

## Liberty at Risk: Reprisals Against Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region and Neighbouring Countries

A Report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)



**August 2016**

“We should use our voices and respective mandates to hail brave individuals, defenders and activists who, in circumstances where it may be safer to remain silent, have decided to engage with the UN human rights mechanisms... We should stand beside them, behind them and around them. Many times we are all they have to shield them when they are attacked for leading the struggle in defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Sekaggya,  
Former UN Special Rapporteur on the  
situation of human rights defenders, 2011

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly News “Preventing intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders”  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/GAPanelOnReprisal.aspx#sthash.QIX90MIU.dpuf>

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## I. Introduction

This report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) aims to set out the cases of human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries who have been subjected to reprisals as a result of their co-operation and engagement with international human rights systems, including United Nations (UN) bodies. In this report, acts of reprisals are documented against human rights defenders from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. These acts are increasing in incidence in the Gulf region and it is paramount to the integrity of the international human rights mechanisms that the issue of reprisals is tackled as a matter of urgency.

Engagement with such mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and Special Procedures, is essential for attention to be brought to human rights situations and individual cases and to enable appropriate measures to be taken. The very existence of these mechanisms depends on the ability of individuals and organisations to engage with them freely and without fear of reprisals or intimidation.

International Conventions, including UN treaty body conventions, afford protection to human rights defenders against reprisals,<sup>2</sup> however, all too often, human rights defenders are met with unjust targeting by authorities in an attempt to punish and hinder their activities. Many others are unable to engage with human rights mechanisms for fear of such targeting.

According to a July 2013 report to the UN HRC by the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), reprisals “take many forms, ranging from smear campaigns, threats, travel bans, harassment, fines, the closing of organisations, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests, prosecutions and lengthy prison sentences through to torture, ill-treatment and even death.”<sup>3</sup>

The former UN High Commissioner, **Navi Pillay**, recognised the importance of protecting human rights defenders from reprisals, saying, “It is natural for people to stand up for their rights and freedoms, resist oppression, and challenge authoritarianism. In these brave efforts they frequently resort to the international community and its human rights mechanisms for support.”

“The United Nations could not do its invaluable work for human rights without those who cooperate with UN representatives, rapporteurs and other mechanisms,” said the Secretary General. “When they are targeted for reprisals, we are all less secure. When their cooperation is stifled, our work for human rights is also a victim.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1999, Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture 2002, Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1998

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly Report of the Secretary General “Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights” A/HRC/24/29 available at

[http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session24/Documents/A-HRC-24-29\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session24/Documents/A-HRC-24-29_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/GAPanelOnReprisal.aspx#sthash.SK0o4Hlr.dpuf>

## II. Reports on Reprisals by Country

### Bahrain

The authorities in Bahrain systematically punish human rights defenders who engage with international human rights mechanisms as a means of targeting individuals and their families as a tool to discourage human rights activism. Reprisals, which followed engagement with the UN and in particular the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, were recognised and condemned by the UN Secretary General in a 2012 report.<sup>5</sup> More recently, travel bans were imposed on human rights defenders prohibiting them from traveling to the UN HRC in June 2016.<sup>6</sup>

A series of travel bans were imposed on approximately two dozen human rights defenders as they attempted to travel in June and July 2016 to destinations including Geneva for the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN HRC in Geneva. Bahraini authorities imposed travel bans on human rights defenders **Hussain Radhi** of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), **Ebtisam Al-Saegh** of Salam for Human Rights and Democracy, unionist and activist **Ebrahim Al-Demistani**, the parents of **Ali Mushaima**, a victim of extrajudicial killing, and the father of another victim of extrajudicial killing **Sayed Hasimh**, all of whom were due to participate in the delegation in Geneva.

In separate cases, human rights lawyer **Mohammed Al-Tajer**, head of the Bahrain Transparency Association **Sharaf Al-Mosawi**, journalist **Nazeeha Saeed**, and members of the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory (BHRO) **Zainab Al-Khamis** and **Abdulnabi Al-Ekry**, were also banned from travelling to other destinations in June. On 13 June 2016, **Jalila Al-Salman**, Vice-President of the dissolved Bahrain Teachers' Society, was stopped from flying to Norway for an award ceremony.

On 8 June 2016, **Dr. Taha Al-Derazi**, a former prisoner of conscience and activist, was prevented from traveling to the United Kingdom with his wife. He had participated in the 31st session of the UN HRC in 2015. Then on 15 August, Dr. Al-Derazi was charged with "illegal gathering", and remanded in custody for two weeks.

Human rights defender **Maytham Al-Salman** was also charged in the same case on 15 August 2016 but freed. The charges relate to their peaceful assembly in the village of Duraz, which has been blockaded by police since June after large-scale protests began. A travel ban has also been in place against Al-Salman following his participation in various international human rights related conferences. He was selected from over 500 applicants to participate in the 2016 Draper Hills Summer Fellowship Program at Stanford University based on "the significant contributions that he has made to build more tolerant societies to counter violence and extremism in the Middle East." The Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law called on the Bahraini authorities to lift the ban to no avail.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A/HRC/21/18 (par 51-54) available at [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-18\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-18_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> For further information see GCHR appeals <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1296> <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1287>

<sup>7</sup> <http://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/news/stanford-cddrl-calls-bahrain-authorities-release-travel-ban-sheikh-al-salman>

The imposition of travel bans is a worrying tactic that the authorities are using in an effort to prevent engagement with international human rights mechanism and to intimidate and silence freedom of expression. While not a new tactic, it appears that the authorities have escalated the use of travel bans in recent months. Furthermore it is thought that the list of those who are banned from travelling extends beyond those aware of the ban, as many individuals only find out when they attempt to travel.<sup>8</sup> Travel bans are so widespread in Bahrain currently that around 54,000 people have used the e-government website to check if they are banned from travel in the past seven months.<sup>9</sup> No reasons have been provided for such bans. This tactic is in clear contravention of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>10</sup> and the Constitution of Bahrain.<sup>11</sup>

**Nabeel Rajab**, Founding Director of GCHR, President of BCHR and Deputy Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), has been subjected to an on-going travel ban since 2014 and is currently in detention. He was arrested during a raid on his home on 13 June 2016, the first day of the UN HRC session, allegedly for "spreading false news and rumours about the internal situation in a bid to discredit Bahrain" relating to TV interviews he gave in which he brought attention to human rights issues. Rajab remains in detention facing trial in other cases related to his advocacy online including reporting on torture in Bahrain's Jaw Prison and civilian casualties during the bombing of Yemen, in violation of his right to freedom of expression, and there are increasing fears for his health, as he suffers from a number of medical conditions.<sup>12</sup> In 2011, Rajab received the Ion Ratiu Democracy Award, presented annually by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and he has won other accolades for his human rights advocacy.

Prominent human rights defender and co-founder of the GCHR **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja** remains behind bars, serving a sentence of life imprisonment handed down in June 2011, as a result of his peaceful work in promoting and protecting human rights and drawing international attention to the dire situation in Bahrain. He worked regionally and internationally, engaging with the UN systems on a regular basis, and bringing cases of human rights violations to their attention. In 2012, Freedom House gave Abdulhadi, and his daughters **Maryam** and **Zainab Al-Khawaja**, its annual Freedom Award. In 2013, he won the World Without Torture award from DIGNITY, and he has also been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

His daughter **Zainab Al-Khawaja** has also been targeted as a result of her human rights activism and her online postings. She has faced judicial harassment, multiple arrests and periods in detention due to her work publicising human rights violations in Bahrain and for charges of "insulting the King." Her detention on these charges was heavily criticised by the UN.<sup>13</sup> Following a recent jail sentence, she was forced to leave Bahrain in June with her children and live in exile as a result.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/7974>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1133433.html>

<sup>10</sup> Article 12 (1)

<sup>11</sup> Article 19

<sup>12</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1278>

<sup>13</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1216>

His other daughter, GCHR Co-Director Maryam Al-Khawaja, has been the target of defamation campaigns and imprisonment due to her human rights work and engagement with the UN.<sup>14</sup>

On 22 June 2016, **Ghada Jamsheer**, a feminist, writer, blogger and journalist who is President of the Women's Petition Committee (WPC), was sentenced on appeal to one year in prison for four cases related to her Tweets about corruption at King Hamad hospital. She has already been sentenced to one year and seven months on other charges related to the same case. The sentencing is a direct result of her being a well-known international human rights defender and writer who has strong links to the international community, with whom she consistently communicated during efforts to draw attention to human rights issues in the country. On 15 August 2016, Jamsheer was taken into custody at the airport upon her return to the country from a trip abroad.

On 25 January 2016, human rights defender **Naji Fateel** was among 57 prisoners sentenced to additional 15-year terms for allegedly being involved in disturbances in Jaw prison in March 2015. Fateel, a board member of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), was already serving a 15-year prison sentence for allegedly “establishing a group for the purpose of disabling the constitution,” and has been in prison since May 2013. He was reportedly injured during the disturbance in prison.<sup>15</sup> It is believed that he was originally jailed and tortured in 2013 for his participation at the UN HRC.

These are only some of the recent cases of acts of reprisals against human rights defenders in Bahrain who have suffered for years as a result of their engagement with the UN.

## **Kuwait**

In Kuwait, human rights defender **Nawaf Al-Hendal** has been targeted by the authorities for his peaceful work of monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Kuwait including during Bedoon (“stateless”) demonstrations, which are often targeted by state security forces. He has faced travel bans and arrests. Together with human rights defender **Hadeel Buqrais** he has been accused, in State Security reports, of acting as a spy for foreign bodies following their communication with international human rights organisations.

In March 2015, **Nawaf Al-Hendal** spoke at the 28<sup>th</sup> session of the UN HRC highlighting the continued targeting and judicial harassment against on-line activists and human rights defenders in Kuwait. Three days later he was arrested when monitoring a peaceful protest calling for a wide range of reforms. He faced charges including “illegal gathering” and was acquitted in March 2016 following international pressure.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/750>

<sup>15</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1174>

<sup>16</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/960>

## Oman

In Oman, long-standing, prominent human rights defender and blogger **Saeed Jadad** has faced continuous reprisals as a result of his peaceful activism and his involvement with international human rights bodies including the UN and the European Union (EU). He was instrumental in organising and leading pro-reform protests in Dhofar in 2011 and has spoken publicly to crowds of up to 20,000 people. He is also an active blogger and has signed several petitions calling for reform in Oman.

In April 2012, he was one member of a human rights delegation who met with representatives of EU institutions including the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Danish EU Presidency and the 27 Member State and the European Parliament in Brussels. He spoke about the general human rights situation in Oman and the marginalisation of the people in Dhofar and called for greater communication with human rights defenders in Oman.

In September 2014, Jadad met with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly and Association **Maina Kiai** when he was on an official visit to Oman. Following the visit he was increasingly targeted by authorities with harassment and detention. In a press release in January 2015 the Special Rapporteur stated, “Mr. Jadad has been repeatedly detained since 10 December and I am worried that he was arrested for having met with me during my visit.” He urged the Omani government to ensure Saeed Jadad’s safety and guarantee that no human rights defender in the country is subjected to any form of reprisals.

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, also emphasised that “Mr. Jadad’s recurring detention is unacceptable as it seems to be an act of reprisal for cooperating with international organisations.”<sup>17</sup>

A travel ban was placed against Saeed Jadad in July 2014 and he was arrested on 10 December 2014 during a raid on his home by security forces. He was detained incommunicado before being released on bail following reports of ill-health and ill-treatment in prison. In January 2015, he was arrested again and sentenced to three years in prison, on charges including allegedly “undermining the country’s position and prestige” and “incitement against the government and public order disruption.” He was released on bail in April 2015 while appealing the charges. He was then arrested on 25 November 2015 and sentenced under the Cyber Crimes Law to one year in prison on charges of “the use of an information network (Internet) in the dissemination of material that would prejudice public order.” He is currently held at Arzat Central prison where his health has seriously deteriorated, yet he has been denied medical treatment.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> UN OHCHR News “Oman: UN experts call for the immediate release of prominent rights activist as reprisals continue unchecked” <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15525&LangID=E#sthash.V0kLsjew.dpuf>

<sup>18</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1266>

## **Saudi Arabia**

The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is critical. Many human rights defenders who bravely speak out and engage with the international human rights community face reprisals as a result.

**Samar Badawi** is a leading women's rights activist who was a prominent figure in the 2011-2012 Right to Drive Campaign. She has worked tirelessly raising international awareness about the oppression of women and the treatment of human rights defenders. She has been detained and interrogated for her activities and faced threats and harassment from the authorities. She was awarded the International Hrant Dink Award given to individuals who risk their lives for ideals and principles through peaceful means. However, due to a travel ban in place against her she was unable to travel to collect the award in September 2015,<sup>19</sup> and she has been unable to travel since then. She was also one of ten honorees in 2012 who received the prestigious US Secretary of State Award for International Women of Courage, which recognises women who have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment, often at great personal risk.<sup>20</sup>

Dr. **Mohammed Al-Qahtani** is a prominent lawyer and co-founder of the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights, who was publicly convicted for his co-operation with the UN system. He is currently serving a 10-year jail term to be followed by a 10-year travel ban. He has been featured in numerous reports of the UN Secretary General on this matter in which the UN has demanded that charges against him be dropped and that he be released. A UN report noted that there are 11 charges against him including charges that made "specific reference to his work as a human rights defender and accused him of providing false facts and information to international mechanisms by way of statements and the dissemination of information about individual complaints against the Saudi Government which 'contradict the truth and reality documented in official papers'." It also noted, "Concerns have been raised that the criminal charges against him are directly related to his work documenting cases of arbitrary detention in Saudi Arabia and constitute reprisals in response to his engagement with human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council and its special procedures"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1159>

<sup>20</sup> For further information see US Department of State Press release <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/03/185230.htm>

<sup>21</sup> UN HRC Report 2012 A/HRC/21/18 para 36 and 37

Human rights lawyer **Waleed Abu Al-Khair**, founder and Director of the independent non-profit civil rights organisation Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA) is also currently in detention serving a 15-year prison sentence which began in 2014. He has been subjected to ill-treatment in prison and is being denied access to his family. Multiple trumped-up charges were brought against him including allegedly “antagonising international organisations against the kingdom,” relating to his engagement with international human rights mechanisms including the UN system and “setting up and supervising an unlicensed association” referring to MHRSA.<sup>22</sup> The UN Secretary General has called for the release of **Waleed Abu Al-Khair** and Dr. **Mohammed Al-Qahtani**.<sup>23</sup> The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) repeated this call stating that their arrests were arbitrary and they should be immediately released.<sup>24</sup>

Human rights defender and journalist **Mikhliif Al-Shammari** was also targeted as a result of his engagement with international human rights bodies. He faces charges, which include communicating with suspicious organisations and attempting to discredit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the eyes of internal and external public opinion.<sup>25</sup>

## **Syria**

Prominent human rights defender and lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh**, her husband **Wa’el Hamada**, and their colleagues **Samira Khalil** and **Nazem Hamadi** were abducted on 9 December 2014 by a group of armed men at the offices of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), a Syrian human rights monitoring group. Since then there has been no contact with them and their whereabouts remain unknown despite on-going calls for their safe return. Prior to their abduction, Razan Zaitouneh had been targeted by extremist militants and Syrian authorities due to her communications with international mechanisms including the EU and the UN and given her prominent role as a human rights defender.

The case of **Mazen Darwish**, **Hani Al-Zitani** and **Hussein Gharir**, members of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of expression (SCM), is another clear example of reprisals. The SCM actively engaged with international mechanisms, bringing attention to human rights issues and the treatment of human rights defenders in Syria. In February 2012, they were arrested by the Syrian Air Force during a raid on their offices and they were released only three-and-a-half years later through a general amnesty in 2015 following European and International pressure.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/986>

<sup>23</sup> UN HRC Report 2012 A/HRC/21/18

<sup>24</sup> UN WGAD Opinion A/HRC/WGAD/2015/38

<sup>25</sup> A number of communications have been sent by Special Procedures on his case as well as Waleed Abu Al-Khair and Fadhil Al-Manasif. See UN General Assembly Report, Communications report of Special Procedures, A/HRC/29/50

<sup>26</sup> For further information see GCHR appeal: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1065>

## **United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

Prominent human rights defender and blogger **Ahmed Mansoor**, as well as others, have been subjected to reprisals in the UAE. Ahmed Mansoor, is a member of GCHR's advisory board, one of a group of human rights defenders jailed in 2011 and collectively known as the UAE5, and a former member of Human Rights Watch's Middle East Advisory Committee. He has contributed extensively to many international human rights forums and events. As a result, he has been subjected to repeated harassment, intimidation and death threats from the state security apparatus, as well as media smear campaigns. In 2011 his passport was confiscated and since then, despite being released and pardoned of the charges against him, the authorities have refused to return his passport. In October 2015, he was awarded the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders but was unable to travel to Geneva to receive the award due to the travel ban.

## **Yemen**

**Amal Basha** is a prominent human rights defender who has co-operated with various international mechanisms and worked closely with the UN, in particular as Programme Officer for the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and by attending HRC sessions in Geneva. She is chairperson of the Sister's Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF) and advisor for the International Coalition on the Criminal Court and the Ministry for Human Rights in Yemen. As a result of her work she has been targeted by all sides of the Yemeni conflict. In 2009, together with other Yemeni human rights organisations, she submitted a comprehensive report on torture to the UN. As a consequence of the report a campaign of attacks was launched against the SAF's office and she faced repeated harassment including an attempt on her life. She currently lives in exile due to the risks associated with her return to Yemen.

**Abdulrasheed Al-Faqhi** and his wife **Radhia Al-Mutawakel** are executive director and chairperson respectively, and founding members of the human rights organisation Mwatana, which monitors and documents human rights violations in Yemen. As a result of their engagement and partnership with international human rights organisations including Amnesty International and the UN, they have been repeatedly targeted.

**Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih** was detained by Houthi militia in Sana'a International airport as he was returning from an international conference on freedom of expression and journalism in Jordan. He was questioned and his passport was confiscated.

The conference was organised by the Yemen Journalists' Syndicate, the International Federation of Journalists, and the Arab Federation of Journalists to discuss the challenges faced by journalists in Yemen, and to develop strategies to protect and strengthen them and their work. This targeting of Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih is an example of how the militias respond to those who engage with human rights issues both at home and on a regional and global level.



Due to Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih, Radhya Al-Mutawakel and Mwatana's work in reporting on human rights issues they have been the subject of smear campaigns by different sides to the conflict in Yemen who hold them responsible for critical reports on human rights by international organisations, even when they have not contributed to said reports.

A hate campaign was launched by the Houthi armed group against them following the publication of a report by Amnesty International which criticised their use of anti-aircraft weapons in civilian areas. Radhya Al-Mutawakel was accused online of being a traitor and the Houthi-controlled ministries of health and human rights organised a press conference attacking the report. As a result, Al-Mutawakel and Al-Faqih were ostracised from their local community.

They have also been targeted by the Al-Islah party following the publication of a UN report stating that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible for 60% of child deaths and injuries in Yemen last year. As a result of the report there have been calls by the international community to put Saudi Arabia back on the UN blacklist of states and groups that violate children's rights in conflicts. The Al-Islah party campaign against Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih and Radhia Al-Mutawakel accused them of being responsible for the report and of being supporters of the Houthi armed group.

These campaigns not only affect them personally but also targets the credibility of Mwatana and its important human rights work.

Women's rights defender **Dr. Shafiqah Al-Wahsh** was barred from travelling to preparatory peace talks in the region by Houthi officials. She is the director of the semi-government Women's National Committee of Yemen and has engaged with human rights mechanisms in an attempt to improve the human rights situation in Yemen. In October 2015, she was one of the women leaders who met with the UN Special Envoy in Yemen at a UN-organised meeting in Cyprus where the women called for permanent peace, an urgent humanitarian response and the inclusion of women in peace negotiations.

### III. Conclusion

Human rights defenders face attacks, threats, intimidation and reprisals by various governments within the Gulf region and neighbouring countries in retaliation for their engagement and co-operation with international human rights systems which, in and of itself, constitutes an attack on public freedom, UN human rights values and principles, the rule of law, and the international mechanisms themselves.

The situation for human rights defenders and civil society continues to become more critical, as State authorities have intensified their efforts to cut links between the human rights movement in the Gulf region in addition to the neighbouring countries and the international community.

## IV. Recommendations

**The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) urges all UN human rights bodies, including the Human Rights Council and UN member states to:**

- Take immediate action to combat reprisals by state authorities against human rights defenders and all those engaging with the UN;
- To this end, to develop and endorse a set of key protection and prevention guidelines, to enhance the protection of the at-risk human rights defenders;
- Remind States of their international responsibilities to avoid acts constituting reprisals;
- Carry out an independent, thorough and impartial investigation into acts of reprisals and ensure accountability for such acts; and
- Consider the establishment of a UN unit or Special Rapporteur dedicated to the issue of reprisals, including their prevention, investigation and accountability.

**The GCHR urges state authorities in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries to:**

- Ensure that all human rights defenders, and all citizens, are free to avail of and engage with UN human rights mechanisms and the international human rights community;
- Ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate and peaceful human rights work without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions including judicial harassment;
- Encourage engagement with UN human rights mechanisms where to do so would benefit the promotion and protection of human rights; and
- Ensure there is a national system in place for investigating acts of reprisals which human rights defenders can engage with, and which carries out impartial and thorough investigations with a view to prosecuting those responsible.

## About GCHR

The **Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)** is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organisation that works to provide support and protection to human rights defenders in the Gulf region by promoting freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

GCHR documents the human rights environment for human rights defenders working in the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as Iran, Iraq, Yemen and Syria.

GCHR was founded in April 2011 by human rights defenders in the region. It has offices in Beirut and Copenhagen and receives guidance from an Advisory Board composed of regional and international human rights defenders, including academics and lawyers.