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Bahrain authorities must rescind decision to close only independent newspaper al-Wasat and cease all-out campaign to end independent reporting

Amnesty International calls on the Bahraini authorities to rescind their arbitrary decision to close the only independent newspaper in the country, al-Wasat, and end its all-out campaign to crush freedom of press. This call comes over a month after the Ministry of Information indefinitely suspended the newspaper and as the authorities' crackdown on all forms of peaceful criticism intensifies. The organization also calls on the authorities to reverse their arbitrary decision not to renew the accreditation of prominent journalist Nazeeha Saeed and other journalists and for Nazeeha Saeed's conviction for working without a permit to be quashed.

On 4 June, al-Wasat received a call from the Ministry of Information informing them that it had decided to immediately suspend publication of al-Wasat, both print and online, until further notice. The Ministry stated that its suspension was for an article published that day on the protests in al-Hoceima, Morocco. Shortly after al-Wasat received the call, the Bahrain News Agency published a [statement](#) that al-Wasat was suspended "following its recurrent violation of the law and spreading what would stir divisions within the community and undermine the Kingdom of Bahrain's relations with other countries." It stated that it had "published a column on page 19 [on al-Hoceima protests] that included a defamation of a sisterly Arab country".

The newspaper received a letter from the Ministry that day informing it of the decision to suspend the newspaper until further notice. Al-Wasat attempted on multiple occasions to contact the Ministry and other government departments and officials, including the Deputy Prime Ministers, but has not received any response.

On 24 June, al-Wasat's board of directors informed its staff of around 185 full and part-time employees and other contributors that it had decided to terminate their contracts due to it being forced to end its activities following its suspension.

Al-Wasat's [opinion piece](#) described the protest movement in Morocco since the Arab Spring and the reasons for the protests in al-Hoceima, in northern Morocco, which had taken place a few days earlier. There is nothing in the al-Wasat piece that would justify the newspaper's suspension. This arbitrary measure violates Bahrain's obligation to respect and ensure the right to freedom of expression. The authorities must end the suspension of al-Wasat immediately and ensure that it can publish without further arbitrary interference.

This brazen attack on press freedom comes at a time of heightened crackdown on all forms of peaceful criticism, including the targeting of human rights defenders, political opposition groups and activists and other peaceful critics, including journalists.

The Ministry of Information, which regulates the accreditation of foreign and local correspondents, did not renew the accreditation of several journalists and photojournalists in 2016. The reasons the Ministry has given for the decision not to renew accreditation, which were either vague or cited the journalist's opinions. The arbitrary denial of accreditation of journalists forms part of the authorities' intensified campaign targeting peaceful critics and violates freedom of expression. Also, one journalist was arbitrarily detained and another has been convicted as a result of her journalism.

Prominent journalist **Nazeeha Saeed** was subjected to an arbitrary travel ban between June and August 2016, like scores of other activists. She was put on trial in July 2016, accused of "practicing information work without renewing the permit issued by the Information Affairs Authority" under Article 88 of the Law on Regulating the Press, Printing and Publication, which provides that correspondents of foreign news agencies may not practice their work in Bahrain without a license from the Ministry. On 25 May 2017, the court convicted her and fined her 1,000BD. Nazeeha Saeed had worked as an accredited journalist with international news agencies for 12 years with the required accreditation. Before her accreditation expired on 31 March 2016, she had applied for renewal, and had carried on working as a journalist assuming that her accreditation would be renewed as in previous years. She only became aware that it was not renewed when she received a letter from the Ministry on 20 June 2016 stating that her license had not been renewed as she had not attended 10% of events in Bahrain - an accusation she denies. The day she received the letter, she stopped working as a journalist. According to the court documents seen by Amnesty International, the case brought against her related to her reporting as a France 24 correspondent on 28 and 30 May and 1 June 2016, before she had received the ministry's letter. According to the documents, Nazeeha Saeed's accreditation was not renewed because "her performance [was] not satisfactory with regards to covering of events and carrying out of correspondent duties overall", a vaguely-worded accusation which Nazeeha Saeed denies. Nazeeha Saeed's appeal begins on 18 July.

Prominent photojournalist **Mohamed al-Sheikh** was arrested upon his arrival at Bahrain International Airport on 21 March 2017. He was arbitrarily detained for over 24 hours, without access to his lawyer, and released on 23 March, without charge. The Ministry of Information had arbitrarily revoked Mohamed al-Sheikh's accreditation on 22 September 2016 citing reasons of "biased coverage".

Background

This is not the first time that al-Wasat has been suspended or otherwise targeted. In January 2017, al-Wasat's online publication was suspended for three days after the Ministry of Information issued an order on 16 January to suspend it due to its "repeated broadcastings inciting to discord in society and the spirit of sedition, disruption of national unity that affects public peace." Its suspension came amid a heightened clampdown in the country following mass demonstrations protesting the execution of three men, the first executions to take place in nearly seven years. Al-Wasat was also suspended in August 2015 for two days for "violation of the law and repeated dissemination of information that affects national unity and the Kingdom's relationship with other countries." It was also suspended for a day in 2011.

The co-founder of al-Wasat, **Abdelkarim al-Fakhrawi** was beaten to death on 11 April 2011 while in custody of Bahrain's National Security Agency (NSA). Two NSA officers were sentenced to seven years for his death, but this sentence was later reduced to three years on appeal.