



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Arabian Peninsula & Iran Department
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
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26 February 2016

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 1149-15

Thank you for your email of 1 December asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000. You asked:

“Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 I would like to request a list of FCO meetings with Bahraini NGOs and opposition societies between November 2014 until December 2015, including date, location, purpose of meeting, which organisations and societies were met, and titles of FCO officials involved in each meeting”.

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information which you requested. I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold information relevant to your request.

We have completed a search of the electronic diaries and meeting records that we hold. You should be aware that we do not hold records of every meeting or encounter and therefore this list may not be exhaustive. There are 617 registered NGOs in Bahrain and our Embassy staff have had informal contact with over 200 of these NGOs in the past year through various events. During the quarterly UN Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva there can be up to 20 side events a day (not necessarily Bahrain specific), which are regularly attended by local NGOs and opposition figures from Bahrain. There are also a number of side events at UN General Assembly Third Committee in New York every October. FCO staff, from the UK Mission to the UN in Geneva and New York, attend these events but, given the number and frequency of them, they do not keep a regular log of who they have met at each one. The relevant information that we do hold is attached as a digest.

Some information has been withheld under section 27 of the FOIA.

Section 27(1) (a) of the FOIA recognises the need to protect information that would be likely to prejudice relations between the United Kingdom and other states if it was disclosed. In this case, the release of information relating to meetings held with Bahraini NGOs and opposition figures in the last 12 months (November 2014-December 2015) could harm our relations with Bahrain.

The application of s.27 (1) (a) requires us to consider the public interest test arguments in favour of releasing and withholding the information. We acknowledge that releasing information on this issue would increase public knowledge about our relations with Bahrain. However, s.27 (1) (a) recognises that the effective conduct of international relations depends upon maintaining trust and confidence between governments. If the United Kingdom does not maintain this trust and confidence, its ability to protect and promote UK interests through international relations will be hampered, which will not be in the public interest. The disclosure of information detailing our relationship with Bahraini NGOs and opposition figures could potentially damage the bilateral relationship between the UK and Bahraini Governments which would reduce the UK Government's ability to protect and promote UK interests through its relations with Bahrain, which would not be in the public interest. For these reasons, we consider that the public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.

In addition some of the information you requested has been withheld as it falls under Section 38 (1) (a) and (b) – information that would endanger the physical or mental health of any individual or endanger the safety of any individual. Section 38 is a qualified exemption and as such a public interest test had to be applied.

We recognise that there is a public interest in transparent and open government, and releasing information that would inform public debate on our work and demonstrate openness in the FCO's dealings with Bahraini organisations. We understand that customers often feel that we should not protect the names of our officers acting in an official capacity. However, we have to balance this with the need to ensure that our staff are able to carry out their jobs without fear of undue repercussions and, as their employer, we have a duty of care to ensure that they are not individually targeted for protecting and promoting UK interests in Bahrain. Disclosure of the specific details of the location of meetings might expose the participants to significant risk to their personal safety.

In this case we believe that the public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in release.

I also wish to advise that some of the information you requested has been withheld as it falls under Section 40 – Personal information of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The nature of your request means that the information found contains personal data relating to living third parties, the disclosure of which would contravene one of the data protection principles. In such circumstances Sections 40(2) and (3) of the Freedom of Information Act apply. In this case our view is that disclosure would breach the first data protection principle. This states that personal data should be processed fairly and lawfully. It is the fairness aspect of this principle, which in our view, would be breached by disclosure. In such circumstances Section 40 of the Act confers an absolute exemption on disclosure. There is therefore no public interest test to apply.

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Yours sincerely,

Head of Arabian Peninsula & Iran Department

Foreign and Commonwealth Office



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