



One Hundred and Fourteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

May 12, 2015

The Honorable Mr. Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
NW Washington DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As Members of Congress and strong supporters of a mutually beneficial relationship with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and in light of your upcoming meetings with the GCC heads of state, we write to express our deep and continuing concern regarding the suppression of civil, political and religious rights within these countries.

United States foreign policy should seek the promotion of the core values essential to defending our national interests and strengthening the security of our allies. Our GCC partners, however, have in place laws, policies and practices that limit the exercise of universal rights. The governments of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain both have extended records of internal repression and human rights violations. Saudi Arabia in particular also maintains laws and practices that severely restrict the human rights of women. In addition, GCC members Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait also engage in domestic repression and violate the human rights of their citizens and residents. While we recognize that many of these governments state their aspirations to assist in countering violent extremism, we are concerned that their records of ongoing internal repression can only hinder their future stability and damage our enduring regional interests. We thus urge you to use the opportunity presented by your upcoming meetings on May 13th and 14th to press the GCC heads of state to release prisoners of conscience and implement significant human rights reforms.

In regard to Bahrain, we continue to receive credible reports of the ongoing use of practices that violate fundamental human rights, including excessive use of force against peaceful activists and government critics, arbitrary detentions and torture. The prominent peaceful activists known as the Bahrain 13, arrested in connection to their participation in

the 2011 protests calling for democratic reforms, remain in prison. Credible human rights observers have documented the torture, ill-treatment and denial of necessary medical care suffered by the 13, who include human rights defenders, religious and political leaders, medical professionals and teachers. In protest of the severe conditions, one of them, Professor Abduljalil al-Singace, who is serving a life sentence, began a hunger strike on April 21st. Another widely-reported case is that of Nabeel Rajab, arrested on April 2 for posting information on the use of torture in Jaw Prison. His detention has again been extended.

In Saudi Arabia, women continue to face severe discrimination in law and practice and are inadequately protected against domestic and other gender-based violence, which leaves them living as second class citizens. Women need the authorization of their male guardians to travel, gain employment, study at a university or college, obtain a business license, or marry. The government also systematically discriminates against followers of minority Muslim faiths, and the government does not tolerate public worship by Christians or adherents of religions other than Islam. Raif Badawi, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a thousand lashes for founding a web site that encouraged religious and political debate, remains in prison. Representatives of our government have repeatedly called for the cancellation of his sentence, and that of his lawyer, Waleed Abu Al-Khair, who was arrested, tried and sentenced for activities related to the exercise of his profession in defense of accused human rights defenders. Yet another case of the violation of fundamental freedoms is that of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), whose founders have all either been wrongfully imprisoned or put on trial. One of them, Professor Mohammad al-Qahtani, is serving a 10-year sentence for documenting human rights abuses committed by the government.

Furthermore, in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia authorities often discriminate against or deny members of disenfranchised populations equal access to government services and positions. Unemployment remains high in regions along the peripheries of both nations. During your meetings, you and your GCC counterparts will likely discuss the future challenges posed by the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Unresolved domestic grievances within disenfranchised communities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia affect the broader region's climate of conflict and prospects for reconciliation.

Our human rights concerns extend to the internal practices of the other members of the GCC as well. In Oman, state authorities continue to restrict freedom of expression, including in the media and on-line. The United Arab Emirates continues to hold multiple prisoners of conscience after unfair trials. In Kuwait, peaceful criticism of the Amir and other state authorities is illegal. In Qatar and across the region, migrant workers face extensive exploitation and abuse, while remaining inadequately protected under the law. Women face discrimination in each of these countries.

Given the multiple challenges across the region, we understand that your itinerary for the upcoming meetings is extensive. We remain convinced, however, that sustainable solutions to these regional challenges require that our allies respect fundamental human rights within their own borders. We urge you to leverage your strong relationships with King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, and other GCC

leaders to encourage the following reforms, which will improve the collective security of our allies:


- The immediate release of all prisoners of conscience;
- The ending of undue restrictions on the operation of civil society groups and religious minorities;
- The reform of laws that discriminate against women, limit women's full participation in society, or make it difficult to address domestic and other gender-based violence;
- The reform of laws that facilitate extensive exploitation and abuse of migrant workers;
- The comprehensive review and reform of all laws that violate the civil, political, and economic rights of citizens and residents; and
- The reform of discriminatory economic practices and the opening of public sector positions to all qualified members of society.

Thank you for your attention to our concerns. We look forward to hearing about your dialogue with the GCC leaders when the summit has concluded.

Sincerely,



JAMES P. MCGOVERN
Member of Congress



JOSEPH R. PITTS
Member of Congress



ALBIO SIRES
Member of Congress



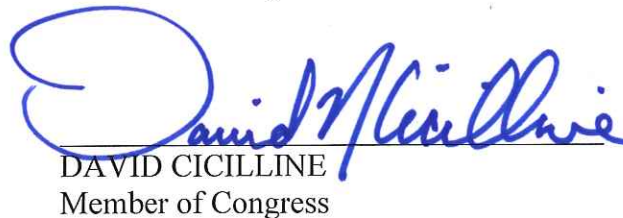
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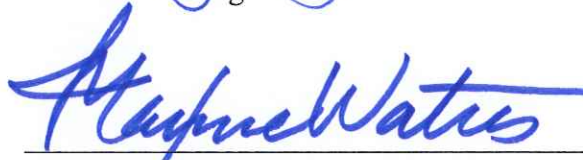
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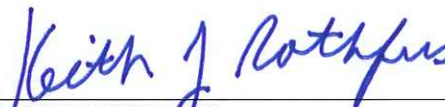
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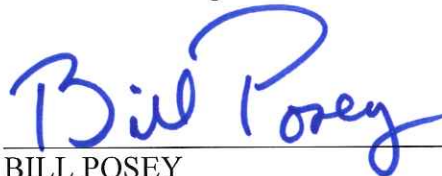
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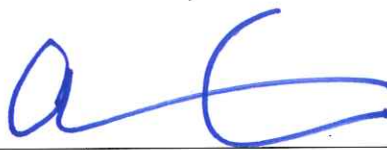
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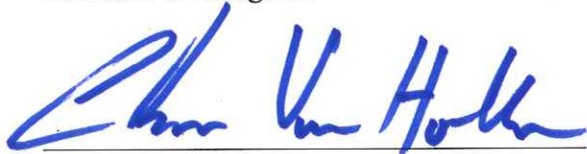
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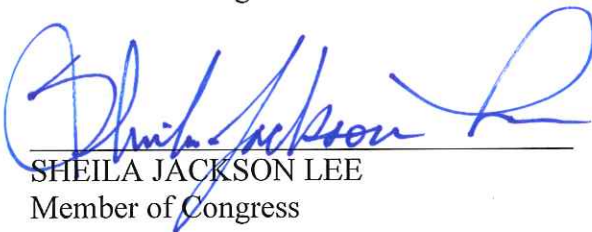
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