



20 October 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
United States Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson,

We write in advance of your travel to Saudi Arabia to urge you to include human rights within your agenda when you meet with Saudi officials in Riyadh. During your upcoming trip, we understand you [plan to discuss](#) “the conflict in Yemen, the ongoing Gulf dispute, Iran, and a number of other important regional and bilateral issues.” We would like to stress the regional and bilateral importance that human rights must play in your discussions in order to support greater national and regional peace and stability. We therefore call on you to raise human rights issues of concern, in particular concerns over the continued death of civilians in Yemen in the Saudi-led war, as well as the kingdom’s ongoing suppression of free expression and assembly domestically, especially the detention of peaceful dissidents and human rights defenders. We further call on you to follow up on your recent [comments](#) at the release of the State Department’s 2016 International Religious Freedom report in which you raised concerns over Saudi Arabia’s religious rights record.

Since Saudi Arabia entered the conflict in Yemen in March 2015, over [13,000](#) civilians have been killed, many by airstrikes launched by the kingdom and its coalition partners. These airstrikes have not only struck Houthi-Saleh military positions, but [civilian areas](#) and infrastructure, like [Hodeida port cranes](#), [hospitals](#), and [schools](#), in addition to [refugee camps](#), [markets](#), and a [funeral hall](#). Despite these, and many other attacks on civilian targets, the coalition’s investigatory body, the [Joint Incidents Assessment Team](#) (JIAT) has absolved the coalition of almost all wrongdoing. In their rulings, the JIAT – which is composed of individuals from the countries conducting the airstrikes – has effectively whitewashed the coalition’s actions, green-lighting further airstrikes and ensuring the parties responsible will not be held accountability for the thousands of civilians killed.

The United States is not an impartial actor in this conflict. Rather, because of the extensive support the US has given the coalition members, in particular, Saudi Arabia, the US has become an integral part of the coalition’s actions in Yemen. [According](#) to Senator Chris Murphy, “The United States provides the bombs. We provide the refueling planes in mid-air. We provide the [intelligence]. I think it’s safe to say that this bombing campaign in Yemen could not happen without the United States.” Despite this, the US continues to provide material support to the coalition. In January, President Trump went to Riyadh, where he announced a sale of [\\$100 billion worth of weapons](#). This includes the sale of [precision-guided munitions](#) which had drawn Congressional skepticism over the death of civilians in airstrikes.

Saudi Arabia also systematically violates human rights domestically, with the government recently arbitrarily arresting and detaining [at least 30](#) clerics, intellectuals, and activists in what Human Rights Watch called a “[coordinated crackdown on dissent](#).” Among those detained are two prominent clerics, [Salman al-Odah](#) and [Awad al-Qarni](#). Both were arrested over peaceful criticism they had made over Twitter. Al-Odah, in particular, who has 14 million followers on Twitter, was detained after expressing hope that Saudi Arabia and Qatar could repair relations.

Al-Odah, al-Qarni, and the other peaceful dissidents are only the most recent activists to be arrested because of their expression. For years, the Saudi government has systematically jailed human rights defenders and activists on the basis of their speech. As Human Rights Watch has [noted](#), for example, due to the government’s methodical campaign of suppression and prosecution, almost all of the members of the Saudi Civil and

Political Rights Association (ACPRA), one of the kingdom's most prominent human rights organizations, are currently on trial or in prison. Other activists, like [Fadhil al-Manasif](#) and [Ahmed al-Mshaikhass](#) with the Adala Center for Human Rights, and [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#) and [Raif Badawi](#), are also serving prison sentences for comments they have made and for their peaceful activism.

In addition to prosecuting peaceful dissidents because of their expression, the Saudi government has continued to discriminate against religious minorities. With [no freedom of religion](#), all religious minorities face state-sanctioned repression. Non-Muslims, whether Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists – many of whom are migrant workers – are unable to openly and freely practice their faith. According to the State Department's 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, authorities “detained, arrested, and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Islamic religious activities.” A significant aspect of the discrimination religious minorities face is state-sanctioned hate speech by state-affiliated clerics and institutions. For example, official religious textbooks published by the Ministry of Education [promote intolerance](#) towards non-state-sanctioned religious practices.

While all minority religions face discrimination, the kingdom's Shia minority faces particularly [harsh prejudice](#). This bias is present not only in religious textbooks, but permeates all of Saudi society, and is present also in the justice system, in politics, and in cultural practices. As a result of systematic discrimination against all religious minorities, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has repeatedly classified [Saudi Arabia](#) as a “[country of particular concern](#)” – USCIRF's designation for countries that systematically violate religious freedom, and one that may recommend sanctions.

Secretary Tillerson, when you [spoke](#) at the launch of the State Department's 2016 report in August 2017, you specifically discussed Saudi Arabia's religious freedom record. In your remarks, you stated “We remain concerned about the state of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The government does not recognize the right of non-Muslims to practice their religion in public and applied criminal penalties [...] for apostasy, atheism, blasphemy, and insulting the state's interpretation of Islam. Of particular concern are attacks targeting Shia Muslims [...]. We urge Saudi Arabia to embrace greater degrees of religious freedom for all of its citizens.” We hope you follow up on these remarks by raising these concerns directly with Saudi authorities in Riyadh.

These issues – the conflict in Yemen, and protections for fundamental freedoms, including free and peaceful expression and religious observation – are significant issues of concern to the United States. As a critical partner in the conflict in Yemen, the US has the ability to shape the conflict, ensure that all parties adhere to their obligations under international law, and that all parties are held accountable for rights abuses. This is a chance for America to demonstrate leadership on this issue and spearhead a reduction of hostilities in favor of a peaceful political settlement. Finally, freedom of expression and freedom of religion are values central to American identity. The US cannot stand by as one of our most important allies imprisons peaceful dissidents because of their expression and oppresses religious minorities because of their faith. Secretary Tillerson, these are not issues that can go unaddressed. We urge you to raise these topics seriously during your visit to Riyadh and to make clear to the Saudi government that the US will not continue to support indiscriminate killing in Yemen, and that free and peaceful expression and tolerance of religious freedom are universal human rights.

Sincerely,



Husain Abdulla
Executive Director
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)