-Muqdad. Both Mr Al-Khawaja and Mr Al-Muqdad have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, including by the Bahraini military, as documented by [the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry](#), and they have been deprived of their fair trial rights such as

attending court hearings, legal representation, and access to health care, in violation of both international human rights law and Bahrain's constitutional obligations to uphold and respect human rights. Furthermore, in 2012, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [concluded](#) that Mr Al-Khawaja's detention was arbitrary and in contravention of international law and called for his 'immediate release' and 'enforceable right to compensation'.

Bahrain continues to unjustly detain others for politically motivated reasons – amongst them those advocating for human rights, including Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, Hassan Mushaima and Sheikh Ali Salman. According to documentation by Human Rights Watch, there are also [26 people on death row](#) facing imminent execution, many of whom allege torture and unfair trials. These include Mohammed Ramadan and Hussain Moosa, who have now spent over a decade in arbitrary detention and were sentenced to death in 2014 in an unfair trial marred by allegations of torture.

In 2024, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa issued four royal pardons, resulting in the unconditional and immediate release of an estimated 810 political prisoners, [according](#) to the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. Regrettably, 2024 also saw the deaths in custody of two prisoners held for political reasons, [Hussain Khalil](#) and [Hussain Aman](#), in March and December 2024 respectively, who died of cardiac arrest, raising deep concerns about the adequacy of healthcare in the prison. The deaths triggered [prisoner strikes](#), which were met with disproportionate and unlawful response by prison authorities, including the [use of force](#) and collective punishment, according to the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR). The undersigned remain concerned over conditions in Jau Prison, [amid reports](#) from the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) of prolonged confinement, unhygienic conditions, lack of adequate health care, and punishment for congregational prayers and rituals.

Following the first EU-GCC summit in October 2024, [both parties committed](#) to respecting, protecting, and promoting universal human rights and international law. As such, it is vital for the EU to emphasize these aspects of the relationship with Bahrain.

In the light of the above, we respectfully call on the EU to do the following:

- Make urgent high-level outreach to the King of Bahrain to secure the immediate and unconditional release of EU nationals Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad;
- In line with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU should meet with Mr Al-Khawaja and Mr Al-Muqdad during country visits to Bahrain and, if this is not possible, consider meeting with the family of Mr Al-Khawaja and Mr Al-Muqdad instead;
- Work closely with the governments of Denmark and Sweden to coordinate joint efforts in the case of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Mohammed Habib Al-Muqdad, a Danish-Bahraini and a Swedish-Bahraini national, respectively;
- Ensure more accurate and balanced reporting on the human rights and democracy situation in Bahrain in the EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy, including by increasing consultation with civil society, including those in exile, and international human rights organisations; and guaranteeing that human rights defenders can carry out their peaceful work without fear of reprisals against them and their families;
- Publicly urge the Bahraini authorities to end the use of the death penalty in Bahrain, calling on Bahrain to commute all outstanding death sentences, and to establish an official moratorium on executions;

- Carry out independent human rights impact assessments before signing any future agreements with Bahrain, and use the ongoing negotiations for partnership agreements to secure concrete and measurable human rights progress through reforms and the release of unjustly jailed individuals.

We trust that the EU will show the solidarity and determination necessary to secure the release of two EU nationals and allow them to finally reunite with their families after 14 years of unjust imprisonment, and we hope that these releases can be secured well before Denmark takes over the EU Presidency in July 2025.

Thank you for your attention and we remain ready to discuss this urgent matter with you at any time.

Sincerely,

1. Access Now
2. ALQST For Human Rights
3. Amnesty International
4. ARTICLE 19
5. Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
6. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
7. CIVICUS
8. DAWN
9. FairSquare
10. Front Line Defenders
11. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
12. Human Rights First
13. Human Rights Monitor (HRM)
14. Human Rights Watch
15. HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
16. IFEX
17. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
18. International Media Support
19. International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)
20. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
21. Martin Ennals Foundation
22. Mellemfølkeligt Samvirke / ActionAid Denmark
23. MENA Rights Group
24. Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)
25. REDRESS
26. Reprieve
27. Sentinel for Human Rights
28. The Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
29. The FreeAlKhwaja Campaign
30. The Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
31. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders