

February 13, 2015

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

We applaud your leadership in convening next week's White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, and we welcome your efforts to include civil society representatives with experience in dealing with these issues in the Summit. Our two organizations—one U.S.-based and the other based in Cairo, Geneva, and Tunis—have more than fifty years of combined experience dealing with the intersection of security and rights. We write to urge that you use the Summit to underscore the centrality of respect for human rights in the struggle against violent extremism.

We know that violent extremists abuse and seek to destroy human rights. We also know that human rights violations perpetrated by governments fuel instability and create a climate in which violent extremism flourishes. It is no coincidence that the current wave of violent extremism has found a foothold and proliferated in a region that for decades has suffered from one of the poorest human rights records in the world. Violent extremists and repressive, authoritarian governments feed off of each other in a deadly—and mutually reinforcing—cycle. We urge you to use the Summit to develop short and long-term strategies to break it.

We know that you understand this dynamic. In your speech to the Clinton Global Initiative in New York last September, you recognized that “when these rights are suppressed, it fuels grievances and a sense of injustice that over time can fuel instability or extremism.” And yet, too often in your recent public comments, you have given the impression that promoting human rights is an impediment to countering terrorism and upholding security. For example, on January 27 on your way to Saudi Arabia to meet with the new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz, you said, “Sometimes we have to balance our need to speak to them about human rights issues with immediate concerns that we have in terms of countering terrorism or dealing with regional stability.” Your speech to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2014 left the impression that the United States can protect its core interests in the Middle East and promote stability and security without promoting and protecting human rights, and that upholding security and advancing human rights are not inextricably connected. National Security Adviser Susan Rice made a similar point when introducing the new U.S. National Security Strategy in Washington last week, relegating human rights to a “long term” goal, rather than recognizing it as an urgent priority.

The use of such language sends the damaging message—especially to governments with whom the United States is working to combat terrorism—that advancing respect for human rights is not a priority for the United States. Giving the impression that the United States is downgrading the importance of human rights undermines the vital global struggle against violent extremism and terrorism.

Much of the ideology that fuels violent Islamic extremism finds its roots in the dangerous practices and ideologies of governments that the United States seeks to make into its allies in the fight against this same extremism. Governments that resist the call for more inclusive and representative government, restrict basic rights and freedoms, flout the rule of law, and fail to provide fair opportunities to their people do more than just fuel the grievances on which violent extremism and terrorism feed; they create an environment where disenfranchised communities become vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists. Systematic repression of the rights to assembly, expression, and association by U.S. allies like Egypt closes public space and weakens moderate, non-violent, secular, and religious critics that are essential for open, responsive governance, thereby empowering more extreme elements who use state violence and repression to justify their own acts of violence.

Effective strategies to counter violent extremism need community support and engagement. Violations by the state, whether in the form of police brutality, mass arrests and arbitrary detentions, or discriminatory treatment, foster distrust between vulnerable communities and the authorities. Violent extremism thrives on these types of grievances.

Governments that incite hatred and promote extreme interpretations of religion through their official religious institutions, state-sponsored media, and educational curricula are not part of the solution to violent extremism—they are part of the problem. Any effective strategy to combat violent extremism must call out and condemn these practices. We urge you to speak out clearly against the financial support flowing from the wealthy Gulf monarchies to extremist ideologues and movements, and the extremist incitement from religious leaders based in their countries.

Likewise, you should condemn the practice of turning political protests into sectarian conflicts, whether this tactic is employed by the Assad regime in Syria or by authoritarian monarchies like Bahrain. Above all, we urge you to make clear that the United States stands against the denial of basic rights and freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion by the governments of its regional allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and recognizes these abuses as part of what fuels violent extremism around the world. The extreme intolerance of allies like Saudi Arabia, where advocates of non-violent religious dialogue are lashed in public, emboldens violent extremists who kill satirists and cartoonists in Paris.

Unfortunately, American allies in the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have fueled sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims for their own narrow political purposes. Fueling anti-Shi'ite sectarianism legitimizes ISIL's ideology, lending credence to the narrative that ISIL is defending Sunni Muslims against increasing Iranian influence and the growing power of Shi'a groups in the Arab region.

If international cooperation in the fight against violent extremism is seen as solely—or even primarily—a matter of operational cooperation between military and security services, it will fail. Advancing human rights, accountability, and the rule of law must be at the heart of any sustainable and effective strategy. Those who wish to be effective allies in this vital struggle must demonstrate through their words and actions that they understand this. The White House Summit, and the regional events that follow, will provide excellent opportunities to put this challenge directly to governments.

Sincerely,



Elisa Massimino, President/CEO  
Human Rights First



Bahey eldin Hassan, Director  
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)

cc:

The Honorable John Kerry, Secretary of State

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

The Honorable Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Honorable Brett H. McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

The Honorable Lisa O. Monaco, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

Mr. Stephen Pomper, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights,  
National Security Council