

(English version)

Question for written answer E-002937/26
to the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Per Clausen (The Left)
(15 July 2026)

Subject: Inclusion of human rights conditions in EU-GCC agreements on strategic partnerships, visa-free travel and trade

In her answer to Question E-004195/2025 ⁽¹⁾, VP/HR Kaja Kallas highlighted the Commission's engagement in human rights dialogue with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries while avoiding any mention of specific mechanisms to secure the release of EU citizens imprisoned in GCC member states on political grounds, and failing to answer the question as to whether future agreements will contain binding human rights clauses.

We draw attention once again to the case of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a human rights defender and EU citizen who has been imprisoned in Bahrain since 2011. As the VP/HR stated in her reply, the protection of human rights is one of the EU's core values. Mr al-Khawaja's case has been raised on a number of occasions by Parliament, which has called for action. With that in mind:

1. What human rights conditions and requirements will EU countries impose on GCC countries in their negotiations on strategic partnerships, visa-free travel and trade, and how will the EU respond if the human rights situation in one or more of the GCC countries further deteriorates, for example when it comes to the situation of imprisoned EU citizens? What would the concrete consequences be?
2. Can the Commission confirm that the release of the Danish citizen and political prisoner Abdulhadi al-Khawaja will be a clear requirement in the negotiations on free trade, visa-free travel and/or a strategic partnership between the EU and Bahrain?
3. How will human rights be written into agreements between the EU and the GCC countries?

Submitted: 15.7.2026

Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Kallas on behalf of the European Commission
(10 August 2026)

Promotion and protection of human rights remain a key pillar of EU-Bahrain relations and will be one of the areas also covered by the upcoming negotiations of the bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement that the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Commissioner for the Mediterranean launched together with the Foreign Affairs Minister of Bahraini in Brussels on 12 July 2026.

The European External Action Services (EEAS) has been following closely, including through EU Delegation in Riyadh accredited to Bahrain, the cases of dual EU-Bahraini nationals imprisoned in Bahrain.

The EU has been raising concerns with Bahraini authorities, including in the context of annual EU-Bahrain Human Rights Dialogue, as well as in the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In addition, the former and current EU Special Representatives for Human Rights raised the issue with Bahraini authorities pleading for their release on humanitarian grounds.

The EU's current system for granting visa exemptions is based on a broad set of criteria ⁽¹⁾. As announced in the Visa Strategy adopted in January 2026 ⁽²⁾, the Commission is currently working on a new system for proposing visa exemptions and, in consultation with Member States, will develop a more targeted set of criteria, acting within the current legal framework, which will be used for future visa waiver processes.

The EU will continue to use all available means at its disposal to continue addressing human rights situation in the country, including the case of dual EU-Bahraini nationals.

¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-004195-ASW_EN.html.

⁽¹⁾ Article 1 of the Visa regulation provides that a visa exemption is to be based on a case-by-case assessment of a variety of criteria relating, for example, to the EU's external relations with the relevant third countries, including, considerations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the implications of regional coherence and reciprocity. The list of criteria is not exhaustive.

⁽²⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_217.