

18 April 2016

Mr. Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. President,

This month during your visit to Riyadh, you will undoubtedly [reaffirm](#) the “longstanding friendship” between the US and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Although your administration has made the security of the Gulf region a key priority, it has increasingly emphasized defense cooperation over commitments to human rights and democratic reform. In the absence of what you [described](#) as “legitimate political outlets for grievances,” the Gulf States will continue to face a heightened risk of internal instability. At the summit this month, the undersigned organizations therefore call on you to again urge GCC leaders to promote domestic stability through the full realization of human rights and a free and independent civil society.

GCC leadership is continuing down a worrying path away from reform. On 2 January 2016, King Salman approved the [execution](#) of 47 individuals in Saudi Arabia, including prominent human rights and social activist Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. Sheikh Nimr [advocated](#) for peaceful reform within Saudi society and called for equality among the kingdom’s citizens. Saudi Arabia [continues](#) to hold at least three individuals on death row for crimes they allegedly committed as minors; one of these individuals is Ali al-Nimr, Sheikh Nimr’s nephew. He could be executed at any time for his involvement in pro-reform protests in the kingdom’s Eastern Province.

In Bahrain, the al-Khalifa monarchy has intensified its repression of peaceful political opposition and free expression. On 14 March 2016, Bahraini authorities [incarcerated](#) human rights defender Zainab al-Khawaja and her 15-month-old son on charges related to her exercise of peaceful dissent. Bahraini authorities continue to arbitrarily detain thousands of political prisoners on charges that violate their right to free expression, including human rights defenders Abduljalil al-Singace, Sheikh Ali Salman, Fadhel Abbas, and Hassan Mushaima. The government has also escalated its broad use of [citizenship revocation](#) and [forced deportation](#) as punishment for political dissent, particularly [targeting](#) the country’s Shia communities.

The Government of the UAE, similarly, has [continued](#) to arbitrarily detain and even disappear perceived dissidents, including [American](#) and [Canadian](#) citizens. Meanwhile, Kuwaiti authorities have worked to [stifle](#) political discourse by prohibiting speech that is critical of any GCC countries. Cybercrime laws across the GCC further codify the repression of free speech by expanding systemic online censorship, which particularly restricts the work of journalists and bloggers. Although the governments of the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar have recently instituted nominal reforms to the internationally-criticized *kafala* system, millions of migrant workers continue to experience

exploitation and inhumane living conditions in the GCC, entrenched in an employer-tied visa system in which individuals are highly vulnerable to forced labor and human trafficking, often unable to end their contractual work or escape situations of exploitation or violence. GCC countries have done little to nothing to extend basic protections to domestic workers, despite high profile cases of abuse.

Finally, during King Salman's last visit to Washington, you yourself noted that the US shares the GCC's concerns regarding the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen – even as the Saudi-led coalition stands accused of violating international humanitarian law in that country. Since your remarks in 2015, the US-backed military intervention has contributed to thousands of civilian casualties and the forced displacement of an [estimated](#) 2.4 million Yemeni citizens.

Given your administration's professed commitments to human rights and democracy in the region, the US has both a unique opportunity and a clear responsibility to promote human rights reforms in the GCC. As recently demonstrated by the Qatari emir's decision to [pardon](#) the imprisoned poet Mohammed al-Ajami, international pressure to improve human rights can achieve remarkable results when actually employed. If your administration truly seeks security and stability in the Gulf, it must hold its partners accountable to the highest international standards, and encourage the GCC to reassess its restrictive policies towards human rights.

The respect for human rights will lay the foundation for stability in the Gulf. We therefore call on your administration to raise human rights and democratic political reform with the GCC leadership during your upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia. We particularly encourage you to call for the release of all political prisoners of conscience in GCC countries, including human rights defenders, journalists, members of political opposition, labor leaders, and peaceful protesters. We urge you to advocate for the development of free and independent civil society within the GCC member states by calling for the implementation of meaningful legal reforms, which may further promote freedom and stability within the broader Middle East region.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)

Arabian Rights Watch Association (ARWA)

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)

European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)

Freedom House

Justice Human Rights Organization (JHRO)

Kuwait Watch

Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)

Reporters Without Borders

Saudi Organization for Rights and Freedoms (SAORF)

Solidarity Center

Yemen Peace Project