

BRIDGING THE GULF



Foundation for Human Security in the Middle East

The 2nd GCC Civil Society Conference

Brussels, 1 - 3 March 2009

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Bridging the Gulf – Foundation for Human Security in the Middle East aims to contribute to regional co-operation in the Gulf region by supporting initiatives in the areas of human security, human rights, women's rights and the development of civil societies. At the same time, in the areas mentioned, the Foundation wants to form a bridge between the Gulf region on the one hand and Europe/The Netherlands on the other hand.

The Foundation seeks to realise these intentions through both government and civil society channels. It promotes understanding about the Gulf region in Europe, facilitates dialogue, and disseminates and exchanges knowledge about the Gulf region, via platforms of various nature: academic, political, civil, media, culture and the arts.

The programme for the "Gulf Cooperation Council Civil Society Conference" in Brussels was organised by the **International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)**, which also contributed to producing this report.

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

A) Participants from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries:

Bahrain:

Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna:

Dr. Al-Baharna is a women's rights defender and the president of the Bahrain Women's Association, which promotes women's rights and conducts activities against violence and discrimination against women.

Saudi Arabia:

Mr. Jafar M. Al-Shayeb:

Mr. Al-Shayeb is a civil society activist, member of the National Society for Human Rights and Chairman of Qatif Municipal Council.

B) Advisers to Bridging the Gulf:

Ms. Amal van Hees, the Netherlands:

Ms. van Hees (an Arab descent born Hamiddallah Al Ahmadi), a lawyer, works for Amnesty International Netherlands as the coordinator for Middle East & North Africa. She is a former UNESCO staff member and a former IOM program officer for the Balkans and has been teaching NGO studies and capacity building at the American Webster University. She is also an advisor to the Global Fund for Women.

Mr. Mauritius Wijffels, the Netherlands:

Mr. Wijffels is a Dutch international lawyer and legal adviser to Bridging the Gulf. He dedicates a great part of his work to the Middle East region; he works partly in Amsterdam, Dubai and Cairo. His current mandate with Bridging the Gulf is to assess possibilities for institutionalised human rights education in the Gulf region.

C) International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR):

Ms. Brigitte Dufour:

Ms. Dufour is a lawyer and the director of the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), an association she has founded with members in Vienna, Moscow, Bratislava and Geneva. She is also senior human rights adviser to Bridging the Gulf.

Ms. Paula Tscherne-Lempiäinen:

Ms. Tscherne-Lempiäinen is senior development officer at the IPHR and responsible for developing the organization's program, overseeing various administrative and planning tasks while also providing consultation services to NGOs. She was assigned to write a grant proposal on behalf of Bridging the Gulf to the European Commission.

Mr. Herwig Schinnerl:

Mr. Schinnerl was an intern with the IPHR from September 2008 through 15 March 2009. He holds a master's degree in social and cultural anthropology from the University of Vienna. He now works for the Austrian Red Cross.

Ms. Amandine Englebert:

Ms. Amandine Englebert was an intern at the IPHR from January through March 2009. She holds a licence in law from the University of Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) and completed her degree at the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina).

Bridging the Gulf Foundation: Introduction

Bridging the Gulf - Foundation for Human Security in the Middle East, was officially established in 2006. Its statutory aim is to “promote human rights, strengthen civil society and stimulate regional cooperation in the Gulf region”. It uses the so-called Helsinki process as inspiration for the Gulf region to advance transformation by intensifying dialogue with reform-oriented forces.

The origin of the Foundation lays in the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC). Under the name “Bridging the Gulf” the Nederland’s Helsinki Committee organized a conference in 2004 with the subtitle “Elements of the Helsinki Process as Inspiration for the Gulf region”. The Helsinki process arises from the 1975 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which emphasized peaceful co-existence of states and mutual non-interference on the one hand, and respect for human rights, economic and personal contacts across borders on the other.

As follow-up to the 2004 conference, its initiators in 2005 and 2006 several times to all countries in the Gulf region, including Iran and Iraq, with the view of establishing a network of human rights activists, women’s rights defenders, prominent scholars and local committees for human rights.

The Bridging the Gulf board members and collaborators are individuals from the region and professionals with expertise in the field of human rights and Middle East societies.

The Gulf region in the definition of the Foundation covers the Arab Peninsula countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Yemen – as well as Iraq and Iran.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia - are comparable in many ways in terms of culture and religion. They also face similar forces of exposure to the international economic and legal environment. For this reason, Bridging the Gulf is also committed to promoting interaction and cooperation among actors in the different Gulf countries.

Economic and educational developments in the GCC member countries lead to sharply increasing exposure to international norms, including those relevant for promoting human rights such as independence of the judiciary, equal access to justice to all people regardless of gender or ethnicity, as well as advancing public dialogue and political participation. Adherence to those norms will be a key determinant for a successful overall development of societies in the Gulf region. Not only human rights NGOs but also other sectors of civil society, the academic world, professional bodies, the media, women’s organisations and similar bodies all have their role to play in this process.

Based on the above-mentioned principles, a brainstorming meeting involving civil society and academic actors from the region was organised in Utrecht in 2007 where participants from the region identified key priorities to be addressed in the region. This meeting marked the official launch of the network and paved the way for a conference held in Brussels and in The Hague in October 2008, which served both as a coordination meeting for activists from the Gulf region and as an advocacy event to establish contacts with EU officials and members of the European Parliament. The conference included training with the aim of building civil society capacities in the Gulf region, lobbying, and introduction to the EU structures and institutions, international NGO’s, as well as to Dutch human rights structures and institutions. The participants also met with a number of EU officials to convey their concerns and to offer regular exchange of information to them. The conference participants agreed that strengthening of the regional network was one of the major achievement reached during the 2008 conference. They also agreed that it would be useful to hold regular meetings to follow up on developments in the region, share experiences and expertise, and to continue strengthening relationships with the EU with the view of ensuring that also civil society voices will be heard when decisions are being made with regard to the Gulf region. The 2nd GCC civil society conference was held in Brussels on 1-3 March 2009, continuing advocacy with the EU but focusing largely on internal organizational issues.

1. Internal meeting on Monday, 2 March 2009

1.1. Welcome and update on latest developments:

Ms. Brigitte Dufour opened the conference on behalf of Bridging the Gulf and International Partnership for Human Right (IPHR), which had helped organise the conference programme, and welcomed all participants.¹ She paid tribute to Jan ter Laak, Bridging the Gulf's secretary general, who was terminally ill at the time of the conference.

Ms. Dufour told the participants about the reasons for the organization of this meeting and introduced its program, including a briefing scheduled to take place in the afternoon at the EU Council before representatives of the 27 EU member states who are part of the Working Group on the Gulf region. Discussions took place as to the strategy of the briefing, the topics to be addressed and practical details related to the briefing. It was noted that contributing to the meeting of this working group was a good opportunity to send a message to the EU from local civil society groups in the Gulf region about their expectations with regard to the EU-GCC Ministerial Meeting scheduled to take place later this spring, and about other EU-Gulf relations. It also offered an opportunity to offer assistance in identifying the main human rights concerns that should be raised at the Ministerial Meeting. Bridging the Gulf conference participants also discussed the issues to be taken up with members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who were part of the delegation for relations with the Gulf states, with whom a meeting had been scheduled.

Ms. Amal van Hees delivered a short report on activities since the October 2008 Bridging the Gulf conference that was held partly in Brussels and partly in The Hague, as well as on a meeting held in Doha, Qatar, in February in preparation of the current Brussels conference. Mr. Mauritius B. M. Wijffels reported on a feasibility study he had conducted on the possibilities for more institutionalised human rights education in the GCC member states. Ms. van Hees emphasized that when discussing any possible future activities in the Gulf region, it is important to keep in mind that they should be based on the principle of local ownership and the activities should be designed to address the main problems of civil societies in the region, which are: insufficient capacities of NGOs and individual activists, isolation, and lack of cooperation. Therefore, the future activities should focus on the empowerment of civil society as well as facilitating networking and cooperation in the region.

During the discussion on possible strategies in the region the participants stressed that while the problems are largely identical in the GCC countries, the government attitudes towards human rights and individuals promoting them varied significantly. For example, Qatar is the only country where human rights institutions are at least trying to take distance from governments while in Oman there are no independent human rights institutions. Generally, local activists are posed at risk if they are perceived as having direct links to foreign organizations. In some cases activists are "advised against" meeting with EU officials, for example. Moreover, it was noted that the Gulf states are the best examples of closed societies. Exactly for this reason, the Bridging the Gulf agenda for activities must be transparent and all activities must be implemented without secrecy. At the same time, it is important to encourage EU officials travelling in the region to meet not only with government representatives but also with civil society activists. Only in this way will they be able to gain a full and balanced picture of developments in the region.

1.2. Preparation for the briefing to EU member states:

The conference participants discussed the programme of the briefing due to take place in the afternoon for the members of the In the GCC member countries, Working Group on the Gulf Region as well as representatives of the European Council and Commission. The topics to be covered would be: general human rights issues and human rights institutions in the region, freedom of religion and freedom of expression, human rights defenders, and women's rights. The issue of migrant workers would be addressed briefly while a document prepared by Ms. Antoinette Vlieger on the status of domestic workers in the Gulf region would be distributed to the participants of the meeting.

¹ See list of participants, page ii, above.

While encouraging direct contacts to local human rights societies, the EU representatives would also be given advice on how to cooperate with regional activists on specific issues so as to avoid causing unnecessary problems to the activists who are often in a vulnerable situation when carrying out their duties. Bridging the Gulf would also offer to brief the next EU missions due to travel to the region on current issues and on whom to possibly meet there.

1. 3. Meeting with Mr. Andrew Strohlein, International Crisis Group (ICG):

Mr. Andrew Strohlein, communications director of ICG, discussed with the Bridging the Gulf participants different strategies and approaches in human rights lobbying with regard to various countries and regions. He noted that governmental human rights policies are generally taken as an indicator of the political stability of a state: widespread human rights violations usually mean that the state is weak and, at the same time, paranoid of intrusion and of political opposition. In that kind of country it is important to avoid meetings behind closed doors because anything perceived as “secrecy” increases state paranoia and often leads to attacks on human rights defenders.

In the Gulf region, the EU is primarily preoccupied with the necessity to secure energy resources because of EU countries’ high dependency on oil/gas. When energy concerns are involved, the EU tends to turn away from human rights concerns. The best way to influence EU policies with regard to the Gulf region is to try to ensure that human rights are not “ghettoised” into bi- and multilateral discussions, i.e., separated from core discussions and addressed only under separate agendas. It is important to constantly follow up on human rights developments in the region and to inform selected “allies” within the EU about them. In addition, it is necessary to identify those countries that actually care about the promotion of human rights in the said region, and address the issues in their national media. Moreover, causing “political embarrassment” is a useful method to raise attention to human rights issues: the most effective way today to make human rights dialogues useful is to actively embarrass the EU about its failure to make proper use of such dialogues. Moreover, it is useful to establish contacts with EU presidencies and meet their representatives every few months.

It is crucial for human rights activists to be perceived as organic in their own countries. To that effect, it is also important to issue reports and statements about current developments; such reporting “humanises” the situation and shows that there is actual movement on the ground - the closer you get to local society, the more influential you can be. The most important thing to do is to connect local stories to those persons who are both interested and influential. At the same time, it is necessary to stay up-to-date about developments at the international level.

2. Briefing for the Working Group for the Gulf Region of EU Member States, European Council and European Commission officials (2 March 2009)

In the afternoon of 2 March, the Bridging the Gulf conference participants were invited to attend a meeting of the working group on the Gulf region of EU member states, taking place at the European Council. Ms. Brigitte Dufour thanked on behalf of Bridging the Gulf and IPHR for the opportunity to be present at the meeting and introduced the Bridging the Gulf members.

Mr. Jafar Al-Shayeb (Saudi Arabia), Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna (Bahrain), Ms. Amal van Hees (the Netherlands) and Mr. Mauritius Wijffels (the Netherlands) gave the following presentations:

- Mr. Jafar Al-Shayeb: National human rights institutions, general human rights developments, religious freedom²;

² See Appendices 1-2, Jafar Al-Shayeb, “Overview on Human Rights Situation in GCC States, A Statement presented to European Union Presidency, Working Group for the Gulf Region of EU Member States, European Council and European Commission Officials,” 2 March 2009; and “Over the Recent Events in Madinah, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, February 25th, 2009.”

- Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna: "Recent Gains and New Opportunities for Women's Rights in the Arab Gulf"³;
- Ms. Amal van Hees: The situation of civil society in the Gulf region in general. She also presented the paper on freedom of expression⁴ prepared by Dr. Mohammed Al-Roken of the UAE;
- Mr. Mauritius Wijffels: Opportunities or institutionalised human rights education in the Gulf region;

In his presentation, Mr. Al-Shayeb, member of the National Society for Human Rights and chairman of Qatif Municipal Council, spoke among other things about the recent attacks on Shia adherents gathered in the city of Madinah, and about the appointment of the first woman to government office as deputy minister in Saudi Arabia. He also stressed that citizens are not equally treated in the Gulf states: for example, in Kuwait some 400,000 people are without citizenship although they their families are permanent residents of the country already in third generation. Moreover, Shia religious minority members (around 20%) are excluded from certain jobs. He also observed that independent civil societies in the GCC states are virtually non-existing; only two human rights organisations operate in Saudi Arabia – the governmental Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights. The highest number of NGOs in the region can be found in Bahrain where the king allowed their existence in 2002. Mr. Al-Shayeb stated that the EU could serve as a platform for establishing contacts and organizing meetings between Gulf region and European bodies. He also stressed the importance of partnerships between international and Gulf region NGOs.

Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna, vice-president of the Bahrain Women's Association for Human Development, presented the situation of women in the GCC states. She provided an overview with regard to developments in the field of women's rights in the GCC states in 2004-2008. She addressed a wide range of issues including family law, political participation, women's economic and social rights, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination. Among other things, she noted that women in Bahrain can apply for a passport only since 2004 and in Saudi Arabia they are not allowed to work, to drive a car, or to leave the house without permission from a male guardian. In her recommendations she pointed out that governments should bring national laws into conformity with CEDAW (which all GCC states except Qatar have acceded to). Furthermore they should permit independent women's rights organizations and remove barriers that hinder women from leading independent lives.

Ms. Amal van Hees from Amnesty International Netherlands (and Bridging the Gulf) pointed out that the GCC states were facing many changes in the fields of social development, civil society and freedom of expression.

Mr. Mauritius Wijffels, a Dutch lawyer, stressed the importance of designing and implementing activities in the region with the view of paving the way for more institutionalised human rights education in the GCC countries.

Following the presentations a representative of the European Commission asked about the appointment of the female minister in Saudi Arabia and whether this could be seen as a sign of opening in Saudi Arabia. His second question related to the impact of the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on GCC states and Mr. Al-Shayeb's assessment of the importance of the process. The Greek representative at the meeting enquired about the level of awareness among the public in Saudi Arabia of international conventions and resolutions. Mr. Al-Shayeb replied that through pressure from society and international organizations the profile of women's rights in Saudi Arabia has heightened but more pressure was needed to achieve concrete results. He noted that the number of well-educated women has risen but many of the women cannot find work that would correspond their qualifications. As regards the UPR, he stated that the Gulf governments do not ignore the UPR; they work hard to present a reasonable picture. The process, as well as other UN mechanisms, put the governments under pressure to improve their human rights record and are therefore important. Mr. Al-Shayeb also emphasized the importance to encourage Gulf states to ratify international conventions, among other things because they provide a basis for the work of human rights defenders.

³ See Appendix 3: Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna, "Recent Gains and New Opportunities for Women's Rights in the Arab Gulf: 2004-2008"

⁴ See Appendix 4: Dr. Mohammed Al-Roken, "Freedom of Expression and the Press in the GCC States. A Statement Presented to the European Union Presidency, Working Group for the Gulf Region of EU Member States, European Council and European Commission Officials," 2 March 2009.

3. Working session on Tuesday (3 March 2009)

The Tuesday morning session discussed the future plans of the Bridging the Gulf in general and its grant application to the European Commission that was due on 26 March .

3.1. Brainstorming on organizational issues

The participants agreed on the need to further develop the structures of Bridging the Gulf Foundation, the division of roles and responsibilities, and the best strategies on how to be able to assist the human rights community and other civil society actors in the Gulf region. It was generally decided that the Foundation's objectives should be the following:

- capacity building
- facilitating the forming of networks and cooperation
- improved exchange of information between the EU and civil societies in the GCC member states

The participants further discussed the best possible organizational developments to advance the priorities and the possible establishment of a Bridging the Gulf Advisory Board consisting, for example, of Bridging the Gulf members in the region.

3.2. Brainstorming on EC grant application

Ms. Brigitte Dufour opened the session and invited all participants to share their views with regard to a planned Bridging the Gulf project, for which funding would be applied from the European Commission's "European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights" (EIDHR).

Ms. van Hees presented the concept note, which had been approved by the EIDHR in the first round of the grant application process, and had to be developed into a full proposal and budget by 26 March 2009. She again emphasized the principles of local ownership in the planning of possible activities. After that, Ms. Paula Tscherne-Lempiäinen (IPHR) presented the draft "objective tree" and a list of questions to be addressed for the purpose of project planning. It was decided that the application should show close cooperation with local civil society actors despite the fact that for various reasons (including security reasons), the concept note did not foresee formal local partners in the Gulf region. Moreover, it was agreed that the grant application should demonstrate the planned activities' added value by showing that Bridging the Gulf will conduct activities that are not yet implemented by other international NGOs, including capacity building of local civil societies and facilitating networking and cooperation. The project activities should also be designed with a view of laying the basis for a more institutionalised human rights activity in the region at a later date, for example in the form of a human rights educational institute.

4. Meeting with MEP Sajjad Karim (3 March 2009)

The IPHR had organized for the conference participants working in the Gulf region, a meeting with MEP Sajjad Karim (Conservative Party, UK) to discuss issues of mutual concern. MEP Karim is a member of the EP-Gulf States Delegation and Sub-committee on Human Rights. He raised a number of issues dealing among others with the difficulty for MEPs to deal the GCC member states due to the fact that those countries do not have genuine parliaments through whose representatives it would be possible to build relationships with the people of the region. He also noted that it is difficult to identify relevant civil society talking partners in the region.

Mr. Al-Shayeb raised two recent incidents in the region: an attack on human rights defenders in Bahrain and a crackdown on pilgrims in Saudi Arabia.⁵ He also addressed some facts that contributed to the incidents, including the absolute monarchist system that does not allow for pluralism, and the lack of religious freedom enjoyed by minority religions in the region. Mr. Al-Shayeb noted that the inter-faith dialogue that the government of Saudi-Arabia is calling for would provide a good opportunity to address the persisting problems. Moreover, human rights issues should be taken up as an integral part of the free trade agreement. Also, Mr. Al-Sayeb added, the EU officials should include meetings with local human rights activists in their travel programs each time they visit the GCC states and not only meet with government representatives.

With regard to possibilities of reform, Mr. Al-Shayeb emphasized that all reforms need to be gradual. The governments in the region fear that free and fair elections would bring “radicals” into power, an argument which is dangerous because it is often used to block developments and prohibit institutions protected by international human rights law, such as the formation of NGOs.

MEP Karim noted that the GCC member states are aware that there is much more to gain for the EU than for them in the free trade agreement, which makes it difficult for the EU to exercise any real influence on the human rights clause.

⁵ For the latter incident, see Appendix 2: Jafar Al-Shayeb “Over the Recent Events in Madinah, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, February 25th, 2009”

Overview on Human Rights Situation in GCC States

**A Statement presented to
European Union Presidency, Working Group for the Gulf Region of
EU Member States, European Council and European Commission Officials**

**Prepared by:
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Network for Rights Activists; Saudi Arabia
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Bridging the Gulf Briefing, Brussels, 2 March 2009

1. Introduction:

The six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are in a serious need for human rights reform program that may guarantee citizens freedom of choice and protect their basic rights.

All the GCC states are absolute monarchies with a minimal level of popular participation and freedom of expression; which varies from one state to other. People have almost no say on the shape and role of their governments, public wealth and religious rights among other issues.

There have been lately minor positive developments in the areas of political and social fields that are taken place; thanks to the courageous efforts of local reformists, the global openness and the active roles of foreign channels; i.e. diplomats, media, and human rights organizations.

At this stage, it is an important moment for the reform in the region to take place to guarantee stability; security and a sustainable development. Governments and citizens in the region are looking for a constructive two-way dialogue plan that will ultimately lead to a wider popular participation and protection of all rights of the individuals.

EU is in an ideal place to be positively involved, at this time, and can play a progressive role in GCC by encouraging mutual dialogue and popular participation, promoting human and religious rights, and protecting civil society.

This statement will highlight main issues related to human rights in the GCC States and states few recommendations to improve them; and more specifically on the issues related to human rights institutions.

2. Current Situation:

2.1. Good Governance:

Popular participation is very limited in the Gulf States and governments are not putting any plan for developing wider participation in the future. Except for Kuwait, which holds regular public and direct elections, the rest of GCC States have not yet proved to hold fair election timely. Saudi Arabia may delay the next municipal elections, which was the first to be held for over fifty years and is supposed to take place at the end of 2009. Activists in Bahrain raised many reservations on the elections as being officially directed to rule out independent and liberal candidates from being elected. In Kuwait debates over the zoning of elections' districts lead to the suspension of the parliament. Political parties are banned and groups in some states are represented through social and cultural organizations.

2.2. Citizens Rights:

Discriminatory policies have not yet been dealt with efficiently in GCC. Some groups are still facing discrimination practiced through customary laws and unwritten directions. Women for example; in Saudi Arabia, are not yet able to hold public offices and participate in elections. Citizens of religious and ethnic minorities, such as Shia, might not be appointed in some government offices such as foreign ministry, security and military agencies, and religious institutions. In all GCC States, the ruling families are tightly controlling the process of appointing high ranks public officers based on their loyalty to the regime and there is no accountable and independent legislative body to examine the qualifications. Some citizens of different backgrounds are deprived from their basic rights and are considered as second class citizens such as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

2.3. Religious Freedom:

The majority of the citizens in GCC States are Muslims with different sects and interpretations. However, over four million non-Muslim expatriates work and live there. Laws have not yet developed to guarantee the rights of belief for the Muslim religious minorities as well as non-Muslims. It varies in each state and Saudi Arabia is the most conservative one that requires a lot of developments and legislations to accommodate these internationally recognized principles. Many human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and International Crisis Group have reported major violations in this regards. Lately an ongoing demonstrations and tension are taken place in Eastern Saudi Arabia because of the clashes between religious police and Shia pilgrimages to the holy city of Madina last week.

2.4. Human Rights Conventions:

The GCC States have signed few UN and other international human rights agreements and conventions; including CRC (Rights of the Child), CERD (Racial Discrimination), CAT (Against Torture), CEDAW (Discrimination Against Women). Although GCC States have also signed many regional human rights charters, there are still reservations based on Sharia compliance. Also, the implementations of these international agreements are poor and inadequate, which require more monitoring and proper reporting to international human rights organizations.

2.5. Civil Society and Human Rights Institution:

In general, civil society in GCC Sates is very weak and not well developed; one reason is that there exists no legal environment to protect let alone support civil society organizations. NGOs are highly controlled and closely directed by the state, which interferes in all their activities, and Human rights and civil society activists are facing very difficult circumstances. In Saudi Arabia, there is no law for governing civil society organizations; they cannot be registered and are not allowed to communicate with international organizations for cooperation and funding. The governments interfere in NGOs management appointment, financial issues and work supervision.

Bahrain has the largest number of NGOs in the Gulf due to the flexibility of the civil society law approved with the reform program introduced by the King. Saudi government allowed establishing only two human rights organizations; one of them is an official and the other exceptionally registered under royal decree. Qatar and UAE established national human rights organizations few years ago; however, Oman lately announced the establishment of a governmental human rights body. Human rights groups have been also active in Kuwait for many years now.

Most of the violations reported include domestic violence, freedom of expression, foreign workers mistreatment, discrimination based on sex, belief, misuse of authority

To improve and foster NGOs in the GCC States; the following recommendations are suggested: issuing and/or revising civil society laws, allowing freer space for NGOs, adopting legal reference to eliminate continuous interference, signing relevant international agreements related to political and civil rights, and allowing partnership with international NGOs.

3. Recommendations:

a) Seeking a broader understanding

The relations between the EU and the GCC are old. Nevertheless, the perception in the GCC is that the EU is largely absent and often overshadowed by the USA. This perception could be changed and the EU not limiting itself to formal contacts at Government level but enlarging its exposure to representatives of local civil society could enlarge the EU's role in the GCC. Such contacts will enhance a more complete understanding of GCC societies including their subtleties and complexities.

- b) Civil society in the GCC to be invited to join official and informal EU-GCC meetings
More specifically, civil society in the GCC deserves better access to both formal and unofficial EU-GCC meetings and should be allowed to submit recommendations in connection with EU-GCC meetings at government level. In the framework of the above, we purport to organize yearly civil society meetings preceding the annual EU-GCC ministerial meetings.
- c) Economic development alone is not enough
Solid democracies with a flourishing civil society and respect for human rights have proven to produce less volatile political environments and more stable economies. Alongside the very important promotion of economic relations, we therefore welcome any effort by the EP to stress with the EU's trade partners in the GCC the key value of creating and maintaining a healthy civil society in a democratic context.
- d) EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement
More specifically, we welcome the ongoing negotiations between the EU and the GCC regarding the Free Trade Agreement as an excellent venue to bring up human rights issues by elevating them to serve as qualifying conditions as has been the case with the WTO.

Over the Recent Events in Madinah Qatif, Saudi Arabia, February 25th, 2009

By Jafar Al-Shayeb

Introduction:

During all of this week, many extremely violent events took place between security forces, the Saudi religious police and Saudi Shiite civilians in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, which led to many arrests and injuries. This brief report introduces some information over this topic through statements of eyewitnesses who were in the scene.

Islamic cities, particularly the Shiite ones, are visited by large groups of Muslims for praying and visiting Islamic mausoleums especially in religious occasions and school holidays. In this regard, Shiites have rituals to show their respect in those places that embrace the graves of Prophet Mohammad and his family.

These rituals do not go beyond reading some texts that confirm the recognition of their prominent religious status beside some prayers in which they ask Allah to answer them with their blessings as in the Qur'anic verse "and seek the way of approach unto Him".

Saudi authorities do not believe in these beliefs and describe them as heterodoxies and Shiites as polytheists; therefore, they take measures which usually executed by the elements of Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) to prevent Shiites from practicing their rituals freely. Moreover, collective supplication and letting women enter Albaqie Cemetery (a large cemetery in Madinah that includes graves of some members of Prophet Mohammad family) are forbidden which make them gather in the square between Prophet Mohammad mosque and Albaqie Cemetery to perform what they believe in.

The anniversary of Prophet Mohammad death, according to Shiites, coincided with the holiday of the half of the school year that began on Wednesday, February 18th, 2009. This made thousands of Shiites from Qatif and Alahssa go to Madinah on Thursday.

Friday, February 20th, 2009

In the afternoon of Friday, thousands of pilgrims gathered in the square between Prophet Mohammad mosque and Albaqie Cemetery to practice the rituals of visiting Albaqie Imams (member of Prophet Mohammad family buried there). In the meantime, some of the CPVPV elements approached the pilgrims and videotaped them, especially women. This action is one of the actions that are extremely rejected by the Saudi society, especially if it was done by the CPVPV elements. The same action was repeated which made the female pilgrims showed their objection and asked them to stop but they did not respond to them which led to chaos among those groups due to the verbal arguments between pilgrims and the CPVPV elements who insulted them with rude descriptions like graves' worshipers.

It did not stop at this point; some female elements of the CPVPV, also, called the Shiite pilgrims with rude descriptions like "polytheists" and "enjoyment girls". This action made the pilgrims repeat religious expressions, which consequently led to calling the security forces in an attempt to disperse them.

At then, about two thousands of pilgrims gathered in front of CPVPV center and demanded them to hand over the video tapes while they were crying out with objection slogans and expressions. All of this ended with a fight with the CPVPV elements and security forces which dispersed the pilgrims by beating them randomly.

Those events led to the arrest of some male pilgrims; five of them were identified:

1. Abdullah Mohammad Almatroud, a military officer from Safwa city in Qatif region.
2. Abdulaziz Jafar Aldarweesh (37 years old), a teacher from AlQudaih town in Qatif region.

3. Murtadha Alarbash (25 years old), an employee from Dammam.
4. Abdullah Jum'ah Almomen (15 years old), a student from Dammam.
5. Mukhtar Mohammad Alnasir from Dammam.

It seems that the arrestment was random because one of the arrested pilgrims, Abdulaziz Aldarweesh, appeared in one of the video clips, which are available in internet websites, while he was trying to drive women away from clashing with the CPVPV elements or the security forces.

The statements of security officials and the CPVPV center in Madinah acquitted the CPVPV elements from the provocative acts and accused the pilgrims with starting the riot. Those statements are denied by eyewitnesses who followed all what happened and mentioned that the pilgrims were sitting and reading prayers in the public square, and the CPVPV elements are who started to provoke the gatherings. There is not any clear and official measures were taken in order to stop such actions and no official investigations were carried out to find out the real reasons.

Monday, February 23rd, 2009

In the evening of Monday, February 23rd, 2009 which coincided with the anniversary of Prophet Mohammad death (PBUH), thousands of Shiites gathered by AlBaqie Cemetery to perform the ceremony of visiting and repeat some religious expressions. Security forces asked them to leave the cemetery. The pilgrims did what they were asked to do, moved to the square between AlBaqie cemetery and the Mosque of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and continued their ceremonies.

When the pilgrims felt that the forces are about attacking them, some of them moved to the mosque. Then, engagements occurred between Shiite pilgrims and some extremist Sunnis which led to dispersing them by the anti-riot forces that attacked on Shiites only and caused many injuries. Wounded and injured people were hospitalized and one of them is the Shiite Sheikh Jawad Al Hadhar from Alahssa who was stabbed with a knife several times because of which he is still in the intensive care.

During the clashes, some extremist Sunnis attacked Shiite pilgrims and their attacks spread to include one of Madinah's neighborhoods; Alazeyat neighborhood, where they have attacked cars and shops. Since then, there is still a state of security alert in the Holy Mosque till the time of preparing this report.

Saudi Shia Leaders Call for Respect of Religious Freedom
Qatif, Saudi Arabia, 26 February 2009

In response to the violent clashes between religious and security police and Saudi Shia pilgrimages in the holy city of Madina, west of Saudi Arabia which started last Friday, Shia leaders in the Eastern Province denounced the intimidations and violent actions committed by members or the ultra-conservative religious police; the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV).

Sheikh Hasan Alsaffar, in a separate public statement, criticized the Saudi government for its ignorance to the practices of the CPVPV against Shiites and asked the Saudi King to put an end for such acts and to release the Shiite detainees of Albaqie sit-in, which took place in Madinah. He accused the CPVPV elements of dealing with Madinah's pilgrims in a way that contradicts with Islamic ethics, human rights and the orientations adopted by the Saudi king in national and Islamic dialogues. He stated that such practices make Hajj and Umrah seasons more subjected to denominational and sectarian tensions, which denigrate the country's intensive efforts for serving the pilgrims.

Another political writer, Dr. Tawfiq Alsaif, called for constituting an independent committee for carrying out investigations around the extreme events in Madina against Shiite pilgrims. In a TV interview, he criticized the attempts of clearing the CPVPV elements and holding the entire responsibility over the Shiite pilgrims. He, also, stated that the Saudi security forces have taken a non-neutral stand because it supported a governmental body, which is the CPVPV, against civilians.

Alsaif asked the Saudi government to spare no efforts in taking the necessary procedures in terms of dealing with the actions of the CPVPV elements that attacked Shiite pilgrims in the courtyard of the Prophet's mosque. He explained these events because of continuous political marginalization of Shia citizens in Saudi Arabia and frustration resulted from that and from the limitation imposed on their religious rights. Alsaif referred also to the latest governmental shuffle by saying it did not reflect any policy change toward the Shia citizens who were not included in these changes.

Jafar Alshayeb, a human rights activist, in a letter to the Chairman of the state-run Human Rights Commission, called for forming an independent committee that carries out investigations over the recent events in Madina, and reports the testimonies and statements of participants and injured in order to punish who were involved in using violence against civilians without any justification whether they were from the CPVPV elements or security forces.

He urges local human rights organizations to play an active role in protecting the rights of the detainees and providing them with legal assistance. Alshayeb also emphasized on the importance for the government to guarantee religious rights for all citizens, explaining that such extreme practices contradict with the principles of human rights, especially in regard of restricting religious freedoms and suppressing civilians by weapons and arrest.

Alshayeb, also, called for appointing lawyers and legal consultants to take the necessary procedures for the detainees; especially there are some juveniles among them. He indicated that false accusations were fabricated against Shiites which resulted in harsh sentences in previous cases.

Mohammad Almahfoud, a prominent Islamic thinker, accused the authorities of allowing extremists and radical institutions to attack Shiite pilgrims in Madina, explaining that security forces supported these groups in beating, provoking Shiites just for ideological differences.

He stated that all media and governmental institutions as well as anti-riot forces portrayed what has happened exactly the opposite of the truth. He called religious and political Shiite figures as well as writers and poets to make initiatives in order to protect the identity of the Shiite sect and express the continuous persecution and discrimination against Shiites in Saudi Arabia.

Shiite pilgrims clash with Saudi police in Medina

The Washington Post

Today's Zaman -« DONNA ABU-NASR»- 24/02/2009

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- Saudi police have clashed with Shiite pilgrims over several days near a cemetery in Islam's second-holiest city, leading a Shiite cleric to appeal to the king to put a stop to the "insults" of the religious police.

Relations are tense between Saudi Arabia's majority Sunnis and the Shiites, who make up a small minority of the country's 22 million people. Shiites, who are considered infidels under the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam widely followed in the kingdom, routinely complain of discrimination. Outspoken Shiite critics have been jailed, and many Shiites claim to have been banned from such jobs as the religious police and teaching religion classes.

Shiite witnesses said the first clash took place Friday evening after religious police, who enforce the country's strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, filmed female Shiite pilgrims outside the al-Baqee Cemetery in Medina, which contains the graves of revered imams.

When five male relatives of the women demanded the police turn over the tapes, there was a scuffle and the men were arrested, according to a witness who refused to be identified for fear of being punished.

Afterward, hundreds of pilgrims gathered outside the cemetery, demanding their release. Riot police used batons to disperse the crowd, said the witness.

According to Medina's police, however, the five were arrested and charged with causing a disturbance at the cemetery gate after being told visitation hours were over.

On Monday night, another confrontation took place when the religious police banned female Shiite pilgrims from visiting an area reserved for them outside the cemetery overlooking the graves, according to the same witness. In Saudi Arabia, all women are banned from visiting cemeteries so special viewing areas are created for them.

The witness said police used batons against the angry Shiite crowd, which he estimated at 3,000-4,000. Sunni onlookers also joined the fray, attacking Shiite pilgrims.

On Tuesday, when police once again prevented people from entering the cemetery, the pilgrims drew knives and attacked, injuring two policemen, according to a security official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media.

A member of the crowd was taken to the hospital, the official said.

The Shiite pilgrims were at the cemetery to mark the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's death; an occasion not observed by Sunnis in Saudi Arabia.

In an appeal posted Monday on his Web site, Sheik Hassan al-Saffar, a prominent Shiite cleric, said the treatment of Shiites at the cemetery violates "Islamic morals and human rights" and the tolerance called for by an interfaith conference hosted by the king a few months ago.

When contacted by The Associated Press, al-Saffar's office confirmed the statement.

"Visitors are generally harshly treated ... and prayer books are confiscated," said al-Saffar, adding that this makes pilgrimages and religious visits "subject to sectarian tensions."

The Al-Madina newspaper on Tuesday quoted Medina's governor, Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Majed, as saying that authorities are questioning "those behind the chaotic events" in al-Baqee. He did not elaborate.

Yasser al-Matrafi, head of public relations at the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice which runs the religious police, told Al-Madina that the religious police had no part in al-Baqee events.

Heightened Shiite-Sunni Tension in Medina



Middle East Online - « Habib Trabelsi »- 24/02/2009

The tension was still high Tuesday near the Prophet Mohammed's mosque in the Muslim pilgrimage city of Medina, which was a theatre of clashes between armed forces and Saudi Shiites on Monday night, according to news websites.

"The troublemakers are being questioned. Anyone who violates the law will be judged," Emir Majed ben Abdel Aziz, the regional governor of Medina, told the daily Medina which is the only local newspaper to have referred Tuesday to the clashes that broke out Friday evening at the entrance of the Baqi Al-Gharqad cemetery located at the southeast corner of the Prophet's Mosque.

According to several website, including the main pro-Shiite "Rased", clashes broke out between elements of the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" (religious police) and the Shiite pilgrims from the Eastern Province, particularly Al-Qatif and Ihsa, who came to spend the winter school holidays in Medina and visit the Prophet's tomb.

"Rased, citing protesters, said that" the Shiite pilgrims have responded to the religious police's wrongdoings. The website has aired a videotape showing what it called "the spark which ignited the fire."

One sequence showed a young man at the top of a building adjacent to the Baqi Al-Gharqad cemetery, currently filming several Shiite women who were asking him to stop recording. According to "Rased", the man behind the camera is a member of the religious police.

The "Alweeam" website, close to authorities, wrote Sunday that "nearly 7000 citizens of the Shiite community had expressed their anger, shouted anti-government slogans and denounced "discrimination" which, according to them, affects their community.

The demonstrators also bribed members of the Commission who denied them access to the cemetery, a usual preventive measure, because of the rites of members of this community."

According to the website, the crowd surrounded the Commission's headquarters, shouting slogans hostile to it and to the Saudi leaders and chanting slogans glorifying the Shiite Imams outside the kingdom".

"The security forces then intervened to restore order and prevent the situation from escalating," according to "Alweeam" and several anti-Shiite websites.

According to these websites, sporadic fighting resumed Monday night and continued Tuesday at dawn, injuring several people in both camps. The daily Al-Madina stated however that "the renewed clashes have been controlled by the security forces."

The Shiite pilgrims - whose number, according to various sources, is estimated between 2000 and 7000 – came from the Eastern Province, particularly from Qatif and Al-Ihsa, during the winter school holidays to commemorate the death of Mohammed and his grandson, the second of the line of imams revered in Shiite Islam who is buried in Al-Baqi cemetery adjacent to the prophet's mosque.

The unprecedented Shiite gathering in Medina occurred more than a week after the announcement of radical institutional changes in the kingdom.

Monday clashes left six injured, one seriously hit in the chest. The website did not specify whether the wounded were among the demonstrators who attacked shops and smashed windows of cars, reported "Alweeam".

"Two policemen were wounded, while four injured protesters were admitted to hospital," the website added.

Police fired live bullets on the crowd, injuring dozens of Shiite pilgrims, several of them seriously, reported the pro-Shiite Rasid website, adding that it was "the religious police who provoked the clashes" and that "security forces intervened to quell the Shiite pilgrims, including hundreds of women and children."

"The clashes then spread out to the predominantly Shiite district of Al-Aziaat and the extremists of the Commission attacked shops and cars."

But, Fahd Al-Khidr, the President of the Commission in the Medina region, was quoted by Al-Madina saying that he "categorically denied that his men were involved in skirmishes "whether inside or outside the cemetery."

These clashes were accompanied by violent diatribes between Saudi writers and journalists of Sunni and Shiite faiths, via the press and websites.

This war of words heightened on Monday. Several Sunni journalists and writers Sunnis vehemently denounced "acts of violence perpetrated by Shiites". Some of them even blamed the unrest on Iran.

Al-Jamil Dhiab, A journalist of Al-Hayat, even urged the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to "recall their ambassadors from Tehran and expel Iranian ambassadors from their capitals."

Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, the Saudi Shiite leader, called on King Abdullah to "put an end to degrading acts of religious body (the Commission) against the Shiite pilgrims," according to Rasid website which also referred to "a wave of anger in the predominantly Shiite areas, including Al-Qatif and Ihsa, and calls for street demonstrations, which are strictly forbidden in the kingdom.

Saudi Shiites represent, according to various estimates, between 10% and 20% of the kingdom's population estimated at more than 18 million. They are concentrated especially in the East Province, a region rich in oil bordering Kuwait and southern Iraq.

Shiites say they suffer discrimination, particularly being banned from holding key positions in military, diplomacy and security and from exercising their religious rites and cultural activities.

The Saudi government is dominated by Sunnis inspired by Wahhabism, a strict doctrine of Sunni Islam.

The radical changes made on February 13 by King Abdullah have been marked by the restructuring of the "Supreme Ulemma Council, the highest religious body in the country.

For the first time the Council was expanded to three other doctrines of Sunni Islam (Maliki, Hanafi, Chafii), whereas previously, this body was composed entirely of members of the Hanbali school, known for its firmness. However, the Shiite community is not represented.

Saudi analysts, were quoted Sunday by the Kuwaiti daily "Al-Qabas" as saying they were expecting "Shiite personalities to join the Supreme Ulemma Council."

Rare Shiite protests in Sunni-led Saudi Arabia



Associated Press - 25/02/2009

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) -- Shiite Muslims are shouting anti-government slogans and demanding more freedoms in rare protests amid the minority's worst confrontations in years with authorities in this overwhelmingly Sunni kingdom.

Prominent Shiite clerics and intellectuals called on the government Wednesday to launch a fair investigation into a dispute last week that triggered the unrest.

Hundreds of protesters in the poor Shiite town of Awwamiya carried banners saying "Down with the government" and spray-painted the slogan on billboards Tuesday, witnesses said. One said youths threw stones at a police post before officers fired in the air to disperse the crowd, which included women. No casualties were reported.

Clashes between Shiites and religious police also were reported Monday and Tuesday outside a cemetery at the center of the latest uproar.

The Sunni majority has long had strained relations with Shiites, who are a small minority of the country's 22 million people. Considered infidels under the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam widely followed in Saudi Arabia, Shiites routinely complain of discrimination and outspoken Shiite critics have been jailed.

The latest eruption of tensions began with an argument Friday night near a cemetery in Medina, Islam's second holiest city, that contains the graves of revered imams.

Shiites say members of the religious police who maintain an office at the al-Baqee Cemetery filmed female pilgrims and refused to hand over the tapes or destroy them. A Saudi official blamed Shiite pilgrims for the trouble, accusing them of performing religious rituals offensive to other worshippers and authorities at the cemetery.

Shiites say riot police were heavy-handed in dealing with the pilgrims, beating them with batons and arresting some.

The protests came a week after King Abdullah ordered the most significant changes in government, the armed forces, the judiciary and the religious establishment since he became king in 2005, but left Shiites feeling left out of the reforms.

Shiites had hoped for appointments as ministers or representation in the council of senior scholars that had been restructured to include all schools of Sunni Islam. But no Shiites were chosen for those positions.

"There's a feeling that the Shiites' ambitions have not been realized as hoped, and that could have played an indirect role in inflaming emotions," said Najib al-Khonaizi, a Shiite columnist. "We have to admit that there's tension in the Shiite street."

Many Shiites say authorities deliberately provoked the dispute at the cemetery.

"There was a flagrant aggression on women's rights and the Shiite visitors," Sheik Hussein al-Mustapha, a prominent Shiite cleric, told The Associated Press. "It was a premeditated action by extremist men who want to put an end to visits by Shiite visitors."

"We demand an investigation into the incident in order to put an end to these ugly practices," he said.

A Saudi official put the blame on the Shiite pilgrims, saying they triggered the dispute by practicing rituals deemed by others to be "religious infractions," such as the practice of Shiites to grab a handful of dust as a blessing and pray at the graves of the imams.

The official, who would not allow his name to be used, said such "infractions" are frequent at al-Baqee and usually are dealt with quietly by asking pilgrims to stop. But last week, he charged, a large crowd of Shiites was bent on provoking other worshippers and authorities at the cemetery.

Asked if members of the religious police had videotaped Shiite female pilgrims, the official said that if there was filming it was to take evidence of the infractions and not for voyeurism.

The official said nine of the Shiite visitors to the cemetery were arrested. He said the government was keen to find out the truth and the reasons for the escalation. He said the perpetrators would be held responsible, but did not elaborate.

Shiite Pilgrims Clash with Saudi Police in Medina



AFT - 25/02/2009

RIYADH (AFP) — Shiite Muslims held protests in eastern Saudi Arabia after an outbreak of violence between Shiite pilgrims and religious police in Medina, a Saudi human rights activist said on Wednesday.

Hundreds of people joined two protests late on Tuesday near the city of Qatif in Eastern Province, Ibrahim Mugaiteeb of the Human Rights First Society told AFP.

Mugaiteeb said anti-riot forces sought to break up the demonstrations but there were no initial reports of injuries or arrests.

The protests followed an outbreak of violence between Shiite pilgrims and security forces in the Muslim holy city of Medina in western Saudi Arabia late Monday.

The interior ministry said nine people were arrested in the violence near Al-Baqi cemetery adjacent to the Prophet Mohammed's mosque, which attracts millions of pilgrims every year.

According to accounts from Saudi Shiite Muslims, the pilgrims were angered when Sunni religious police made videos of Shiite women in their group last week, and the dispute boiled over into violence Monday near the holy sites.

"People are really angry," Mugaiteeb said by telephone, noting that few Saudi Muslims of any confession accept women being photographed or filmed without permission.

Interior ministry spokesman General Mansur al-Turki confirmed on Tuesday that nine people were arrested in Medina on Monday, but denied Internet and foreign media reports that one or more people had died in the violence.

"The security authorities will issue a statement later to clarify what happened, the nationalities of the participants in the fight and their motives, once the investigation is over," Turki said.

Shiites account for only about 10 percent of the Muslim population of Saudi Arabia, which is dominated by an ultra-conservative version of Sunni Islam.

Some Saudi Sunni clerics deride Shiites as Muslim rejectionists, but recent government initiatives have sought to bridge the sectarian divide, most recently King Abdullah's decision last week to name several new Shiite members to the kingdom's consultative Shura Council.

Human Rights First condemned the attack on the pilgrims, calling on the government to launch an investigation and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Shiite Pilgrims Clash with Saudi Police in Medina



CBN - 25/02/2009

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia - Saudi religious police have clashed with Shiite pilgrims near a cemetery in Islam's second-holiest city, leading a Shiite cleric to appeal to the king. The Shiites were barred from entering the cemetery in Medina to mark the anniversary of Muhammad's death -- an occasion not observed by Sunnis in Saudi Arabia. Witnesses say the confrontation turned violent, and both police and pilgrims were injured. Relations are tense between Saudi Arabia's majority Sunnis and the Shiites, who make up a small minority of the country's 22 million people. Shiites, who are considered infidels under the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam widely followed in the kingdom, routinely complain of discrimination.

Shiite pilgrims clash with Saudi police in Medina

The Seattle Times

The Seattle Times - 25/02/2009

Shiite Muslims are shouting anti-government slogans and demanding more freedoms in rare protests amid the minority's worst confrontations in years with authorities in this overwhelmingly Sunni kingdom.

Prominent Shiite clerics and intellectuals called on the government Wednesday to launch a fair investigation into a dispute last week that triggered the unrest.

Hundreds of protesters in the poor Shiite town of Awwamiya carried banners saying "Down with the government" and spray-painted the slogan on billboards Tuesday, witnesses said. One said youths threw stones at a police post before officers fired in the air to disperse the crowd, which included women. No casualties were reported.

Clashes between Shiites and religious police also were reported Monday and Tuesday outside a cemetery at the center of the latest uproar.

The Sunni majority has long had strained relations with Shiites, who are a small minority of the country's 22 million people. Considered infidels under the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam widely followed in Saudi Arabia, Shiites routinely complain of discrimination and outspoken Shiite critics have been jailed.

The latest eruption of tensions began with an argument Friday night near a cemetery in Medina, Islam's second holiest city, that contains the graves of revered imams.

Shiites say members of the religious police who maintain an office at the al-Baqee Cemetery filmed female pilgrims and refused to hand over the tapes or destroy them. A Saudi official blamed Shiite pilgrims for the trouble, accusing them of performing religious rituals offensive to other worshippers and authorities at the cemetery.

Shiites say riot police were heavy-handed in dealing with the pilgrims, beating them with batons and arresting some.

The protests came a week after King Abdullah ordered the most significant changes in government, the armed forces, the judiciary and the religious establishment since he became king in 2005, but left Shiites feeling left out of the reforms.

Shiites had hoped for appointments as ministers or representation in the council of senior scholars that had been restructured to include all schools of Sunni Islam. But no Shiites were chosen for those positions.

"There's a feeling that the Shiites' ambitions have not been realized as hoped, and that could have played an indirect role in inflaming emotions," said Najib al-Khonaizi, a Shiite columnist. "We have to admit that there's tension in the Shiite street."

Many Shiites say authorities deliberately provoked the dispute at the cemetery.

"There was a flagrant aggression on women's rights and the Shiite visitors," Sheik Hussein al-Mustapha, a prominent Shiite cleric, told The Associated Press. "It was a premeditated action by extremist men who want to put an end to visits by Shiite visitors."

"We demand an investigation into the incident in order to put an end to these ugly practices," he said.

A Saudi official put the blame on the Shiite pilgrims, saying they triggered the dispute by practicing rituals deemed by others to be "religious infractions," such as the practice of Shiites to grab a handful of dust as a blessing and pray at the graves of the imams.

The official, who would not allow his name to be used, said such "infractions" are frequent at al-Baqee and usually are dealt with quietly by asking pilgrims to stop. But last week, he charged, a large crowd of Shiites was bent on provoking other worshippers and authorities at the cemetery.

Asked if members of the religious police had videotaped Shiite female pilgrims, the official said that if there was filming it was to take evidence of the infractions and not for voyeurism.

The official said nine of the Shiite visitors to the cemetery were arrested. He said the government was keen to find out the truth and the reasons for the escalation. He said the perpetrators would be held responsible, but did not elaborate.

Cleric urges end to anti-Shiite actions



Kuwait Times - 25/02/2009

RIYADH: A prominent Shiite cleric in Saudi Arabia appealed to King Abdullah to put an end to "extremist practices and insults" by members of the religious police against Shiite pilgrims following a series of incidents at a revered cemetery. Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar's posted the appeal on his website Monday, following reports of several incidents of confrontations between Shiites and riot police at the Al-Baqee Cemetery in Madinah, Islam's second-holiest city. The confrontations aggravate the friction between the overwhelmingly Sunni population and the Shiites, who say they make up 10-15 percent of Saudi Arabia's 22 million people.

Saudi authorities arrested at least nine Saudi Shiite pilgrims after clashes, Shiite and security sources said yesterday. "Some 1,500 Shiite pilgrims gathered near the mosque for the commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) death," said Jaafar Al-Shaib, a leading figure among Saudi Shiites. "Stick-wielding members of the morals police backed up by plainclothes policemen sought to disperse them." Morals police often prevent pilgrims venerating tombs, seen as idolatry under the strict Saudi version of Islam. Some pilgrims were injured in a stampede after police fired into the air to disperse the crowd, Al-Shaib said, adding ambulances took some away. He said some shops owned by Shiites were attacked.

An Interior Ministry spokesman for security affairs described the incident as "a quarrel between visitors and worshippers". "Now there is an investigation to establish motives and reasons," spokesman Mansour Al-Turki said. He declined to confirm that the clash was between the morals police and Shiites. He said nine people were taken in custody, but declined to give more details saying an official statement would be issued later. A security source who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to talk to the media told Reuters seven Shiite pilgrims were injured in the resulting stampede and were taken to the city's King Fahd Hospital.

Saudi Arabia follows the severe Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam that considers Shiites infidels. Shiites routinely complain of discrimination, including being banned from joining the religious police. Shiite witnesses said the first clash took place Friday evening after members of the religious police filmed female Shiite pilgrims outside the cemetery, which contains the graves of several revered imams.

When five male relatives of the women demanded the police turn over the tapes, there was a scuffle and the men were arrested, according to a witness who refused to be identified for fear of being punished. After the arrest, hundreds of pilgrims gathered outside the cemetery, demanding their release. Riot police used batons to disperse the crowd, said the witness. According to Madinah's police, however, the five were arrested and charged with causing a disturbance at the gate of the cemetery after being told visitation hours were over.

On Monday night, another confrontation took place when the religious police banned female Shiite pilgrims from visiting an area reserved for them outside the cemetery that overlooks the graves, according to the same witness. Women in Saudi Arabia are banned from visiting graves. The witness said police used batons against the angry Shiite crowd, which he estimated at 3,000-4,000. Sunni onlookers also joined the fray, attacking Shiite pilgrims.

Yesterday, when police once again prevented people from entering the cemetery, the pilgrims drew knives and attacked, injuring two policemen, according to a security official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media. A member of the crowd was taken to the hospital, the official said.

The Al-Madina newspaper yesterday quoted Madinah's governor, Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Majed, as

saying that authorities are questioning "those behind the chaotic events" in Al-Baqee. He didn't mention their identities or numbers. Yasser Al-Matrafi, head of public relations at the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice which runs the religious police, told Al-Madina that the religious police had no part in Al-Baqee events.

In his appeal, Al-Saffar said the treatment of Shiite visitors near the Al-Baqee Cemetery violates "Islamic morals and human rights" and the tolerant measures called for by the interfaith conferences hosted by the king a few months ago. When contacted by AP, Al-Saffar's office confirmed the authenticity of the statement on the cleric's website. "Visitors are generally harshly treated ... and prayer books are confiscated," said Al-Saffar, adding that this makes pilgrimages and religious visits "subject to sectarian tensions.

Iran's Arab-language satellite channel quoted witnesses as saying that on Monday evening two Saudi Shiites from Al-Qatif in the oil-rich east of the kingdom were killed and four others wounded by anti-riot police. It added that the Shiite pilgrims were commemorating the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his grandson, the second of the line of imams revered in Shiite Islam who is buried in Al-Baqee adjacent to the prophet's mosque, when they were provoked by the Saudi moral police.

Saudi Security Police Open Fire on Shia Pilgrims in Medina



[Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission](#) - « Zainab Hasan »- 25/02/2009

Saudi security forces and the Wahhabi 'religious police' have killed at least two Shia pilgrims in the holy city of Medina in what appears to be a premeditated and coordinated attack. The courtyard of the holy mosque of the Prophet (s) witnessed heavy clashes on Tuesday afternoon when security forces opened fire on Shia pilgrims who had come to commemorate the death anniversary of the Holy Prophet of Islam.

The provocations began on Friday evening when religious police prevented pilgrims from mourning the death of the Holy Prophet and instead started to film a group of female Shia pilgrims outside the al-Baqee Cemetery in Medina. The raw footage captures the highly charged atmosphere in the courtyard caused by the aggressive conduct of the religious police.

When male relatives expressed their protest at the mistreatment of the female visitors to the shrine, five of them were jailed by security forces. The names of those jailed are: Abdullah Muhammad Al-Matroud, Abdul-Aziz Al-Darwish from the town of Qatif, Murtadha Faysal Al-Arbash from Dammam, Abdullah Jum'ah Al-Mumin aged fifteen (15) and Mukhtar Muhammad Al-Nasir.

Wahhabi religious police in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are notorious for manhandling Shia pilgrims and often subject them to harsh treatment. The Saudi kingdom on its part has a long history of support for Wahhabi and Salafi radical groups, with leading figures in the monarchical hierarchy such as Bandar bin Sultan, known for their particular hatred towards the Shia.

The clashes boiled over on Tuesday when Saudi security police aided by Wahhabi fanatics set a parameter around visiting Shia pilgrims and later opened fire on them resulting in two fatalities and several casualties, some of whom with life-threatening injuries. Amongst those critically injured is young Abdullah Al-Hassaani aged fifteen (15) who is presently being treated in the intensive care unit in one of the hospitals in Medina. Abdullah was shot in the chest by security forces.

Earlier in the day, Shia cleric Sheikh Jawad Al-Hodhry was attacked with a knife by a Wahhabi fanatic at the entrance of the mosque of the Holy Prophet.

The nature in which the Saudi security forces have conducted themselves in dealing with visitors to the holy shrine of the Prophet, and the consequent escalation to bloody clashes witnessed in the courtyard of the holy mosque shows a well planned and premeditated attack aimed at vilifying, and laying blame on the Shia population in Saudi Arabia. There can be no doubt that in the aftermath of these clashes there will be even more severe restrictions placed on Shias living in the kingdom.

Reports by human right groups have always underlined the systematic suppression faced by the Shia minority at the hands of the Saudi government.

Saudi Cleric: End anti-Shiite Actions



News Blaze - 26/02/2009

Members of the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia are feeling the heat following clashes over the past few days between Shi'ite pilgrims and Saudi security forces in Medina.

Several Shi'ite protesters have been arrested after criticizing what they called discrimination against the Shi'ite minority.

Clashes have been taking place over the past week between Shi'ite visitors to Medina and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice - the religious police - according to numerous news reports.

Hundreds of Shi'ites gathered in Medina last Friday and spoke out against the government. They were demonstrating after the religious police filmed female Shi'ite pilgrims visiting the graves of revered Shi'ite figures in Medina.

News reports said that when the religious police refused to turn over the tapes to the pilgrims' male relatives, it turned into a scuffle and this drew protesters.

At least nine of the protesters were arrested following several days of demonstrations, Shi'ite and security forces said.

Homemade video footage filmed on cell phones of the women participating in the protests and posted onto YouTube show a man crouching behind a wall on top of a building and filming the gathering of female pilgrims.

Other videos showed uniformed security forces chasing women worshipers down the streets. Witnesses said Sunni Muslims also hurled verbal abuse at the women.

Videos of this nature have been posted onto video-sharing sites, although several of these websites are blocked in Saudi Arabia.

At least three people were reportedly killed in the clashes.

The sparring has fueled mass protests in Qatif, a predominantly Shi'ite area in eastern Saudi Arabia.

"People are really nervous," a resident of Qatif told The Media Line, but added that they were not being attacked by the police.

The ensuing clashes have increased tension between the government and the kingdom's Shi'ite community, which constitutes between five and 10 percent of the population.

Saudi Arabia practices Wahhabism, a strict form of Sunni Islam.

Shi'ites often complain they are discriminated against by the government and say they face restrictions on religious freedom.

Most Saudi Shi'ites live in the eastern part of the kingdom.

Around 15 percent of Muslims worldwide adhere to Shi'ism, constituting the second-largest group of believers in Islam after the Sunnis.

The main bone of contention between Sunnis and Shi'ites is the issue of succession to the Prophet Muhammad, who is believed to have died in 632 AD (CE).

Iran has the highest concentration of Shi'ites, with the vast majority of its 70 million-strong population adhering to this branch of Islam. Other Shi'ite concentrations are located in Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Pakistan and Lebanon.

Saudi Cleric: End anti-Shiite Actions



Today's Zaman - 28/02/2009

A prominent Shiite cleric in Saudi Arabia appealed to King Abdullah to put an end to "extremist practices and insults" by members of the religious police against Shiite pilgrims following a series of incidents at a revered cemetery.

Sheik Hassan al-Saffar posted the appeal on his Web site Monday, following reports of confrontations on Friday, Monday and Tuesday between Shiites and riot police at the al-Baqee Cemetery in Medina, Islam's second-holiest city. The confrontations aggravate the friction between the overwhelmingly Sunni population and the Shiites, who say they make up 10-15 percent of Saudi Arabia's population of 22 million. Saudi Arabia follows the severe Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam that considers Shiites infidels.

Shiites routinely complain of discrimination, including being banned from joining the religious police. Shiite witnesses said the first clash took place on Friday evening after members of the religious police filmed female Shiite pilgrims outside the cemetery, which contains the graves of several revered imams. When five male relatives of the women demanded the police turn over the tapes, there was a scuffle and the men were arrested, according to a witness who refused to be identified for fear of being punished. Hundreds of pilgrims gathered outside cemetery after the men were arrested Friday and demanded their release.

**Recent Gains and New Opportunities
for Women's Rights in the Arab Gulf
2004-2008**

**Presentation by
Dr. Wajeeha Al-Baharna , Bahrain Women's Association
to the
European Union Presidency, Working Group for the Gulf Region of EU Member
States, European Council and European Commission Officials**

**Bridging the Gulf Briefing,
Brussels, 2 March 2009**

1. KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

Nationality:

- Women remain unable to pass their Saudi citizenship automatically to their non-citizen spouses and children, but a new amendment in 2007 allows the sons of citizen mothers and non-citizen fathers to apply for Saudi citizenship once they reach age 18.
- Amendments to the citizenship law in October 2005 allow non-Saudis, including foreign-born husbands of Saudi women, to apply for citizenship if they have lived in the kingdom for at least 10 years and have professional qualifications deemed desirable by the interior ministry.
- Additionally, Article 16 of the citizenship law was amended in 2007 to grant Saudi citizenship to non-citizen women married to or widowed by Saudi men on the condition that they relinquish any other citizenship.

Family law:

- The personal status laws of Saudi Arabia are determined by the Shari'a and favor men in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.
- The contract requires the intended bride to specify whether she is a virgin, widow, or divorcee but does not require the same information of the man. The formal contract excludes the bride as a signatory and is merely the legal confirmation of decisions taken. A woman may petition for divorce in a court if she can show that her husband has deserted her, is impotent, or has a loathsome disease, which is humiliating and a logistically difficult claim to present before a court of male judges, By contrast, a Saudi husband is entitled to a divorce without explanation.
- Women rarely receive custody of their children upon divorce, although the age at which a child is surrendered to his father in Saudi Arabia is seven if a boy, but not until puberty if a girl.

CEDAW:

- Saudi Arabia ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2000, with reservations stating that the kingdom is under no obligation to observe terms of the treaty that contradict Islamic law such as marriage, inheritance, and women's testimony .

Gender-based discrimination:

- Women are prohibited from most ministry buildings and discouraged from walking along public streets. Where separate accommodations are available to both men and women, such as hospital waiting areas, dining areas in restaurants, government office buildings, and prayer rooms in public facilities, the men's accommodations are always of a quality superior to those of women.
- Women are at a further disadvantage in the courts in that the testimony of one man is taken to be equal to that of two women, and for the purpose of compensation for accidental death or injury, a woman's worth is calculated at half that of a man.
- In practice, girls continue to be denied access to sports programs in schools, although a 2004 ministerial decree called for the creation of sports and cultural centers exclusively for women

Freedom of movement:

- Freedom of movement for women in Saudi Arabia is limited by overlapping legal constraints and social controls, and as a result women may not drive cars, travel on airplanes, work, or be outside their own home without a guardian's permission.
- women are considered legal minors under the control of their mahram (closest male relative) and are subject to legal restrictions on their personal behavior that do not apply to men.
- In 2008, women for the first time were allowed to receive their civil status cards without their guardian's permission.
- In court identification by a guardian is necessary because women's faces must be covered and judges do not accept the ID card as proof of a woman's identity.

Domestic Violence:

- The privacy of women, which involves their anonymity and chastity, is fused with ideals of family —honor, so society cannot talk about the reality of domestic violence without challenging public myths about themselves.
- Women in particular cannot talk about their personal situation without damaging their family's honor and their own reputation.
- There are few government support services and shelters for victims of domestic violence, and women die because police are not willing to intervene in domestic situations.
- Women have no legal protections against gender-based violence outside the home. Women who report sexual abuse or rape are unlikely to find sympathetic judicial authorities, and instead of receiving protection, they are often accused of having had illicit sex.

Economic Rights and Labor law:

- The opportunities for women's employment remain limited, with the vast majority of working women employed in the kingdom's single-sex education bureaucracy or in health care.
- Women constituted only 5.4 percent of the total Saudi workforce in 2005, a figure that was expected to rise to 14.2 percent by the end of the 2005-09 five-year development plan. Two such obstacles include the prohibition of mixing the sexes in the workplace and the requirement that a woman's guardian give permission for her to work.
- The vast majority of working women are employed in the public sector, and of these 84.1 percent work in education. Additionally, 40 percent of the kingdom's doctors with Saudi citizenship are women. Saudi businesswomen own nearly 20,000 companies, and women's investments amount to about 21 percent of the total volume of private sector investment in the kingdom.
- The 2005 labor law provides women with substantial maternity and childcare benefits. Unfortunately, these benefits discourage private employers from hiring women because they are so costly.
- There are no legal protections for women against sexual harassment, but as of June 2008, sexual harassment policies for women in education and in the workplace are under consideration in the Consultative Council.

Political participation:

- Saudi Arabia remains a country without the basic freedoms necessary for civil society to take root. Political parties are prohibited, there are no constitutionally guaranteed rights to free speech, press, religion, or assembly in the Basic Law of the Kingdom, and forming trade unions, striking, and engaging in collective bargaining are forbidden. Women were prohibited from voting or running as candidates for municipal councils during Saudi Arabia's first elections for public office. The question of whether women have the right to vote in Saudi Arabia, however, remains unresolved.
- The king appointed three women to serve as advisers to the council on women's issues. But they have not been invited to sit in on council deliberations. In July 2006, six more women were appointed advisors to the council with portfolios as nebulous as that of the first group.
- Women have recently been appointed to elite ministry posts, university deanships, and directorships in quasi-governmental civic organizations. Female physicians were appointed for the first time as Deputy Director of Health Affairs. A National Organization for Human Rights was established in Saudi Arabia in 2004, and 10 of the 41 members appointed were women with a mandate to monitor women's rights.

2. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Nationality:

- An Emirati woman loses her citizenship upon marriage to a foreign man in the absence of a special dispensation from the Naturalization and Residence Directorate of the emirate in which the wife lives. Even with such a dispensation, she may not transfer her citizenship to her foreign husband unless the couple was granted permission from the Presidential Court prior to marrying.
- On the other hand, the children of an Emirati father, whether he is dead or divorced from their mother, automatically receive his nationality.

Family Law:

- The new personal status law codifies many of the common Shari'a. Codifies the Shari'a practice of khula, which allows women to request a divorce from their husbands if they return their mahr (dowry). Additionally, permits women to include stipulations regarding education and work in the marriage contract, another significant assurance of women's rights.
- The ability of women to negotiate an equal marriage remains limited. A woman's guardian and prospective husband are the parties to the marital contract, although its validity is contingent upon her approval and signature. The guardian's signature is necessary except where the woman was previously married, is over a specific age, or, in certain circumstances, where she has asked the court to serve as her marriage guardian.
- If a woman is granted a divorce, she receives custody of female children until they reach the age of 13 and male children until they reach the age of 10. If a woman chooses to remarry, she forfeits her rights to custody of her children from the previous marriage

Gender –based discrimination:

- Women are not considered full persons before the law in all instances. According to the Hanbali school of Shari'a, a woman's testimony in criminal matters is equal to only half of a man's, although their testimony is considered to be equal in some civil matters.

- Education in the UAE is free for all nationals and compulsory for both boys and girls, most academic institutions are gender segregated, 65 percent of all university students were women, the majority of whom choose to study social sciences and humanities.

CEDAW:

- The UAE ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in October 2004, but has reserved the right to implement Articles 2(6) (inheritance), 9 (discrimination in granting nationality to children), 15(2) (testimony and right to conclude contracts), 16 (discrimination in marriage and family relations), and 29(1) (jurisdiction) in a manner compatible with Shari'a.

Freedom of movement:

- Freedom of movement and residence within the limits of law. However, in practice, some restrictions on freedom of movement for both Emirati and foreign women still exist. Women who are citizens may be restricted from leaving the country if they lack permission from their husbands or guardians. According to custom, a man may prevent his wife, children, and adult unmarried daughters from traveling abroad by confiscating their passports, and government institutions will not challenge a husband's right to do so.

Economic Rights:

- The proportion of working adult women has grown from 26 percent (in 1990) to 35 percent (in 2000) to 41 percent (in 2007).
- Women are free to enter into businesses of their choice, some municipalities have created barriers that prevent women from applying for licenses without the signature of a male guardian.
- The draft labor law would, for the first time, specifically prohibit any form of discrimination between people with equal qualifications and experience levels. It also protects the rights of all persons to enjoy equal opportunities to find and remain in their jobs and enjoy full employment rights and benefits. Also it requires equal pay for equal work among male and female employees, to also prohibit discrimination against women in regards to their job security. In particular, the amended article would prohibit termination of employment on the basis of marital status, pregnancy, delivery, or maternity.
- The draft labor law directly addresses — Emiratization, a nationalization program introduced by the government to promote employment in the private sector in an effort to reduce the UAE's dependence on foreign labor. The Ministry of Labor no longer allows work permits for foreigners working as secretaries, public relations officers, and human resource personnel, effectively limiting all new hires for these positions to nationals.

Labor Law:

- Generally, women still have few opportunities for professional development and promotion, and local men often show more respect in the workplace for foreign than for Emirati women, since the former are free from the traditional cultural stigma placed on working women.
- The labor law provides gender-specific benefits and protections in the workplace such as paid maternity leave, an illness linked to pregnancy or delivery, breastfeeding etc.

Political Participation:

- The UAE is not an electoral democracy. It has a Federal National Council (FNC), A female architect, was elected to the FNC, marking the only time that a woman has won an election during the first national vote in any of the Gulf states. Eight other women were appointed to the FNC by the emirate rulers. At 22.5 percent, this level of representation indicates the expanding participation of Emirati women in government and politics.
- women constituted 66 percent of public-sector employees, but only 30 percent of those held leadership and decision-making posts.
- There are four female ministers. Additionally, two female ambassadors were appointed.
- Political parties continue to be banned in the UAE. Article 33 of the constitution guarantees freedoms of assembly and association —within the limits of law, and all public gatherings require government permits.
- Significant restrictions are placed on the formation and effectiveness of independent women's rights groups. In 1975 Women Union has been established, it serves as an umbrella group for women's organizations in the country, and covers such topics as religious affairs, mother care, social affairs, cultural affairs, arts, and sports.
- It does not deal with the promotion of women's freedoms, nor does it address, aside from the occasional press conference, the issues of human trafficking, domestic and public violence against women, discrimination, or other controversial problems that hinder women's rights.

Domestic Violence:

- Physical abuse is prohibited under the law, but many women are subjected to domestic violence by their male family members. Women remain at the mercy of their husbands because the police are reluctant to get involved in the private affairs of married couples and do not afford them appropriate security.
- However, Dubai now has two safe houses where women may seek shelter from domestic abuse.

3) QATAR**Nationality:**

- Non-citizen husbands of Qatari women and their children are greatly disadvantaged in their ability to obtain Qatari citizenship, particularly as compared to the noncitizen wives of Qatari men and their children.
- As noted by the NCHR, the 25-year residency requirement limits this law's value because children's needs for the benefits conferred by citizenship, such as health care and education, are most acute while they are still young, but it retains preferential treatment for native as opposed to naturalized citizens and continues to discriminate against Qatari women.

Family Law:

- Qatar ratified the new family law in 2006 that regulates engagements, marriage contracts, separation and divorce, child custody, guardianship, and inheritance, among other things. But women continue to be treated unequally.
- Women are now granted custody of boys up to the age of 13 and girls up to the age of 15.
- The family law stipulates that her guardian carries out the contract on her behalf, ultimately subjecting her choice of husband to the guardian's approval. If the guardian is not present, a

prospective bride can ask the judge to carry out the contract instead. They may seek a judicial divorce by citing injury caused by the husband, or they may invoke khula,

- Both husband and wife may include conditions in the marriage contract and both are legally required to uphold such conditions.
- The new courts still apply Shari'a principles when dealing with family and probate issues between Muslim couples. In at least some instances within family law a woman's testimony or worth as a witness is unequal to that of a man's. No such gender-based testimony or witness preferences exist within the criminal and civil code.
- Women usually attend court proceedings in which they are involved and may either represent themselves or, increasingly, be represented by an attorney.

CEDAW:

- Qatar is the only Arab country that has not yet ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but there is a strong push by domestic activists and governmental officials, particularly from the NHRC, for its ratification.

Freedom of movement:

- Qatari women face certain restrictions in their freedom of movement. While foreign women may obtain a driver's license, Qatari women are required to have the permission of their male guardian.
- Law permits adult women to obtain a passport without the permission of a male guardian and they are not legally required to have a male guardian's approval to travel abroad.
- Employers often restrict the freedom of movement of noncitizen women, particularly domestic workers, and their ability to travel abroad.

Property Rights:

- Women in Qatar have property rights similar to those of men. with the same rights of guardianship over their individual incomes and property.
- Qatari women married to foreign nationals are eligible for government housing, as are widows and divorced women with children who did not inherit homes from their husbands. Unmarried women over 35 who support members of their family are also eligible for state housing assistance.

Economic Rights and Labor law:

- Women remain underrepresented in the workforce, constituting only 14 percent of the total adult workforce.
- Employed women tend to be highly educated compared to their male counterparts, with 66.6 percent of female citizen laborers and 35.1 percent of female noncitizen laborers holding degrees.
- only 37.2 percent of all working-aged women in Qatar participating in the workforce, compared to 89.3 percent of all men
- Article 94 of the labor law prohibits women from undertaking dangerous or arduous work, or that which could be deemed detrimental to their health or morals, while Article 95 permits the minister of labor to determine suitable work hours for women. Both of these provisions treat women as minors who are unable to make decisions regarding their own safety.

- Qatari nationals generally, and women in particular, exhibit reluctance to work in the private sector, an additional limitation for women. Instead, 9 out of 10 Qatari citizens are public employees, and women make up 33.6 percent of the total government workforce.
- The university also recently permitted women to study architecture and chemical engineering for the first time.
- A woman has the right to enter into business and economic contracts and activities without the permission of her husband or legal guardian
- Internet-based investment tools appeal to women because they allow transactions to be conducted from home without requiring interaction with financial advisers, most of whom are male.
- The government has encouraged female leadership within the private sector by establishing the Qatari Business Women Forum. According to the Qatar Chamber of Commerce, women were issued approximately 17 percent of all entrepreneurs in 2005 were women. only 8.1 percent of all management and senior positions were held by women.
- The labor law mandates equal pay for men and women if they perform the same work, as well as equal opportunity for training and promotion. In particular, form of discrimination tended to manifest itself in benefits provided by the employer, such as —residence allowances, or senior official loans or allocation of land

Political participation and decision-making positions:

- The emir granted women suffrage in a 1999 decree. The sole female candidate in the 2003 elections won a seat, but only after her male opponent withdrew, And was reelected to her seat with 96 percent of her constituency's votes.
- As with the few available elective positions, women are not adequately represented in appointive government offices, although their numbers have increased in recent years.
- women fail to hold positions of power such as ambassadorships or as police commissioners, or any positions within the security systems and planning fields.
- Political parties are banned in Qatar, meaning the country's limited political and electoral activity is generally based on family and local ties.

Domestic violence:

- Both the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure treat men and women equally, and Although Shari'a law prohibits all forms of physical violence, the Qatari legal system often treats leniently those men who commit acts of violence against women who, in their view, behave immodestly. The government has recognized that violence against women is an issue but has not yet specifically outlawed domestic violence.
- The Qatar Foundation has established a family consultation center and a hotline for women and children to report abuse and continues its efforts to educate women on their legal rights and advocate on their behalf.

4) KUWAIT

Nationality:

- Female Kuwaiti citizens remain unable to confer their nationality to their children or foreign-born spouses, while Kuwaiti men are permitted to exercise this right.

- A Kuwaiti woman married to a foreign national can transfer her nationality to her children only if the father is unknown or has died, or if there has been an irrevocable divorce. Conversely, the foreign-born wife of a Kuwaiti man may become a Kuwaiti national after 10 years or less of marriage.
- The non-citizen husbands of Kuwaiti women, like temporary foreign workers, are treated as guest workers under the Residency Law (No. 17 of 1959). To remain in the country, both populations must have valid work permits, pay residency fees, and renew their residency permits every three years or less. The same conditions apply to the adult children of Kuwaiti women married to non-citizens. On the other hand, the foreign spouse of a Kuwaiti man is granted immediate residency upon marriage.
- In 2005, amendments were made to Articles 14 and 15 of the housing law to allow disabled Kuwaiti women who are married to non-Kuwaitis and the families of slain war victims and prisoners of war the right to claim housing benefits.

Family Law:

- There are two family laws in Kuwait, Sunni and Jaafari.
- A husband is allowed to have more than one wife without the permission or even the knowledge of his first wife. A wife may not ask for divorce on the grounds that her husband has taken another wife, however the personal status law bars the husband from bringing his second wife to live with the first unless the first wife agrees. Article 85 states that a husband must provide each wife with accommodation, although an aggrieved first wife does not always file a complaint in court.
- Kuwaiti women are provided with some protection against arbitrary divorce and mistreatment. A woman may receive financial compensation equal to one year of maintenance if her husband divorces her without her consent, but implementation of court verdicts is often irregular.
- A Sunni woman cannot conclude a marriage contract without the presence and consent of her wali (marriage guardian). The presence of the wali is required even in the case of divorcees, widows, and women who have reached the age of maturity, which is 25 years.
- The minimum legal age for marriage is 15 for girls and 17 for boys.

CEDAW:

- Kuwait ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1994 with reservations on Article 9, paragraph 2 concerning citizenship rights and Article 7 regarding equal voting rights. Reservations were also appended to Article 16, paragraph 1(f), which calls for equal rights on guardianship and the adoption of children, on the grounds that they were incompatible with Shari‘a. In December 2005, Kuwait lifted its reservation related to women’s political participation.

Gender –based discrimination:

- At Kuwait University, female students are required to maintain significantly higher grade-point averages (GPAs) than men in order to be admitted into selected fields. For instance, female students must have a 3.3 GPA to be admitted to the engineering department, while male students need only a 2.8 GPA.
- Family law courts value the testimony of a woman as half that of a man, but all other courts consider the testimony of men and women to be equal.

- Women receive unequal benefits under the government's low-interest loan policy designed to encourage married men to build their own homes. For instance, a Kuwaiti man can apply for a loan up to 70,000 dinars (US\$246,930). On the other hand, divorced or widowed Kuwaiti women with children from Kuwaiti husbands can apply for 45,000 dinars (US\$158,700), payable through monthly instalments.

Freedom of movement:

- Kuwaiti women enjoy relatively uninhibited freedom of movement and may travel abroad without a mahram.
- Under Article 15 of the Passport Law (No. 11 of 1962), however, a married Kuwaiti woman cannot apply for a passport without the consent of her husband, while an unmarried woman over 21 years old does not require permission to obtain a passport.

Political participation:

- Because of the combined efforts of activists, lawyers, politicians, and citizens, women were finally granted full political rights in May 2005.
- In the 2006 and 2008 parliamentary elections, 27 women ran as candidates, and in 2006 two women competed in a local by-election to fill a vacant seat in the Municipal Council but none succeed.
- After the occupation ended, women did assume new and influential titles including university rector, vice-president of the Kuwait Oil Company, and even ambassador when, in 1993, the first female ambassador in the Gulf region.
- Women are now found in most professions including engineering, architecture, medicine, and law, as well as on executive boards of major banks and private companies.
- Women still hold predominantly administrative and secretarial positions at the Ministry of Defense, however, and cannot join the army or work as judges in courts.
- Despite these significant developments, Kuwaiti women still face discrimination in many areas of life. They remain prohibited from serving as judges and joining the military.

Domestic violence:

- Data and research on domestic violence in Kuwait continues to be sparse, making it difficult to assess the severity of the problem.
- This scarcity of information is partly due to the societal belief that domestic violence is a family affair.
- There are no laws against domestic violence, nor are there any shelters, support centers, or free legal services to aid female victims.
- By contrast, gender-based violence such as rape and sexual assault that occurs outside the home tends to receive more scrutiny from the police and the press than incidents of domestic violence. Anyone found guilty of sexual violence may face a prison sentence or the death penalty, depending on the severity of the case.

Economic Rights and Labor law:

- Kuwaiti women are entitled to own and have full and independent use of their land, property, income, and assets.

- Kuwaiti women may enter freely into business and financial contracts and activities at all levels without the permission of a male family member.
- As of 2007, approximately 51 percent of working age women was employed, with the majority working in the public sector. The Ministry of the Interior has proposed a police academy for women to increase their participation in the police force, and in July 2008, the ministry began accepting applications from women seeking to join.
- Gender-specific benefits such as the right to maternity leave and child care exist in both the private and public sectors.
- Although the penal code generally addresses harassment, no laws specifically protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace despite the urgent need for such legislation, particularly among foreign women and domestic workers.

5) BAHRAIN

Nationality:

- Bahraini women remain unable to pass their citizenship to their non-Bahraini spouses. Moreover, the law stipulates that children may only receive Bahraini citizenship from their father, and the child of a Bahraini mother and a foreign father may not receive his mother's nationality. In September 2006, over 370 children of Bahraini mothers and non-citizen fathers were granted Bahraini citizenship, but this was an ad hoc decision made at the discretion of the king, and there is no guarantee that such an act will be repeated again.

Family Law:

- Bahrain has no codified personal status law. Instead, marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance cases are heard by separate family courts for Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The judges in these courts are often conservative religious scholars with little or no formal legal training, who make judgments according to their own interpretations and readings of Islamic law. Because they may implement Shari_ah in an arbitrary manner, rulings are commonly detrimental to women's rights. Women's rights NGOs began advocating for a codified personal status law as early as 1982, and the movement has been publicly supported by SCW since late 2005. The Women's Union has worked with Sunni and Shiite religious leaders and legal experts in drafting the law, which was presented to the government in December 2008. The strongest opposition to comes from religious groups—who demand that Shiites and Sunnis have their own divorce and inheritance laws—as well as conservative segments of the population who seek to return to traditional values.

CEDAW:

- Bahrain ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2002 but made reservations to many important provisions, including those regarding family law, the granting of citizenship, and housing rights.

Testimony:

- A woman's testimony before a Shari_ah court is worth half that of a man's, and women's legal claims are treated unequally by the Shari_ah judiciary Unlike in Shari_ah courts, the testimony of both sexes are weighted equally in civil and criminal courts, and women are able to bring charges in court without permission from male family members.

Domestic Violence:

- Domestic violence in Bahrain is thought to be widespread, but its existence is usually covered up and kept within the family. Studies carried out by the Information Center for Women and Children, a regional research organization, indicate that 30 percent of Bahraini women face some sort of domestic abuse. Although laws generally prohibit assault and battery, domestic violence is not specifically prohibited under Bahraini law or addressed by any government policy. Accusations of domestic violence are rarely taken into account in divorce cases and abused women seldom seek any form of legal recourse, but when they do, courts do not look favorably on such cases.
- The government has also initiated training for judges who deal with domestic abuse, increased the number of policewomen, and amended Law No. 26 of 1986 to streamline Shari_a court procedures, especially with respect to alimony and child custody.
- No laws or government policies specifically address the issue of gender-based violence, and enforcement mechanisms are lacking for the existing legal provisions that may apply. The penal code generally addresses violence against citizens, but this is not adequate to protect against sexual harassment and domestic abuse. Wives, daughters, and female foreign workers rarely seek legal redress for violence committed against them, and when they do, the perpetrators often avoid punishment, thereby exposing victims to additional maltreatment. The punishment for rape is life in prison, but spousal rape is not considered a crime.⁷ Additionally, under Article 353 of the penal code, a rapist may avoid punishment if he agrees to marry his victim.⁸ Although this is viewed by some as protecting women from shame, the psychological effects of this policy are grave and divorces after such unions are likely. Additionally, the rapist may later initiate a unilateral divorce, thereby avoiding both a rapist's punishment and a husband's responsibilities. These considerations make women less likely to report rape

Freedom of movement:

- Women do not face any legal restraints in terms of their freedom of movement, although some cultural boundaries still exist. In July 2004, Article 13 of the passport law was amended to permit married women to apply for passports without permission from their husbands. Women are also not required to seek permission from their guardians before traveling abroad. On a practical level, unmarried women are less able to move freely and their whereabouts are indirectly monitored by their families and community. Married women have additional freedoms because society believes that the responsibility for their husbands and children makes them more —reasonable than single women. Regardless of her age or marital status, a woman's behavior traditionally reflects not only upon herself but also upon the honor of her family and tribe, while men's honor depends on their ability to protect the women in their family

Economic rights and equal opportunities:

- Bahraini women are free to own property and land, subject to their individual financial constraints. In the 1970s, the government established the Productive Family Project to encourage families to run small businesses from home
- Some fields remain segregated based on gender. For instance, certain technical subjects in high schools are restricted to boys, while textile classes are limited only to girls. This segregation affects future job opportunities and reflects government support for societal biases. Although no other subjects are actually restricted, women remain underrepresented in areas such as engineering and overrepresented in education and health care. From a practical standpoint, this limits women's freedom to choose their university courses and leads them to study subjects in low demand in the labor market, increasing their unemployment rate

Labor Law:

- Although most women are free to choose their professions, certain restrictions in this domain still exist. Under Article 301 of the Private Labor Law (No. 63 of 1976), women are prohibited from working between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M., with certain exceptions such as jobs in health care. Law No. 5 of 1977, issued by the Ministry of Health, prohibits women from doing hazardous work, which includes predominantly heavy industrial jobs.³⁶ Women constituted approximately 19 percent of the country's labor force and approximately 31 percent of adult women were employed in 2007
- more foreigners, who are generally cheaper to employ than citizens.
- The labor law offers gender-based protections by prohibiting employers from firing women during maternity leave or because they get married.³⁹ Several improvements have been made to gender-based workplace benefits in recent years. In 2005, maternity leave increased from 35 to 60 working days, breaks for breast-feeding increased from one to two hours a day for a six-month period, and mothers can now obtain unpaid leave for a maximum of two years at a time on three separate occasions during their working lives

Political rights and civic voice:

- In 2002, six women ran unsuccessfully as candidates for the Council of Representatives. After losing that year's election by a small margin, Latifa al-Gaoud ran again in 2006, this time unopposed, and became Bahrain's first and only female parliamentarian. In general, women face unique obstacles while campaigning, in part because they have fewer opportunities to address large groups and mixed-gender groups than men, who have wider access to mosques and other community gatherings. In all, 16 female candidates ran in the 2006 elections, and women constituted 50.2 percent of the voters, a vast improvement over the 2002 elections
- Participation by women in the national government and decision-making positions remains low.

NGO's:

- All NGOs in Bahrain, including women's rights organizations, are supervised by the MSD (Ministry of Social Development). Because NGOs are forbidden from engaging in vaguely defined - political activity, the MSD can effectively ban work on a variety of controversial topics. Any NGO whose annual budget is over 10,000 dinars (US\$26,500) must use an external auditor to monitor its finances. Moreover, all funds and donations from foreign entities are scrutinized by the government, limiting the assistance that NGOs may receive from outside sources and subjecting NGOs to additional government supervision and control

6) OMAN

Nationality:

- Omani women may not transfer citizenship to their noncitizen spouses and children, who must obtain and renew their residency visas every two years, while Omani men may do so without restriction.⁷ Noncitizen husbands are also not permitted to work without a sponsor.

Personal Status Law:

- Oman's Personal Status Law (Royal Decree No. 32 of 1997) is based on Shari‘a law, assigning men and women different rights and responsibilities. Men are financially responsible for the family while women have no such economic obligation under law. The law does not require women to be completely obedient to men and it provides women with the explicit right

to work outside the home. Moreover, if a woman refuses to breastfeed her children, her husband is legally obligated to find household help.¹² Article 282 of the personal status law allows non-Muslims to follow their own religious rules when it comes to family matters.

- The personal status law tends to favor the rights of men over the rights of women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.

Economic rights and equal opportunities:

- Women participate in the workforce at a notably lower rate than men in all age categories. There are 18 women for every 100 men in the Omani workforce. Of the female workforce, 39.7 percent are employed in the education sector, 14.2 percent are in the social and health sectors, and 14.8 percent contribute in the public administration sectors and related jobs.²⁴
- As of March 2008, women make up 38.3 percent of government employees and only 17.1 percent of private sector workers.²⁵ This disparity is attributed to the fact that society is more comfortable with women working the shorter hours associated with public sector jobs. To minimize the gender gap that exists in the workforce, more opportunities for women must be provided in both the public and private sector.²⁶
- Approximately 25 percent of the female population was employed at the end of 2008, representing a 4 percent increase from 2003
- A woman's right to own and use her property independently is protected under Article 11 of the Basic Law, which permits all persons to dispose of their property as they so choose.
- Women are legally entitled to choose their careers under Article 12 of the Basic Law. This decision, however, is usually made in consultation and negotiation with a woman's father, brothers, and/or husband, and women may face social obstacles if their choices are not supported by their male family members. The government does not interfere in family disputes concerning a woman's career choice, meaning that women are often forced to accede to the decisions of the family patriarch.
- By law, men and women should receive equal pay for the same work, although it is legally permissible to provide women with work benefits that are not equal to those of men. No studies have been conducted to examine whether wage disparities exist among men and women who possess the same professional qualifications. Additionally, only divorced or widowed women are eligible for government benefits such as housing and land grants, which are widely available to men over the age of 18. The government has made efforts to hire public sector employees in a nondiscriminatory manner, and over one-third of government employees in Oman are women, but only a few occupy high-level posts.

Political Participation:

- Oman has a bicameral advisory parliament consisting of the appointed State Council and the elected Consultative Council, neither of which has legislative powers.
- Elections for the Consultative Council most recently occurred in October 2007, drawing approximately 63 percent of the more than 388,000 registered voters. The number of female candidates increased from 15 in the 2003 election to 21 in the 2007 election, but for the first time since they were permitted to run as candidates in 1994, no women were elected.²⁸
- Women occupy only 5.15 percent of the leadership and decision-making positions in government and are not allowed to serve as judges in Omani courts, despite constituting approximately half the population.
- They also hold few positions within the upper level of the government: 14 women were appointed by the sultan in a royal decree issued in November 2007 to serve in the 70-member State Council, and there are currently only four female ministers. In 2003, Aisha al-Siyabiah

was appointed head of the Public Authority for Craft Industries, giving her the rank of minister. The remaining three are ministers with portfolio. The first, Dr. Rawiyah al-Busaidiyah, was appointed as minister of higher education in March 2004, making her first female minister with portfolio in the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Later in 2004, Rajiha bint Abdulmir became minister of tourism and Sharifa al-Yahya was appointed minister of social development. Of the four women appointed as undersecretaries in 2003, only one remained as of June 2008. In 1999, the country's first female ambassador was appointed to the Netherlands, and in 2005, a second was appointed as ambassador to the United States.

- In practice, however, men fill the majority of policymaking positions in the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government, thereby limiting the influence women may have on shaping and enforcing policy.
- Article 5 forbids organizations from engaging in politics and interfering with religious matters;

CEDAW:

- Oman's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in February 2006 is viewed as progress toward the realization of women's rights and has encouraged women to fight for their legal rights.⁴ However, implementation of the convention has proven difficult and slow.
- The government instigated an important change by introducing a law in 2008 stipulating that men and women's legal testimonies are now considered equal
- Adult women may now be considered full persons before the law if recent amendments to the rules of evidence are fully enforced. Pursuant to Law No. 63 of 2008, the testimony of men and women is now deemed equal in court proceedings, although it is unclear whether this will be fully implemented throughout the legal system, particularly in family law.

Domestic Violence:

- Oman has no specific legislation that criminalizes domestic violence. While issues of domestic violence are not raised in the media or in public reports, such abuse exists in Omani society at various levels. Undisclosed government sources have indicated that the government conducted a study confirming that domestic violence is a problem that should be addressed, but this study has not been publicly released, and figures and facts are confidential. There is no way to document complaints from victims, no methods that permit women to report violence confidentially, and no facilities for women seeking refuge from violence

Freedom of Expression and the Press in the GCC States

**A Statement Presented to
the European Union Presidency, Working Group for the Gulf Region of EU
Member States, European Council and European Commission Officials**

Written by Dr. Mohammed Al Roken (UAE)

Bridging the Gulf Briefing, Brussels, 2 March 2009

1)- United Arab Emirates (UAE):

Although the UAE constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press, in practice these rights are very limited. By law, the Ministry of Information licenses all publications and approves the appointment of editors. Press content also is governed by law. Despite the wise decision issued by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Vice President and Prime Minister, not to imprison journalists in press crimes, there are many examples of issues concerning the freedom of opinion and expression in the Emirates:

- The authorities in the Emirates on November 17, 2007 took the step to cut two Pakistani channels (Geo News and ARY One) programs off the air on U.A.E and the authorities in the Dubai Media City informed the channels of the decision and gave them a respite of two hours to cut transmission without giving reasons for this decision.
- On November 20, 2007 a group of 25 national educators (teachers and headmasters) launched a public protest because they were suspended and transferred to other ministries. Despite all newspapers were invited to cover the protest, a media screen-out was devised by all the media outlets. Some journalists believe that the screening out decision was taken by superior security bodies in the Emirates after 83 teachers were prohibited from teaching and sent to other administrations with the intention to disperse them over other ministries in positions that don't suit their education in an attempt to push them off the educational system because of their Islamist background.
- A local newspaper refused, as it did times before, to run on October 2007 an essay for Dr. Abdul Khaliq Abdullah that was titled "reforms in university in the Emirates". In addition to that, there are still several national writers who lie in the banning list since (Sept. 2000) the days of former media minister. A number of writers called in Nov. 2007 for removing the ban in accordance with the

decree not to jail journalists for press crimes; there was no response and things still the way they are. The banning list of writers include: Dr. Said Harib, Dr. Mohammed Al-Roken, Dr. Abdul Razzak Al Faris and others.

- Six lawsuit cases were filed against www.Majan.net website. Majan is a well known web forum in UAE & provides a wide margin of freedom for its participants. On August 8, 2007 the Ras Al-Khaimah court sentenced Mohammed Al Shehhi (the owner of the blog majan.net) to one year in prison, a fine of \$19,000 (70,000 dirhams) and shut down the website. On September 12, the Ras Al-Khaimah court sentenced both the owner and Khalid Al Asley (the author of the blog) to an additional five months each in prison. Both appealed the court decision, and both were released on bail on October 1. All cases were dropped on January 21, 2008.
- The government restricted academic freedom. By the end of 2007 the government permitted only one of the 15 intellectuals it banned from publishing and teaching in the country in 2001-2002 to return to teaching and writing. This ban continued to inhibit open academic discussions of a political nature.
- The authorities in UAE blocked the blog site of "Mujarad-Ensan" (Just a Human) on the 12th of October 2008- one day after writing an article titled "laugh with me: our economy is still well". The blog site of "Mujarad-Ensan" is considered to be one of the most important blogs of UAE, as it exposes many of the pressing and complex issues to deliberate analysis. Issues such as Transparency, Freedom of Expression and Media, the conflict between Federal and Local policies, HR issues such as Trafficking, and many other thoughtful political and economical articles pertaining to UAE and the region were the main subjects of the site.
- Dubai Satellite TV Channel stopped September 2008 the last eight episodes of a famous critical TV series called "Hayer Tayer". Hayer Tayer, a satirical social comedy, based on real life issues and situations that happen in the UAE, is a series of individual stories portrayed in short film style in every episode. The stories range from the eternal struggle of choosing to do the right thing, unfairness and its consequences, shows of weakness and strength and even depicts the lengths people can go for their own selfish gains.
- Civil society leaders appealed to President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan to intervene to reconsider the new media draft law, which was passed by the Federal National Council on January 20, 2009. A petition signed by more than 100 Emirati academics, lawyers, journalists, artistes, human rights activists and non-governmental organisations (NGO's) members, said the law "does not live up to ambitions seeking to raise the level of freedoms especially the freedom of the speech and the Press". They added the law is unclear, harms civil liberties and curtails free media work in the UAE. The new media draft law scraps jail terms for journalists and instead imposes up to Dh5 million fine for breaking the law.

2)- Kuwait:

The new website censorship law the Kuwaiti government intends to present to the parliament is contradictory to the dominant trend in most democratic countries, where an increase of freedom of expression, especially on the internet, is recommended. This proposed new legislation reflects a serious decline in freedom of expression in Kuwait manifested through the confiscation of many political and literary books.

After months of planning, Kuwait's Public Prosecutors Office (PPO) is set to finalize a bill that will punish "Internet offenders" in the country. Prosecutor General Hamed Al-Othman told "Al-Qabas" daily on 27 July 2008 that the bill will criminalize the promotion of immoral conduct, encouraging anti-government sentiments, divulging state secrets, or insulting Islam online. Penalties for breaking the law could involve a 1-year prison sentence (7-years if the insulted party is a minor) and monetary fines. The new Internet law aims to stifle freedom online and has already succeeded in creating self-censorship in the blogging community. Prosecutor general Al-Othman reasoned to Al-Qabas daily that the need for a law to control the Internet is obvious to anybody interested in protecting Kuwait's

customs and future generations. "Such a law is needed to combat the increasing electronic crimes associated with the ever-improving electronic technology."

On 12 July 2008 that the Kuwaiti government's issuing of a resolution to prevent official staff from writing in newspapers is a harsh blow to press freedom and freedom of expression, taking Kuwait back decades and violating several constitutional articles that ensure the freedoms of opinion and expression. "Al Qabas" newspaper revealed a governmental document, which has been under preparation since February 2008, that prevents government staff from working in journalism. It imposes penalties that include dismissal from work for any employee who writes in newspapers. The Kuwaiti government provided a flimsy and unacceptable reason for taking this decision, which was the need to "preserve state secrets."

3)- Bahrain:

In Bahrain the authorities have taken measures to effectively block local access to the electronic blog of Abduljalil Alsingace, (<http://alsingace.katib.org>). This is the first blog, a personal homepage, to be blocked by an administrative ministerial order, as part of a censorship campaign initiated by the newly appointed Minister of Information, Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa.

On 14 January 2009, local newspapers disclosed a ministerial order by minister of culture and information addressed to all telecommunications companies and Internet service providers, calling on them to prevent access to websites that were banned by the ministry. This is the first resolution issued by the minister this year and the first administrative resolution to give sharp and clear instructions to telecommunications companies and Internet service providers to prevent "all the customary ways to access blocked sites," whether through Internet addresses or through the use of alternative servers (proxies) or any other way. The text of the minister's resolution stated that "lifting the block on any site should only be on the instructions of the minister herself." She asked the companies and Internet service providers to "use unified technical solutions" to comply with the instructions in her resolution. The minister's actions were justified as a campaign against "pornographic websites and public morality," as stated in the ministerial resolution, but it is well known that the list of banned sites in Bahrain goes beyond that to include websites of local public discussion forums, popular committees, political establishments, human rights organisations, religious and non-religious groups, nationalists, electronic newspapers, news and advertisements sites, and even humour sites.