

## How to Build a More Sustainable and Mutually Beneficial Relationship with Saudi Arabia

***“Too often, we have failed to enforce international norms when it’s inconvenient to do so. And we have not confronted forcefully enough the intolerance, sectarianism, and hopelessness that feeds violent extremism.”***

President Barack Obama, September 24, 2014

The United States faces multiple interconnected challenges in the Middle East region. The government of Saudi Arabia is pursuing policies that are directly harmful to U.S interests, contributing to regional instability in the Middle East and undermining counterterrorism efforts, including the international struggle against ISIL and violent extremism.

Unless it stops turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia’s violations of human rights, the United States may win the battle against ISIL but lose the war against violent extremism. Devising a comprehensive and effective strategy for addressing these challenges will require revisiting old bargains with Riyadh in order to stem the tide of religious incitement. It will also require confronting Saudi Arabia on its campaign against non-violent human rights defenders as well as its support for dictatorial policies in Egypt, Bahrain, and beyond.

### **Saudi Arabia is Committing Human Rights Abuses**

Saudi Arabia’s human rights record at home is endangering the kingdom’s future stability as it confronts

inevitable economic and social challenges, and setting a negative example that reverberates throughout the region. Discrimination against its minority Shi’ite population fuels regional sectarian tensions; its intolerance of religious pluralism, and even of open discussion of Sunni Islam, gives support to the dangerous idea that religious orthodoxy must be enforced through violence, like public flogging and beheading. These practices empower violent extremists like ISIL who claim to be upholding religious purity.

Unless Saudi Arabia is persuaded to open more space for civil society organizations and stop its counterproductive crackdown on human rights defenders, the country will lack important constituencies for peaceful debate, a robust economy, and accountable governance.

### **Saudi Arabia is Enabling and Exporting Sectarian Incitement**

Giving a free hand to hateful invective by hardline clerics makes the region a more dangerous place, threatening Saudi Arabia’s future and core American interests.

Saudi Arabia is using its extensive influence to promote extremist ideologies fueling sectarian conflict throughout the region, and spreading ideas that inspire terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIL, fueling recruitment and support for such groups on a global level. These dangerous extreme ideas are spread through official textbooks, media outlets and through the teachings of extremist clerics who find a comfortable home in the kingdom while spreading anti-Shi’ite, antisemitic, and anti-

western propaganda and promoting hatred of other religions.

## Saudi Arabia is Enabling Resurgent Authoritarianism Abroad

Saudi Arabia is leading a region-wide push back against popular demands for more representative, more responsive government that peaked with the Arab Spring protests of 2011, directly supporting authoritarian governments in Bahrain and Egypt that are denying basic rights and freedoms to their people contributing to polarization and instability. Repression by such governments fuels grievances that are exploited by violent extremists.

### Key Recommendations

The following are key steps the U.S. government can take To build a more sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with Saudi Arabia:

- President Obama should commit to personally raising human rights issues during future communications with Saudi leaders on a sustained and substantive basis, including during regular communications by phone.
  - The Obama Administration should order a review of U.S. strategy for confronting human rights abuses by Saudi Arabia, starting with a campaign to roll back abusive elements of Riyadh's restrictive terrorism and cybercrime rules.
  - The Obama Administration should ensure that the new Presidential Memorandum on U.S. support for civil society is actively applied in Saudi Arabia.
  - The State Department should publicly and privately raise the cases of Saudi rights defenders in jail or under other restrictions as a top U.S. Concern.
- The State Department should raise concerns with Saudi Arabia that continued sectarian discrimination and incitement encourage violence throughout the region and increase opportunities for Iranian subversion inside and outside the kingdom.
  - The State Department should call on Saudi Arabia to use its donor relationship with other monarchies in the region in a manner that advances rather than sets back the rights and freedoms of citizens.
  - U.S. security agencies should conduct a comprehensive assessment of American sales of military and law enforcement equipment to Saudi Arabia in order to ensure that U.S. technology is not enabling the repression of civilians
  - U.S. security agencies should update America's extensive military and military contractor training programs with Saudi security officers to instill respect for human rights, transparency, pluralism, and the rule of law.

The full Human Rights First blueprint is available at:  
<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Saudi-Arabia-Blueprint-final.pdf>