



September 3, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As organizations and individuals in support of the advancement of human rights, we have watched with alarm as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to severely restrict basic civil and political rights. While we recognize that the Kingdom has taken a long overdue step in allowing women to vote, we remain deeply concerned with many of the government's policies that, if maintained, will erode the internal stability of Saudi Arabia and its neighbors. During your September 4th meeting with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, we urge you to press for the release of imprisoned activists, as well as the passage of a Law of Association to allow civil society to operate freely in the country.

Since 2011, the Saudi government has closed a number of independent human rights organizations, conducting arbitrary arrests and issuing lengthy prison terms to suppress their leadership. For example, officials have imprisoned nine of the eleven co-founders of the Saudi Arabian Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), an organization that documents human rights abuses in the kingdom. The two remaining co-founders have also been charged for their peaceful human rights work and, if convicted, could face sentences of a decade or more in prison.

Saudi courts have also applied the country's anti-terrorism law to sentence Waleed Abu al-Khair, attorney and founder of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA), to 15 years in prison. Saudi officials have publicly flogged Raif Badawi, a former client of Abu al-Khair and an advocate for free speech and independent media, and sentenced him to a 10-year prison term.

Additionally, the Saudi government's policies have had a broader effect on human rights defenders elsewhere in the Gulf. Last spring, the Government of Bahrain arrested opposition leader Fadhel Abbas and human rights defender Nabeel Rajab after they publicly criticized the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. In January of this year, Kuwaiti officials arrested blogger Mohammed al-Ajmi and several other individuals for criticizing the late Saudi King Abdullah on Twitter.

We urge you to press King Salman to take immediate steps to reverse this troubling trend. Not only should King Salman pardon Waleed Abu al-Khair, Raif Badawi, and the imprisoned members of ACPRA, but he should also decree a formal Law of Association that fully protects and promotes civic space. We echo Saudi civil society leaders, including ACPRA co-founder Mohammed al-Qahtani, who have repeatedly expressed their fear that the Saudi government's failure to accommodate peaceful dissent only benefits extremist organizations in the region.

Your administration has highlighted the key role that independent civil society plays in advancing human rights and delegitimizing violent extremism. However, bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia have not adequately incorporated this as a policy priority. The U.S.-Saudi alliance must not only address the shared challenges of today, but anticipate and prevent the regional crises of tomorrow. Peaceful civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia must be able to operate freely, as U.S. foreign policy cannot succeed unless civil society succeeds.

Sincerely,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

Celine Assaf
Human Rights Foundation

CIVICUS

Brian Dooley
Human Rights First

Freedom House

David Andrew Weinberg
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy

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**Individual signatures reflect the personal views of that signatory; their institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only.*