

# Canadian Citizen Tortured in Bahrain... But Harper Government Keeps Silent

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Global Research, July 17, 2011

17 July 2011

Region: [Canada, Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

A young Canadian man suffering from a serious heart condition has been abducted and tortured by the Bahraini regime – yet the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has maintained a steadfast silence over his plight.

This lack of action by the Harper government is in spite of the fact that the Canadian Consuls in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are fully aware of the case. The official silence may be due to a bilateral trade deal Canada is in the process of completing with the Bahraini regime, and also Ottawa's increasing subordination to Washington's foreign policy and therefore unwillingness to upset an important US ally in the Persian Gulf.

Naser Al Raas (28), who resides in Ottawa, was caught up in the popular uprising in the oil-rich Gulf kingdom that erupted in mid-February while on a family holiday. He arrived in Bahrain on 6 March to visit his five sisters who live there.

But when the former Microsoft IT specialist went to exit the country on 20 March, he was stopped while boarding his flight by ministry of interior officers. Although Al Raas was travelling on a Canadian passport, he was hauled into a room at Bahrain's international airport and detained for several hours during which time he was hooded, interrogated and physically assaulted. That was just the beginning of his nightmare.

He was then taken by his captors to the infamous Al Qala - the ministry of interior headquarters in the capital, Manama, and incarcerated for four weeks without any criminal charges being made. During his illegal detention, Al Raas was severely tortured.

The Canadian suffers from a rare lung and heart condition - pulmonary embolism. He has previously undergone two open-heart operations at the Ottawa Heart Institute and he requires constant medication. Around the time of arrest, his supply of medication, which he had brought from Canada, ran out. He has been without treatment for nearly four months now.

The sprawling grey Al Qala fortress in Manama is surrounded by an imposing 20-metre-high wall and is equipped with underground holding cells. It is notorious among Bahrainis as the regime's "torture chamber". This is where up to 1,000 civilians have been detained following the US-backed crackdown against the pro-democracy uprising that is challenging the unelected Al Khalifa monarchy, headed by King Hamad. Four people have been tortured to death while in custody in recent months, according to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights [1].

The fierce repression against peaceful demonstrators escalated on 14 March when troops

from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invaded Bahrain to shore up the Al Khalifa regime. Two days before the Saudi-led military intervention, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates held a private meeting with King Hamad in Manama.

Despite condemnations by numerous human rights groups of the Saudi-led invasion and subsequent violations, Washington has remained a staunch supporter of the Al Khalifa regime, with President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton describing it as a “key ally”. The US Navy Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain.

For one month, the family of Naser Al Raas did not know of his whereabouts or even if he was alive. They knew that his last movements were in the airport because he talked to a friend by phone just before his scheduled departure. However, for the next four weeks, the Bahraini government denied all knowledge of the Canadian man.

After one month of being held incommunicado, the Bahraini regime released Al Raas but with-held his passport. He is now stranded in Bahrain - without medication - pending a prosecution trial. On three dates in June, he was brought before a Military Court. It was during the opening hearing on 7 June that he first learnt of the charges against him.

Al Raas stands accused, along with 12 other men, of kidnapping a police officer and promoting crimes against the rulers. He recalls that during his interrogation period he was forced to sign a piece of paper. This has turned out to be a confession to the crimes he is being accused of - accusations that Al Raas denies.

The Bahraini rulers have shown boundless imagination in fabricating prosecution cases. For example, last month it sentenced an internationally respected human rights advocate, Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, to life in prison for “trying to overthrow the state while working for a foreign enemy”. The regime is also currently prosecuting senior surgeons and doctors that it accuses of “concealing machineguns under hospital beds” and “exaggerating the wounds of patients for propaganda purposes, resulting in the death of patients” [2].

All trials in Bahrain since the Saudi-led invasion have been conducted in Military Courts, with minimal legal counsel permitted to the defendants. In over 400 trials, confessions forced through torture are the sole basis for the prosecution case. In eerie show trial fashion, sometimes videos of defendants making confessions are even televised on Bahrain state TV before the verdicts are reached.

Such flagrant violation of international legal standards have been roundly condemned by rights groups, such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch. But while Washington has rushed to condemn Libya and Syria over alleged human rights abuses, it has remained tight-lipped about its Bahraini ally. Indeed, Washington has used its words to talk up the Al Khalifa regime’s initiative for a “national dialogue” - which the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain has dismissed as a sham, pointing out that the regime continues to attack peaceful rallies, the latest atrocity in Sitra on 15 July where police opened fire on civilians resulting in one woman Zainab Hasan Al Jumaa being killed [3].

For Al Raas, the next court appearance is set for September. If found guilty, the Canadian is facing up to 20 years in prison. Given his acute heart condition and weakened state from torture, Al Raas’ family fear that his conviction could result in a de facto death sentence.

The fact that a civilian - a foreign civilian at that - can end up being illegally detained,

tortured and dragged before a Military Court by a regime that has incurred worldwide condemnation is a sobering episode. But what makes the plight of Naser Al Raas shocking is the seeming indifference of his Canadian government.

This silence from the Harper government is not out of ignorance of the case. The plight of Al Raas has been reported in the Canadian press on two occasions in March and June [4] [5].

Canada's consul in Saudi Arabia Michael Erdman travelled to Bahrain to attend two of his trial dates in June. And the man's family has made repeated phone calls to the Canadian department of foreign affairs in Ottawa. Yet to date the Harper government has failed to make any public statement on the matter.

The question of commercial interests may be a telling factor. Canada is in the process of finalising a bilateral trade agreement with the Bahraini regime. According to the Canadian Foreign Affairs and International Trade website, Bahrain "offers significant investment opportunities for Canadian investors in a variety of sectors, including education, infrastructure and healthcare." [6]

Currently, the two countries are signing off a Foreign Investment and Protection Agreement (FIPA) after three years of negotiations.

Another factor is Ottawa's increasingly militarist foreign policy and supine deference to Washington. As Rick Rozoff and Michel Chossudovsky have pointed out, Canada has in recent years emerged as a key NATO player in concert with Washington [7] [8]. NATO's criminal warmongering in Libya has relied on crucial support from the monarchical dictatorships of the Persian Gulf, including Bahrain.

In the grand scheme of Canada's commercial trade interests and imperialist intrigues in the Gulf, the fate of one of its citizens appears to be a matter that needs to be buried rather than raised. The case of Naser Al Raas begs the question: have western governments become so lawless and wanton in their geopolitical calculations that even the basic human rights of their own citizens are now worthless?

Speaking to Global Research, the distraught fiancée of Naser Al Raas said: "This man has done nothing wrong. He is innocent and he is being tortured. Naser should be released immediately and allowed to return to Canada for vital medical treatment." She added: We are begging the Canadian government to please do something... please help us. For God's sake, this innocent Canadian citizen is being tortured by a barbaric regime and Mr Harper has not even bothered to lift the phone."

*Finian Cunningham is a Global Research Correspondent based in Belfast. He was expelled from Bahrain for his critical journalism on 18 June 2011.*

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#### **NOTES:**

Readers can sign an online petition calling for the release of Naser Al Raas here:

<http://www.change.org/petitions/canadian-tortured-in-bahrain-tell-government-to-bring-him-home>

Also more details on Naser Al Raas on Facebook:

[http://www.facebook.com/FreeNaser?ref=ts&sk=app\\_190322544333196](http://www.facebook.com/FreeNaser?ref=ts&sk=app_190322544333196)

[1] <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4320>

[2] <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4324>

[3] Fatima Hasan Al Jumaa dies from teargas exposure after police attack peaceful protesters in Sitra, Bahrain, on 15 July 2011:

[http://184.105.234.159/39/01/3901b56b09a15244b87da99263c45cb1/ba64807/3901\\_w\\_2.3gp?c=313092086&u=733815006&s=BMTNk0](http://184.105.234.159/39/01/3901b56b09a15244b87da99263c45cb1/ba64807/3901_w_2.3gp?c=313092086&u=733815006&s=BMTNk0)

Police firing on civilians in Sitra, Bahrain, on 15 July 2011:

[http://184.105.234.177/76/47/7647cfd7c73ad526c387143e9a08cec2/ba64807/3\\_7647\\_w\\_2.3gp?c=312860331&u=769238730&s=BMTGsv](http://184.105.234.177/76/47/7647cfd7c73ad526c387143e9a08cec2/ba64807/3_7647_w_2.3gp?c=312860331&u=769238730&s=BMTGsv)

[4] <http://www.torontosun.com/news/canada/2011/03/25/17749021.html>

[5] <http://www.torontosun.com/2011/06/22/missing-ottawa-man-arrested-in-bahrain>

[ 6 ]

<http://www.international.gc.ca/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/fipa-apie/bahrain-bahrein.aspx>

[7] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13221>

[8] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=25301>

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### **About the author:**

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge,

England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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