

June 29, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to convey our concerns regarding your trip to Saudi Arabia in July. With Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, unchastened and continuing his ruthless campaign against dissenters, we strongly urge you to, at a minimum, put human rights at the center of your meetings.

While we find any interaction with MBS to be profoundly disturbing, we recognize that Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has had far-reaching repercussions. Global food shortages have exacerbated protracted humanitarian crises and could fuel further conflict. Gas prices are at historic highs and Americans are suffering as a result of our dependence on foreign oil. This is a time when the United States needs to work constructively with as many global partners as it can.

Against this backdrop, Secretary of State Blinken's recent comments ring true, "statecraft often involves making difficult choices." But the choice in the aftermath of Russia's tyrannical assault on democracy should be clear – in order for the United States to achieve long-term national security we must reduce our dependence on corrupt, ruthless authoritarians, not grow more beholden to them. Mercurial autocrats that are willing to flout international norms and laws cannot be expected to then stabilize that same international order. And shifting our reliance from one such leader to another, most notably due to our addiction to fossil fuels, won't solve the problem.

Like Putin, MBS has shown a brazen disregard for fundamental rights and U.S. interests even as he has taken some positive steps toward peace in the region with the truce in Yemen and the end of the blockade in Qatar. The gruesome killing of Jamal Khashoggi, which, according to U.S. intelligence agencies, MBS himself ordered, is only the most high profile and egregious manifestation of a regime that routinely intimidates, surveils, and harasses dissidents at home and abroad. In January 2022, the FBI highlighted how Saudi Arabia is even targeting exiles within the United States, a flagrant violation of our national sovereignty. In a recent Freedom House report, Saudi dissidents in the United States noted that the decision to not sanction MBS for his role in the Khashoggi murder had a chilling effect. "Right after that, things quickly changed for us... It seemed like there was a reaction from the Saudi government that, okay, there's no consequences. We can do whatever we want."

At the same time that it cracks down on its *innocent* citizens abroad, the Saudi government actively helps Saudi *criminals* abroad evade justice. Last year the FBI concluded that Saudi government officials "almost certainly assist United States-based Saudi citizens in fleeing the United States to avoid legal issues, undermining the United States judicial process." These flagrant violations of U.S. law and sovereignty are not victimless crimes. A 2019 investigation found more than two dozen cases in which Saudi students studying in the U.S. vanished while facing manslaughter, sex crimes, and other felony charges. In one tragic example, the Saudi government helped whisk away a Saudi student who was issued an illicit passport and traveled on a private plane weeks before his trial in Oregon for the hit-and-run death of a 15-year-old.

Saudi Arabia also helps other repressive countries extend their long arm of authoritarianism. In a violation of the international law principle of nonrefoulement, Saudi authorities coordinated with the Chinese government to extradite Uyghur Muslims back to China where they are in danger of being tortured. Most recently, two Uyghur men who had traveled to Mecca for the religious pilgrimage have been in prison without charge or trial and have reportedly been told they will be deported soon. Saudi authorities have in recent years indicated support for Chinese government genocidal policies in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

These extraterritorial means of repression have coincided with continued brutality at home. On March 22, after unfair trials lacking due process, the Saudi government beheaded 81 individuals, 41 of whom belonged to the country's aggrieved Shia Muslim minority, in the country's largest mass execution in modern history. For those who avoid the death penalty, many are still subject to horrific torture behind bars. Despite the release of several high-profile dissidents in early 2021, these activists remain subject to arbitrary travel bans and risk being returned to prison if they speak out. Similarly, an ostensibly progressive Family Code passed earlier this year actually codifies male guardianship over women.

We cannot allow MBS to believe he can rule with impunity, and we urge you to pursue the following commitments, in your meeting:

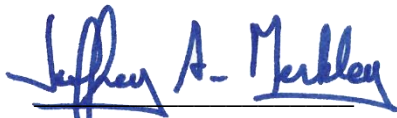
- Releasing from prison, or at the very least presenting irrefutable evidence of wrong-doing by the dissidents listed in the State Department's Saudi Arabia Country Report on Human Rights Practices
- Bringing to justice perpetrators of torture against prisoners
- Lifting arbitrary travel bans on human rights defenders and others, including those imposed on U.S. citizens
- Ending illegal surveillance, state hostage-taking, and other forms of transnational repression, particularly on U.S. soil
- Not assisting Saudi citizens who face criminal charges abroad from evading justice
- Ending male guardianship over women
- Imposing a moratorium on executions
- Maintaining the ceasefire in Yemen

We also call on you to meet with human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. It is ironic that many are unable to come to Washington due to the travel bans MBS has imposed on them. But meeting these activists, even virtually, would send a strong signal to courageous Saudis who look to America for inspiration and support

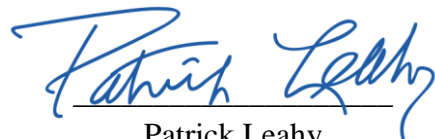
Your upcoming trip has been described as an opportunity to reset the relationship with Saudi Arabia. For too long, we've allowed the exigencies of geopolitics to dictate our policies toward the Kingdom. Today, as we once again face multiple crises, let us not allow the urgency of the moment distract from what you have called the defining challenge of our time – defending democracy and human rights.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator