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March 11, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear President Obama:

Your visit to Saudi Arabia at the end of this month comes at a vital moment for U.S. relations with the Kingdom, the Gulf region, and the broader Arab world. It will be an important opportunity for you to demonstrate the commitment of the United States to the universal values of human rights as it responds to the many policy challenges in the region and beyond.

I urge that you use your visit to press the Saudi government to join with the United States in actions that will ease regional conflicts and promote tolerance and pluralism. Specifically, I urge you to focus on the role that Saudi Arabia is playing in three countries of vital interest to the United States: Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain.

Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia has too often used its influence to obstruct or reverse peaceful reform and to support extremists whose actions have fueled instability and violence. You should make clear to the Saudi government that standing in the way of much needed change will only lead to more conflict to the mutual detriment of the interests of both the United States and Saudi Arabia.

There are no more urgent threats to the peace and stability of the region than the crisis in **Syria**. In recent weeks, leading up to your visit, the Saudi authorities have taken welcome steps to curb support that had been flowing from Saudi Arabia to militant Sunni extremists fighting in Syria. Nonetheless, these extremist forces, which have been implicated in war crimes, continue to receive financial support from sources within Saudi Arabia and there are hundreds of Saudi nationals fighting with these extremist elements. Moreover, these extremist groups are as violently opposed to more moderate groups within the Syrian opposition as they are to the Assad regime. Saudi support for these groups directly undermines U.S. efforts to strengthen more moderate forces within the opposition.

The United States and Saudi Arabia should be pursuing a common strategy to coordinate support for those parts of the Syrian opposition committed to inclusion and pluralism, and to stop weapons and money flowing to extremists. Thwarting enablers is one of the

pillars of your directive geared towards preventing mass atrocities, and we urge you to seek maximum cooperation from Saudi Arabia in achieving this goal.

Both the United States and Saudi Arabia have a large stake in a stable **Egypt**. Without a stable Egypt, progress on many issues of mutual concern, not least the Arab-Israeli peace process and negotiations with Iran, are made more difficult. However, since the mass protests that brought down President Mubarak in February 2011, the two countries have often pulled in opposite directions.

The short-term economic assistance that Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies are providing to Egypt is only delaying the moment when the Egyptian government will have to face up to the imperatives of reform. It is not a sustainable strategy, and it undermines U.S. efforts to encourage a peaceful, inclusive democratic transition. The United States and Saudi Arabia should be cooperating to promote positive change in Egypt; working together, the United States and Saudi Arabia could use the substantial financial assistance that each country provides to serve as an incentive for essential political and economic reforms. The United States and Saudi Arabia could generate the substantial, sustained economic support that Egypt will need in order to recover from three years of acute instability.

Saudi Arabia should work together with the United States to provide encouragement and incentives for the Egyptian authorities to move away from their current repressive course towards an inclusive, democratic political process resulting in civilian rule, governed by the rule of law with protection for basic freedoms of expression, assembly, and association and for the rights of women and members of religious minorities.

In **Bahrain**, a country of great strategic importance for the United States, Saudi influence has undermined U.S. efforts to advance necessary reconciliation and reform. The situation has continued to deteriorate, and an inclusive political settlement is needed as soon as possible. This will require easing up of the repression and releasing members of the peaceful opposition who are in prison. Without positive steps soon, protests will continue, more policemen will be killed, and there will be negative international attention focused on Bahrain, calling into question the security and viability of basing the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.

We urge you to press the Saudi government to be a partner in supporting progress towards political reform and greater inclusivity in Bahrain and for a constructive alternative to continuing repression by the Bahraini authorities.

The lessons of the Arab uprisings, and the inescapable need for political reform, apply just as much inside the Kingdom itself as to the other countries of the region. Right now in Saudi Arabia, peaceful dissidents and independent civil society activists are facing repression, and there are new threats to freedom of expression for social media users. It will be important for you to raise cases of violations and demonstrate consistent U.S. commitment to freedom of expression and association.

Your visit to Riyadh comes almost five years after your historic speech in Cairo where you promised “a new beginning” in relations between the United States and Muslims around the world, based on “common principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.” There is much to be done to make this compelling vision a reality.

We believe, as you do, that Saudi Arabia and the United States share many mutual interests. To realize these common goals, this key bi-lateral relationship must be rooted in shared respect for the universal values of human rights at home and abroad. Your public representation of these principles while in the region is necessary to build the credibility of the United States and its leadership at this volatile and dangerous time.

With respect,

Elisa Massimino
President and CEO

CC: Ambassador Susan Rice, National Security Advisor to the President

Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Ambassador William J. Burns, Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of State

The Honorable Anne Patterson, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

Ms Uzra Zeya, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Honorable Thomas Krajeski, U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain

Mr. Timothy A. Lenderking, Chargé d'Affaires, Office of the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia

Mr. Marc J. Sievers, Chargé d'Affaires, Office of the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt

Mr. Lawrence Robert Silverman, Acting Special Envoy, Office of the U.S. Ambassador to Syria