

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 19, 2018

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20520

Dear President Trump:

As you prepare to welcome Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman to the White House, we wish to reaffirm our commitment to the long-standing ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia that have spanned seven decades and encompass critical security cooperation. While the Crown Prince's visit offers an opportunity to highlight important matters affecting our bilateral relationship, including our close security relationship, counterterrorism coordination and economic ties, it also provides a forum to address key areas of concern. This includes addressing domestic human rights violations, particularly as they relate to freedoms of speech, expression, and religion; combatting Iranian influence in the region; and ending the brutal Yemen war, now in its third year. We urge you to raise these issues in your meeting with the Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince has articulated a vision to reform and advance Saudi Arabia and it is in the interest of all of us that he succeeds. A prosperous Saudi Arabia is essential to a stable Middle East and critical to advancing key U.S. national security interests. While some of the Crown Prince's recent efforts have been commendable, such as granting additional rights to women and diversifying the Saudi economy, other actions threaten our shared goal of stability.

In particular, we are alarmed by reports of activists detained or jailed for expressing their opinions on social media. Raif Badawi was arrested in 2012 on a charge of "insulting Islam through electronic channels" and brought to court on several charges, including apostasy. In 2013 he was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes. In 2014 his sentence was increased to 10 years in prison, 1000 lashes, and a fine. He has languished for over three years. Essam Koshak, an independent activist who used Twitter to push for human rights in Saudi Arabia, including highlighting the repression of peaceful activists and dissidents has been detained for over a year. On February 27, Saudi Arabia's terrorism court sentenced Koshak to four years in prison based on his tweets. If the Crown Prince truly believes in a new vision for Saudi Arabia, he should begin by releasing prisoners of conscience and encourage a vibrant civil society and freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, educational reforms continue to lag behind other social reforms. Saudi Arabia's religious studies curriculum continues to contain hateful and incendiary language toward religions and Islamic traditions that do not adhere to its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The texts disparage Sufi and Shia religious practices and label Jews and Christians "unbelievers" with whom Muslims should not associate. A review by Human Rights Watch of the Education

Ministry-produced school religion books for the 2016-17 school year found that some of the content that first provoked widespread controversy for violent and intolerant teachings in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks remains in the texts today, despite Saudi officials' promises to eliminate the intolerant language.

Beyond the Kingdom, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has also had a destabilizing impact in some areas, threatening our goals for a prosperous Middle East free of Iranian meddling. The conflict in Yemen, for example, has produced the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Seventy five percent of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 8 million are on the brink of famine. The conditions have also led to the worst outbreak of cholera in modern history, with an estimated one million people suspected to be infected. While the conflict in Yemen is not one-sided – the Houthis also bear much responsibility for the violence – the Saudi-led campaign has played a significant role in exacerbating the current humanitarian catastrophe. Given U.S. support to Saudi Arabia during its efforts in Yemen, we have a unique ability to influence coalition behavior to better mitigate the war's impact on civilians. We urge you to press the coalition to better comply with the laws of war and improve its existing investigation procedures so that violations are investigated transparently, and appropriate compensation promptly paid.

We also remain concerned that a Saudi-led blockade of its neighbor Qatar has weakened the Gulf Coordination Council and hurt ordinary citizens. As Secretary Mattis has stated, this dispute has had direct negative consequences, for all those involved, including the United States. Conversely, he added, "A united Gulf Cooperation Council bolsters our effectiveness on many fronts, particularly on counterterrorism, defeating ISIS, and countering the spread of Iran's malign influence." The Crown Prince and the other parties involved must minimize the rhetoric, exercise restraint to avoid further escalation, and work toward a resolution to both of these conflicts so we can focus on our shared national security interests, including the fight against terrorism.

Mr. President, we urge you to raise these issues, in particular these human rights concerns, during the upcoming visit. You will find strong bipartisan support from Congress for strengthening the U.S.-Saudi partnership and advocacy for progress on key issues to achieve our shared objectives in the region.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response.

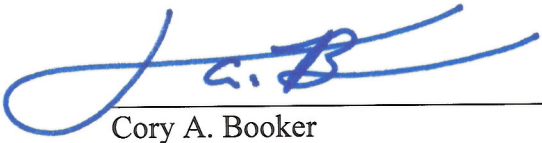
Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Chris Murphy
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator