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Your Majesty,

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom concerning the comprehensive travel bans imposed by Bahrain's Public Prosecutor and Ministry of Interior on at least twenty-eight members of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), including several working and retired academics. These bans violate the basic human rights of freedom of opinion, freedom of movement, and freedom of conscience of these individuals, all of whom are citizens of the Kingdom of Bahrain. We are very concerned that this action on the part of Bahrain's Ministry of Interior and Public Prosecutor sets a dangerous precedent that threatens civil society in the country.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

The travel bans were imposed in June and August 2016. On June 12, 2016, three members of the BCHR, journalist Hussain Radhi, nurse Ibrahim al-Demistani, and BCHR staff member Ebtisam al-Sayegh, were stopped at the Bahrain International Airport and prevented from traveling to Geneva, Switzerland, to attend the thirty-second session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which took place on June 13-July 1, 2016, with an additional meeting on July 8. Two days later, on June 14, BCHR president Jalila al-Salman, who is also vice president of the Bahrain Teachers Association, was prevented from traveling to Oslo, Norway, to attend the awards ceremony for the Arthur Svensson International Prize for Trade Union Rights, which she herself had won in 2015 for her work with the Bahrain Teachers Association. And on June 18, BCHR member Abdunabi al-Ekry, a retired pediatric orthopedic surgeon, was stopped at the same airport and prevented from leaving the country. None of these individuals had been formally informed of the travel bans before going to the airport.

Furthermore, when they were informed of the bans at the airport, they were not told the reason for the bans or what branch of the Bahraini government had issued them. Only later was it understood that most of the bans were issued by the Public Prosecutor's office while the rest were issued by the Ministry of Interior. When several of those barred from travel appealed to Bahrain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they were not even received by ministry representatives.

Again, in August 2016, several individuals were prevented from traveling. On August 22, Enas Oun, head of the BCHR's Monitoring and Documentation Department, was banned from traveling to a human rights workshop outside Bahrain. On August 23, Hussain Radhi was again prevented from leaving the country under the travel ban imposed on him in June. The same day, lawyer and former BCHR member Mohamed al-Tajer was barred from leaving the country, while on August 27, Ebtisam al-Sayegh was once again prevented from traveling, and BCHR member Ahmed al-Saffar, head of the Monitoring and Documentation Unit of the European-Bahraini Organization for Human Rights, was barred for the first time. On August 29, Nedal al-Salman, the BCHR's Head of International Relations and Women's and Children's Advocacy, was prevented from traveling to Geneva in connection with the thirty-third session of the UNHRC, which took place September 13-30. And on August 31, Jalila al-Salman, who had been prevented from leaving the country in June, was stopped on the King Fahd Causeway leading from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia and informed that the Public Prosecutor had ordered a comprehensive travel ban against her.

Bahrain's government appears to be using travel bans, as well as imprisonment and revocation of passports, as instruments to inhibit the important work of the BCHR. Furthermore, these travel bans violate basic human rights of these individuals, notably freedom of movement, freedom of conscience, freedom to form associations, and freedom of assembly, which are enshrined in the Kingdom of Bahrain's 2002 constitution. More specifically, the bans violate Article 19 of the constitution, which states, "...nor shall the residence of any person or his liberty to choose his place of residence or his liberty of movement be restricted, except in accordance with the law and under the supervision of the judicial authorities." In addition, the bans are comprehensive, prohibiting travel outside Bahrain for any reason whatsoever and for an indefinite period. Thus, these restrictions could threaten the health and well-being of the individuals concerned.

We call on the Government of Bahrain, and specifically its Public Prosecutor's Office and Ministry of Interior, to lift the travel bans on all twenty-eight of the affected BCHR members, and to refrain from using travel bans to hinder the work of these and other human rights-oriented organizations in Bahrain. The

members of these organizations, and all citizens of Bahrain, should be allowed to travel abroad freely and without constraints.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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cc:

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