



American ideals. Universal values.

April 18, 2016

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

Dear President Obama:

I am writing to urge you to address the vital issue of human rights during your forthcoming visit to Saudi Arabia and at the Summit Meeting with leaders of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) on April 21. Specifically, please highlight the repression suffered by independent civil society activists, which relates directly to the focus of your visit on enhancing security cooperation between the United States and key allies in the GCC states.

Support for independent civil society has been a signature issue for your administration. In a speech to the Clinton Global Initiative in 2014 you announced an across the government initiative to support civil society around the world and to “oppose efforts by foreign governments to restrict freedoms of peaceful assembly and association and expression.” You noted that support for civil society “is a matter of national security.” You enlarged on this theme in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative you launched at a White House Summit in February 2015, where you said: “When people are oppressed, and human rights are denied—particularly along sectarian lines or ethnic lines—when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism. It creates an environment that is ripe for terrorists to exploit.”

You continued: “And so we must recognize that lasting stability and real security require democracy. That means ... free speech and freedom for civil society groups.” Over the course of the last year senior U.S. officials have traveled the world making the case that governments must permit independent civil society organizations, including human rights organizations, to function free from interference and obstruction as part of a comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism. Over a hundred states, including Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, are now partners with the United States in this multilateral effort.

Despite this partnership, in recent years the Saudi government has clamped down on the activities of peaceful independent civil society activists, targeting those who have spoken up for political reform, religious tolerance, women’s rights and for an end to discrimination and religious sectarianism. Dozens of human rights activists and other non-violent government critics are serving prison sentences. They include:

- Raif Badawi, jailed in 2012 for hosting a website devoted to open discussion of religious and political issues, which pushed back against extreme interpretations of religion. He was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes;
- Waleed Abu al-Khair, a prominent human rights lawyer and NGO leader jailed in 2013 and currently serving a 15-year prison sentence for his human rights advocacy; and

- Ashraf Fayadh an internationally recognized artist and poet, sentenced to death for apostasy, now serving a jail term.

I urge you to call for the release of these activists by name while you are in Saudi Arabia. These prisoners should be essential partners in U.S.-led multilateral efforts to counter violent extremism. Please remind the Saudi authorities to live up to their responsibilities as a partner in the global CVE initiative and to end the persecution of non-violent government critics.

In addition, and in keeping with your directive that U.S. officials across the government should regularly consult and partner with civil society organizations, making time in your schedule to meet directly with independent civil society activists, including those working in areas that may be regarded as sensitive by the Saudi government, like human rights, would send a strong message to the Saudi people about the U.S. commitment to championing freedom.

Saudi Arabia has adopted sweeping counterterrorism laws that deny basic freedoms in the name of preventing terrorism. Counterterrorism laws that disregard universal human rights standards are counterproductive and fuel the grievances on which violent extremism feeds. Please urge the Saudi authorities to ensure that their approach to countering terrorism is carried out in accordance with the norms and standards recognized by the international community and advocated by the United States in its multilateral CVE and counterterrorism programs.

During your previous visits to the Kingdom you have not publicly raised human rights concerns with Saudi leaders. In March 2014, when you met with the late King Abdullah, one of your senior advisors told the press that “given the extent of time” devoted to other issues “they [you and Saudi leaders] didn’t get to a number of issues and it wasn’t just human rights.” The last time you were in Saudi Arabia, shortly after King Abdullah’s death, you told CNN that “paying respects” would be a bigger priority for your visit than addressing human rights concerns.

Since this will likely be the last time that you visit Saudi Arabia during your presidency, I urge you to take this final opportunity to speak out publicly on human rights issues inside the Kingdom. There are a wide array of serious human rights problems in the Kingdom including severe restrictions on women’s rights, religious freedom and freedom of expression; the use of harsh punishments that constitute torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; and alarming new calls for an expansion of the use of the death penalty for same-sex sexual behavior.

As you remarked in 2014, to respond to the global crackdown on civil society the world needs “an even stronger campaign to defend democracy.” Saudi Arabia’s crushing of its nascent independent human rights community is a glaring instance of this global crackdown. Please seize the opportunity to demonstrate America’s commitment to lead that global campaign in defense of democracy during your forthcoming visit.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino
President and Chief Executive Officer