



American ideals. Universal values.

September 2, 2015

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I write to urge that the vital issue of human rights has a prominent place in your discussions with King Salman of Saudi Arabia when he visits the White House on September 4.

Human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and those condoned and facilitated by the Kingdom across the region pose serious threats to America's security interests and run counter to its values. Saudi actions have a huge impact on the global struggle against violent extremism, and they have, unfortunately, run directly counter to the recommendations you made to governments at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism earlier this year.

As you said in your remarks at the CVE Summit in February, "When people are oppressed and human rights are denied—particularly along sectarian or ethnic lines—when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism." It would be a disservice to America's alliance with a key regional partner and undermine U.S. credibility as a global leader on human rights to downplay the importance of these issues to U.S. national interests and to the long-term interests of Saudi Arabia and its people.

In particular, we ask you to urge the Saudi ruler to stop using the need to combat the threat of terrorism as a pretext to silence non-violent dissent. You should urge King Salman to release jailed human rights defenders and other peaceful critics of government policy. For example, eleven human rights activists who helped found the Saudi Civil and Peoples Rights Association (ACPRA) are now in prison or facing heavy prison sentences. More recently, Dr. Zuhair Kutbi has been detained without charge since July 15 after appearing on a television broadcast and calling for political reform and for reform in official religious discourse. Saudi Arabia's new counterterrorism law, adopted earlier this year, provides broad authority for the state to prosecute independent civil society activists and non-violent government critics as terrorists. It is having a chilling effect on peaceful dissent and stifling much-needed civil society mobilization. This law should be amended or repealed.

Saudi Arabia has a troubling record of condoning and facilitating sectarian incitement through official school text books and through the officially supported statements of extremist preachers, who frequently make statements that defame other religions and promote violence against Shi'ites. Heightened sectarian divisions, to which Saudi Arabia has contributed, encourage the sectarian violence carried out by extremist groups like al-Qa'eda and ISIL. These tensions are a major contributory factor to serious conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere in the region, and Saudi Arabia has a leading role to play in defusing them. We urge you to press King Salman to do more to put an end to these dangerous and destructive policies.

Saudi Arabia has also been a regional leader in pushing back against popular demands for more representative and responsive government, which you have identified as one of the most effective bulwarks against violent extremism. The regime is directly supporting repressive governments in Bahrain and Egypt whose policies contribute to polarization and instability and fuel grievances that are exploited by violent extremists. In your meeting with King Salman you should urge Saudi Arabia to cooperate with the United States and the international community in promoting reform and inclusive political change to ease polarization and restore stability throughout the region.

For too long, successive U.S. administrations have ignored the detrimental impact of Saudi Arabia's disregard of human rights at home and support for sectarianism and authoritarianism abroad. These policies have played an outsized role in fueling the many human rights crises that now confront the United States and the international community in the Middle East. At your meeting we urge to make clear, publicly and privately, that just as respect for human rights must be at the core of strategies to confront extremism, human rights issues will no longer be a peripheral element in the bi-lateral U.S.-Saudi relationship. Indeed, the future strength of the relationship will depend on Saudi Arabia finding a way to meet the security, social, and political challenges it faces while upholding the basic rights and freedoms of its people. The bi-lateral relationship will only be healthy when Saudi Arabia can desist from spreading religious intolerance and sectarian hatred and stop being an obstacle to the type of inclusive political change that the region so badly needs.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino
President and Chief Executive Officer

cc: The Honorable John Kerry, Secretary of State
The Honorable Susan Rice, National Security Advisor