

Brendan O'Hara MP
Argyll and Bute



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Anne Marie Trevelyan MP
Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade
Department for International Trade
King Charles Street
Whitehall
London
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The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
King Charles Street
London
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Ranil Jayawardena MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

8 October 2021
Case Ref: LA-BO12234

Dear Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Liz Truss and Ranil Jayawardena,

We are writing to express our concern in light of the meeting today between the government and the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as part of the consultation on Free Trade Agreements (FTA) between Gulf states and the UK, and underline the importance of centring human rights in any FTA. Due to the appalling rights records of many Gulf nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it is essential that any FTA is contingent upon tangible human rights improvements in these countries.

Civil societies across the GCC remain among the most repressed in the world, with freedom of expression, association and assembly being severely restricted. Bahraini society faces some of the heaviest state censorship; high profile political prisoners such as Dr Abduljalil AlSingace and Hassan Mushaima have been detained for over a decade simply for peacefully calling for democratisation in Bahrain and they continue to be subjected to systemic discrimination and violations of their human rights. Similarly, in the UAE, human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor continues to be unjustly detained for his human rights campaigning, despite international outcry.

Serious concerns also remain around the continued use of torture in detention centres across the region and the retention of the death penalty by many states. Bahrain now imprisons its populace at the highest rate of any Arab nation, while its rate of executions has increased tenfold since 2017 with a 600% increase in death sentences handed out in the past decade. Many death row inmates' sentences are based upon confessions allegedly extracted under torture, including those of Mohammed Ramadhan and Husain Moosa. Equally, in Saudi Arabia several individuals remain on death row for crimes allegedly committed when they were children, including Abdullah Alhowati, who faces execution despite having an alibi placing him 700km away from the scene of the alleged crime. It is thus imperative that any FTA with Bahrain and the wider GCC be conditional upon the release of these political prisoners and the commuting of death sentences where torture has been alleged.

Abuses committed by member states are not confined to the borders of the GCC. The devastating Saudi-led war on Yemen, the region's most impoverished country, has now entered its seventh year and remains the world's worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN. Since 2015, relentless air strikes by coalition forces have killed almost 20,000 civilians and pushed millions of Yemenis to the brink of famine. This is particularly disturbing in light of revelations that the UK government has used taxpayer money to support the Joint Incident Assessment Team, a Saudi body which has been accused of whitewashing potential war crimes

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committed by coalition forces.

In January 2021, the then-Foreign Secretary stated that the UK “shouldn't be engaged in free-trade negotiations with countries abusing human rights”. It is therefore deeply disturbing to hear the Foreign Secretary talk during her address to the Conservative Party Conference of building a “network of liberty” by forging closer trade links with the Gulf Cooperation Council states. As the UK seeks to forge a new place in the world in the post-Brexit era, it is crucial that the promotion of human rights and democracy are placed at the centre of trade negotiations and any future agreement signed with the GCC. A failure to do so will be an act of hypocrisy which betrays the values that the government claims its trade strategy will promote. We call on you to make the release of the individuals named in this letter contingent to any FTA between the UK and the GCC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brendan O'Hara', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Brendan O'Hara
Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and Human Rights in the Gulf

Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei
Director of Advocacy at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy