

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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BAHRAIN: FORMER MP AL-TAMIMI TARGETED AMIDST GENERAL STIFLING OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Amnesty International today condemned the continuing government harassment of former Bahraini member of parliament Osama Muhana al-Tamimi. The actions against al-Tamimi come in a climate of escalated state intimidation aiming to quash free expression. In addition to official agencies' actions against al-Tamimi – including multiple summonses and an attempt to confiscate his personal phone without a warrant – there have been a number of incidents targeting al-Tamimi's businesses and personal safety in recent years which the government has failed to adequately investigate. The broader context involves a series of recent statements by the highest officials, including the King, that criticism of government, especially on social media, will not be tolerated.

THE CASE OF OSAMA MUHANA AL-TAMIMI

Osama al-Tamimi entered Bahrain's Council of Representatives after the by-elections of October 2011, which were held to fill the vacancies left when the now-banned opposition bloc al-Wefaq collectively resigned from parliament in protest against the suppression of the February uprising. Al-Tamimi became known as a harsh critic of the government while in parliament and as one of the few Sunni parliamentarians willing to speak out against repression of Shi'a citizens. In a [speech of 28 July 2013](#) before the Council of Representatives, as other MPs tried to shout him down, he expressed solidarity with Sheikh Ali Salman, the Shi'a leader of al-Wefaq. Many of his proposals for reform aligned with those of al-Wefaq. Hence [in an April 2012 speech](#), he called for the resignation of Prime Minister Khalifah bin Salman Al Khalifah, who has led Bahrain's government since its independence from Britain in 1971. Criticism of the Prime Minister is a major taboo in Bahraini politics and his resignation was a key demand of the 2011 uprising. In another parliamentary speech on 11 February 2014, al-Tamimi [called for the release of prisoner of conscience Nabeel Rajab](#), the Shi'a head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. On 20 May 2014, the Council of Representatives removed al-Tamimi from parliament in a secret vote following deliberations that were closed to the press.

Since 2012, al-Tamimi has been subjected to a pattern of harassment by government authorities and false accusations in the government-linked press, while a number of unresolved crimes have targeted al-Tamimi's personal businesses. On 28 April 2012, an unknown assailant opened fire on Caliber Gym, a fitness club owned by al-Tamimi on Istiqlal highway near the town of Sanad. Two employees were inside the gym at the time, and al-Tamimi himself had left shortly before; the building was struck with roughly 30 bullets. In July 2012, while al-Tamimi was driving on Istiqlal highway, he narrowly survived when an unknown assailant opened fire on his car with an automatic weapon, piercing it with four bullets. Al-Tamimi [would later tell al-Wasat](#), Bahrain's sole independent newspaper – which the government has since shut down – that the authorities "haven't lifted a finger" to solve the two shooting incidents. Both files have been shelved as cold cases, with no suspects identified or charges raised.

In July 2013, an unexplained fire destroyed the boxing training club owned by al-Tamimi in the town of Salmabad. In September 2013, the newspaper *al-Ayam*, which the royally appointed Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry [Report](#) noted is "owned by figures closely associated with" the Government of Bahrain, [alleged](#) on the basis of a [fabricated document](#) that the U.S. Embassy had "recruited" al-Tamimi "to serve American interests."

In November 2016, al-Tamimi was [sentenced to a month in prison](#) for allegedly insulting a police officer. Upon his release after completion of his sentence in 2017, he was forced to pay over \$66,000 USD at the al-Hoorra police station. Al-Tamimi was told orally that if he did not pay the amount he would be sent back to prison.

A month ago, on 4 June 2019, al-Tamimi's Caliber Gym was gutted by a second unexplained fire. On 15 June 2019, police wearing uniforms but driving in unmarked cars stopped al-Tamimi on a public road and demanded his national ID card, which he gave them. Without presenting a search warrant, they then demanded his cellphone, which he refused to hand over. He left the scene in his car and was followed aggressively by the unmarked police vehicles. Later that day he went with his family to the U.S. Embassy, seeking entry to claim physical protection and political asylum. The Embassy called on the Bahraini police to remove him from the premises. In recent months, government agencies have summoned him several times for questioning.

ESCALATED THREATS AGAINST THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

This comes in the context of heightened state rhetoric threatening to arrest and prosecute those who criticize the government, especially through social media. In the first instance, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, in a speech delivered on 20 May during Ramadan festivities, [stated](#) that he had “directed ... security agencies to put a decisive stop to” the “misuse of social media.” This message was immediately [supported](#) and [echoed](#) by the royally appointed Shura Council’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense, & National Security. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Khalifah bin Salman Al Khalifah “directed the Ministry of Interior to deal harshly with” social-media accounts which encourage “breaking of ranks” from the “solidity of the social fabric.” As [reported by Bahrain’s official news agency](#), the Prime Minister ordered “intensified monitoring” and “firm deterrent measures” to “guarantee an end to electronic accounts harmful to society’s security,” which he characterized as “poison and filthy pus” spread by “enemies inside and outside.”

The same day, 20 May, the Ministry of Interior issued a [statement announcing](#) that it was “taking the necessary legal actions against those involved in” social-media accounts which “deface Bahrain’s reputation” from “a number of European countries like France and Germany, as well as Australia,” along with Bahrain’s regional enemies Qatar, Iraq, and Iran. The Ministry statement specifically named Sayed Yusuf al-Muhafdha and Hasan AbdulNabi “al-Sitri,” who live in exile in Germany and Australia respectively. Al-Muhafdha fled abroad in 2013 after he was repeatedly arrested solely for exercising his rights to freedom of [peaceful assembly](#), expression, and association – including for his work at the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which the government shut down in 2006. Al-Muhafdha was granted asylum in Germany. The Ministry’s threat of legal action includes individuals “supplying erroneous information from inside the country” or “disseminating distorted messages” from accounts abroad – i.e., anyone who communicates with dissident exiles or who re-Tweets or follows accounts deemed subversive by the state.

The Ministry of Interior’s official Twitter account, in a series of Tweets issued in the name of its Cyber Crime Directorate, echoed these threats. On 21 May, the Ministry account [Tweeted](#) that there were “legal procedures” underway against “anyone who propagates the distorted messages” of Adel Marzooq, a former writer for both *al-Wasat* and the government-affiliated newspaper *al-Bilad*, who now lives abroad in the UK. On 30 May, the Ministry of Interior account issued warnings in both [Arabic](#) and [English](#) that: “Those who follow inciting [*sic*] accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable.” Around the same time, Bahraini citizens and residents began receiving [text messages](#) in the name of the Cyber Crime Directorate telling recipients to “be warned” that “following biased [social-media] accounts that stir up social discord could subject you to legal liability.”

The government’s campaign of intimidation earned it an unusual rebuke from Twitter, which [commented](#) on its public policy account: “We agree with civil society that recent government statements in #Bahrain about critical online posts will, if implemented, pose a significant risk to free expression and journalism.” The social-media company added a note in the same thread explaining to users how they could privately follow accounts without being subject to outside monitoring.

On 1 June, the General Directorate of Anti-Corruption & Economic & Electronic Security, the larger Ministry of Interior department housing the Cyber Crime Directorate, [repeated the warning](#) that “recirculating what is published by accounts that incite and stir up social discord, or giving them backing or support through comments supportive of the owners of these accounts and what they publish ... will subject the individual to legal liability,” and stressing that this “liability” extended to “followers” of such accounts. On 3 June, the Directorate [reiterated](#) that it would “confront all accounts that spread content violating the law and insulting Bahrain.”

This stepped-up rhetoric, aiming to intimidate and dissuade Bahrainis from engaging in open public discussion, has been accompanied by steps to increase punishments attached to the existing legal prohibition on critical discourse. The head of the Council of Representatives’ Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense, & National Security, Mohamed Ebrahim Al BuAinain, [announced on 22 May](#) that, “in line with the directives issued to not be lenient with those who misuse the platform of social media,” he would introduce a bill to “sharpen the punishment” of such “misuse” under the cybercrimes law. On the same day, [the King approved](#) a revised version of Article 11 of the counterterror law, which now applies a harsher punishment of up to five years in prison to “anyone who possesses or acquires ... any means of printing, recording, or publicity, of any sort, used or prepared to be used, even temporarily, to print, record, or broadcast” any “content including” the “propagation, praise, glorification, justification, acclamation, or encouragement of actions comprising terrorist activity.” Bahrain’s legal definition of terrorism (under Article 1 of Act No. 58 of 2006 on the Protection of Society from Terrorist Acts) includes actions “harm[ing] the national economy” or “damaging national unity.”

Though the escalating rhetoric and legal threats have so far been directed primarily against Bahrainis living abroad, Bahrainis still in the country who run Twitter or other social-media accounts which occasionally criticize the government have also recently reported that they have been summoned for interrogation and/or that prosecutions have been opened against them because of Tweets. Former *al-Wasat* writer Jaafar Ali al-Jamri [wrote on his Twitter account](#) that he was been

put on trial “in connection with Tweets” after being summoned for interrogation by the Office of Public Prosecution on 5 May. The lawyer Abdulla AbdulRahman Hashim [Tweeted](#) on 15 May that he had been summoned by the Office of Public Prosecution for interrogation about “the opinions I have put forth on Twitter lately about national issues and social concerns.”

CONCLUSION

Amnesty International expresses grave alarm at the government’s renewed harassment of Osama al-Tamimi and its failure to seriously address the threats to his personal safety, and roundly affirms his rights to liberty and security of person, and to freely leave the country if he wishes to do so. We condemn the Bahraini government’s strident new rhetorical campaign against freedom of expression, which has all but vanished in the country due to the state’s clampdown in recent years. The aggressive moves to further suppress critical discussion on social media, in a context where people already fear prosecution for speaking candidly about national problems, will only exacerbate the repressive climate that pervades the country. Given the [recent claim](#) by the UK government that Bahrain is undergoing an “unprecedented ... reform programme,” and in light of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s decision to prioritize “defend[ing] media freedom” (including on social media), it is particularly incumbent on the UK government to use its leverage with Bahraini authorities to pressure them to end their repression and demand that they respect, protect, and fulfil the right to freedom of expression.