



human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

November 5, 2014

General John Allen
Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear General Allen:

I write in advance of the international conference to be hosted by the Government of Bahrain on November 9, 2014, designed to build broad multilateral support for the global coalition to counter the terrorist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to urge you to take steps to ensure that the U.S. alliance with Bahrain is not interpreted as uncritical support for a repressive and anti-democratic regime. Such a perception will undermine your efforts to build an effective international coalition to counter ISIL.

In your public remarks, you have outlined a five-part strategy for countering ISIL: military operations; stemming the flow of foreign fighters; disrupting financial support for ISIL; humanitarian efforts to aid the victims of the conflict; and delegitimizing ISIL messaging and ideology. We welcome the broad approach that you have outlined, and we recognize that support from as wide a range of allies as possible, especially from the Arab region, will be essential to the success of global efforts to counter ISIL. Our concerns center on the fifth element of the strategic framework you have outlined.

In particular, we are concerned that in forging close operational alliances with Arab states – states that have resisted popular demands for a more inclusive, representative government and restricted the basic rights and freedoms of their peoples – the United States runs the risk of encouraging the spread of the violent extremism that it seeks to counter.

As you are aware, much of the financial support for violent extremist groups in Syria that have now coalesced in the ISIL came from sources in the Arab Gulf region encouraged by regional governments which saw in the Syrian conflict an opportunity to push back against Iranian influence by supporting an armed revolt against Iran's ally, the regime of Bashar al-Assad. While these governments now see it as in their interest to fight against the radicalism of ISIL, their willingness to exploit sectarian divisions to advance political objectives remains a problem for the United States as it works to build an effective coalition to counter violent extremism.

These concerns are especially acute in Bahrain where the level of repression against non-violent advocates of political reform has accelerated in recent years. The government of Bahrain, along with its backers in Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, has stoked sectarian divisions on the island and in the broader region in order to discredit the Bahraini opposition and secure the al-Khalifa monarchy's grip on power. The Bahrain military, equipped largely by the U.S. government, is made up almost exclusively of recruits from the minority Sunni sect. Having such an unrepresentative security force helps to legitimize sectarianism and fuels popular grievances. From the early days of the Bahrain protests in 2011, the Bahraini government and its supporters have portrayed opposition protests as a zero-sum game where Shi'ite protesters, backed by Iran, are seeking to take away power from Bahrain's current Sunni ruling elite, thereby undermining the protesters' calls for more representative government and human rights.

As you know well, part of the appeal of ISIL that continues to resonate in much of the Arab region is that it is fighting back against spreading Iranian influence and the growing power of Shi'ite Arabs. This sectarian message appeals to disaffected Sunnis in western Iraq and eastern Syria, and to Sunni Arabs across the region.

Heightened sectarianism is one of the major drivers of the type of violent, religious extremism epitomized by ISIL. Therefore, we believe it is imperative that the United States send a clear message to participating governments from the region at the conference in Bahrain that fueling sectarianism is not an acceptable response to legitimate demands for political reform. In fact, the purposeful political exploitation of sectarian divisions, of which the ongoing political crisis in Bahrain is a prime example, runs directly counter to the fifth element of the strategy to counter ISIL that you have described. Fueling anti-Shi'ite sectarianism legitimizes ISIL ideology.

We urge you to ensure that those leading the U.S. delegation to the conference express public support in Bahrain to those who are suffering repression and persecution because of their non-violent advocacy of political reform and their work to advance basic rights and freedoms for all Bahrainis. These courageous activists are strong allies in the fight against violent religious extremism like ISIL. We are happy to suggest some civil society figures in Bahrain with whom to meet. The international community and the global alliance you are seeking to build needs these people out of Bahrain's jails and active in public life. We urge you to draw attention to the continuing systematic discrimination suffered by Bahrain's majority Shi'ite population, noting that such injustice necessarily fuels instability and contributes to a climate in which extremism can flourish. Finally, we encourage you to urge the Bahraini government to cooperate with international efforts to promote respect for human rights in Bahrain. The recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), established by the King, should be fully implemented. Visits by U.S. officials, like Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Democracy, and Labor Tom Malinowski should be facilitated, not blocked; and

representatives of independent non-governmental and multilateral human rights organizations should be welcomed.

A successful strategy to delegitimize ISIL's message of hate must take into account the circumstances and factors that contribute to its appeal. Uncritical support for repressive and non-inclusive regimes, such as the Bahraini monarchy, will undermine your efforts to build an effective international coalition to counter ISIL.

Very respectfully,



Elisa Massimino
President & CEO

cc: The Honorable Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. Department of State

Ambassador Brett H. McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Ms. Lisa O. Monaco, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism and Deputy National Security Advisor

Mr. Stephen Pomper, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights