



human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

May 11, 2015

Dear President Obama:

I write to urge you to make clear at this week's summit meeting with leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council that the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of U.S.-GCC cooperation depends on respect for human rights in GCC countries. In your speech earlier this year at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, you spoke eloquently about the connection between human rights abuses and the spread of violent extremism. We urge you to put those words into action by challenging these key American allies to reverse policies violating human rights that have been so ruinous to the region and which undermine their own long term interests.

Because of their wealth and influence, GCC states play a crucial role in confronting the multiple crises that plague the Middle East region. You have made clear that the United States expects these states to play the primary role in upholding peace and security in the region, rather than relying on major involvement of American military forces. You have promised additional guarantees for the external security of American allies in the region, but you have called on them to meet the legitimate demands of their own populations for dignity, rights, and freedom.

As you said at the CVE Summit, "When people are oppressed and human rights are denied—particularly along sectarian lines or ethnic lines—when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism." We agree. Since the Arab Spring protests of 2011, Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, including the United Arab Emirates, have been leading a region-wide push back against popular demands for more representative and responsive government. This has included a Saudi-led, GCC-supported, military incursion into Bahrain to put down a peaceful protest movement and ample financial and political support for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's authoritarian rule in Egypt.

You have rightly noted that "when peaceful, democratic change is impossible, it feeds into the terrorist propaganda that violence is the only answer available." Yet the GCC is advancing policies that appear designed to block avenues for democratic change in their

own countries and the surrounding region. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates are using the need to combat terrorism as a pretext to silence peaceful dissent. They have adopted broadly-worded anti-terrorism laws that are being used to prosecute and jail non-violent government critics.

In addition, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states have cynically exploited anti-Shi'ite sectarianism to build their support bases. The cost has been an alarming escalation in sectarian tensions throughout the region which has played into the hands of violent extremist groups like al-Qa'eda and the so-called Islamic State or ISIL.

Intolerance of religious pluralism, especially in Saudi Arabia, gives support to the dangerous idea that religious orthodoxy must be policed and enforced through violence. Such practices are emulated by violent extremists which claim to act in the name of upholding religious purity.

These policies do not counter violent extremism, they foment it. This week at your summit, we urge you to press the leaders of GCC states to:

- lift restrictions on peaceful dissent;
- free prisoners of conscience;
- permit the free exchange of peaceful ideas online and in the media;
- lift restrictions on independent civil society organizations and free jailed human rights defenders;
- reform overly broad counterterrorism laws so they cannot be used to silence peaceful dissent;
- stop their support for repressive rule in Bahrain and Egypt and cooperate with the international community in promoting reform and inclusive political change that will ease polarization and restore stability in those countries;
- speak out against sectarian incitement and take steps to ensure that extremist clerics are not able to promote hatred of other religions through official institutions and media outlets.

In order for the close relationships between the United States and the GCC states to serve the best interests of all parties, these relationships must be based on more than just narrowly drawn security interests; they must reflect a conviction that promoting respect for human rights and basic freedoms is an essential element in any strategy for overcoming the security challenges and instability currently confronting the region.

Mr. President, you have raised the question: how can the United States engage in counterterrorism cooperation with authoritarian governments without legitimizing or validating the repressive tactics they employ? We hope you will use this week's summit as an opportunity to answer that question: multilateral counterterrorism and security cooperation will be truly effective only if it is grounded on mutual respect for the universal values of human rights.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino

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