



## **European Parliament and “Human Rights Defenders” in Bahrain: The Case of Nabeel Rajab**

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On 22 October 2015, Pier Antonio Panzeri – an Italian Member of the European Parliament attached to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – circulated an open letter, addressed to the King of Bahrain, throughout the European Parliament, in the hope of garnishing support to rehash the debate over Bahrain’s human rights situation. Both the letter, and the email containing it, referred to Nabeel Rajab and used his particular case to promote the narrative that Bahrain’s human rights situation is in need of redress. Not only are many of the claims made by Mr Panzeri erroneous, but the spirit of the letter goes beyond the goals of the European Parliament and contributes to enflaming, rather than alleviating, tensions in Bahrain and the Arabian Gulf more generally. European Parliamentarians often underestimate the importance attached to their actions and it is a matter of international responsibility that individual parliamentarians weigh their actions before contributing to crises rather than solutions.

The European Parliament must remain impartial and refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Mr Panzeri is likely taken – as so many others – by Rajab’s rhetorical invocation of human rights being situated at the heart of the wide-spread dissent which, ostensibly, commenced in February 2011. The reality is sharply different and involves long-term Iranian attempts to destabilise and ultimately subdue the Kingdom of Bahrain. The details of Iran’s regional (including in Bahrain) interference are well documented, as are the people who assist in projecting the Islamic Republic’s influence in the Arabian Gulf. Mr Rajab is one such individual.

This is not to diminish the human rights issues that face Bahrain; it is a country in the process of reform and has consistently and transparently invited the international community – including members of the European Parliament – to assess its progress. Delegation after delegation have returned from Bahrain with glowing reports as to the tremendous strides it has taken in terms of its democratisation. A year ago, Bahrain held parliamentary elections which were determined to be free, fair and open by many within the international community. Bahrain is not a country in the throws of upheaval and Bahrain is not a dictatorship, it is an open, liberal Con-

stitutional Monarchy with a vibrant and dynamic civil society that, together with the government, has ensured the safeguard of fundamental rights related to freedom of thought, expression and worship.

Mr Panzeri's argument that Mr Rajab's crime was a single Tweet suggests that Bahrain practices illiberal policies in relation to free speech. This is erroneous; the story is far more complicated. Over the past 15 years, Mr Rajab has stoked sectarian violence and sought the overthrow of the government. He began a campaign of hate and intimidation against Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers—referring to the entire expatriate community as 'mercenaries.' Mr Rajab is a menace to Bahraini society and European Parliamentarians, like Mr Panzeri, ought to be aware of the history of those whose interests they promote, otherwise the European Parliament runs the risk of enjoining the institutions of division rather than those of unity.

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre calls on the European Parliament, and its individual members, to fairly and objectively evaluate the specific situations unfolding in the Arabian Gulf region and stands at the ready to assist, in all ways, deeper engagements and understanding of the region and its people.