



July 6, 2022

Dear President Biden,

We write to you ahead of your planned trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries with which the United States has long-standing political, economic, and military ties. Both countries also have troubling records on democracy, human rights, and civil liberties—especially for the most vulnerable populations living under their control.

When you meet with your counterparts in Tel Aviv and Riyadh, we ask that you take specific steps that will speak to your abiding commitment to American values and human rights, and impress upon the governments of Israel and Saudi Arabia the very minimum they must do to comply with their obligations under international law on some specific, and easily achievable matters. Below, we provide six concrete actions that you can undertake to advance democracy and respect for human rights, civil society, and the rule of law.

Visit to Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories

1. **Meet with Palestinian Civil Society Groups in Ramallah Baselessly Designated as “Terrorist” Organizations:** When you visit the occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, we ask that you meet with representatives of the six Palestinian human rights and civil society groups that Israel has wrongly declared terrorist organizations under its 2016 [counterterrorism law](#) and in a military order [deauthorizing](#) the six groups. These groups include Al Haq, Addameer, Al Bisan Center, Defense for Children International—Palestine, and others. Many of these organizations work in close partnership with American civil society organizations, and their staff are lifelong champions of human rights who have received awards and recognition from around the world. No country, including the United States, has found the Israeli government’s purported evidence to support this claim persuasive.

Outlawing human rights organizations and civil society groups is a familiar tactic of rights-abusing states, from Moscow to Beijing. By meeting with representatives of these six organizations, you would send a clear message that a vibrant civil society, even one that criticizes the government, is a fundamental tenet of an open, democratic society, and that the United States stands with human rights defenders wherever they may operate, even if they face persecution from our allies and partners.

2. **Publicly Demand that Israel Halt all Activities that Could Result in the Forcible Displacement of the Palestinian Communities Living in Masafer Yatta:** Some 1,200 Palestinian residents, including 500 children, are at immediate risk of forcible transfer and arbitrary displacement in Masafer Yatta in the southern West Bank following an Israeli [court decision](#) last month, which ruled that the Israeli military may disregard protections against forced displacement enshrined in international law and treat the area as a live-fire training zone.

Your administration is already [on record](#) urging the Israeli government not to carry out evictions ahead of your visit, but we implore you to go further. We ask that, when standing next to the Israeli prime minister in your joint press conference, you make clear that the United States will not accept the forcible displacement of entire Palestinian communities in the West Bank, a position the U.S. has held consistently over the years, most notably on Israeli plans to displace and demolish the villages of Susiya and Khan al Ahmar.

- 3. Order an FBI Investigation into the Killing of U.S. Citizen Shireen Abu Akleh:** We ask that you order the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to conduct an independent investigation into the [killing](#) of American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in the West Bank on May 11, while she was covering Israeli army raids in the city of Jenin. Numerous investigations by the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), [CNN](#), and others already have provided ample evidence that an Israeli soldier fired the gun at Abu Akleh, killing her.

On July 4, the State Department released a [statement](#) concurring with the bottom line of those investigations and announcing that the U.S. Security Coordinator “concluded that gunfire from IDF positions was likely responsible for the death of Shireen Abu Akleh.” What’s still needed is an official investigation by a U.S. law enforcement agency so that there can be accountability for any wrongdoing. It is not enough for the U.S. Security Coordinator—which is not a law enforcement agency, does not have investigative authority, and whose mission of security sector reform does not lend itself to these types of investigative actions—to find that it “could not reach a definitive conclusion regarding the origin of the bullet that killed.”

As you know, the FBI has the authority to investigate violent crimes committed against Americans abroad, and it has done so to investigate the killings of American journalists, including the [murder](#) of Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002. The FBI also has the expertise and experience to lead this type of investigation. It is already clear that there will be no credible investigation into Abu Akleh’s death—or accountability for her killing—unless the United States conducts its own investigation. Announcing an FBI investigation into Abu Akleh’s death on your upcoming trip would signal our government’s commitment to ensuring that it will take seriously its role to ensure that there are credible investigations into the killing of American journalists abroad, and help ensure that there is some measure of accountability for her unnecessary death.

Visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

- 1. Submit Any New Security Agreement for Congressional Review:** Multiple [news reports](#) quoting unnamed senior U.S. government officials, as well as statements from former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett and a UAE spokesperson, indicate that the U.S. has entered into a new regional defense agreement with Israel, several Gulf states, Iraq, and Jordan, apparently named the “[Middle East Air Defense Alliance](#),” as well as a new bilateral defense agreement with the UAE. However, to date, your administration has offered the American public no information about what this new security alliance will entail, what commitments it obligates our country, and the circumstances in which this security agreement will apply and can be invoked. The only information in the media about this agreement has come as informal comments from officials and agents of the Israeli and Emirati governments.

Both to show our partners around the world what democratic governance looks like, but also to abide by those same standards back home, it is imperative that you present any new security arrangement with Saudi Arabia, whether bilateral or as part of a regional alliance, to the Senate for consultation, comment, and review. As former Chair and long-time member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, you are acutely aware of the essential role of oversight that the Senate must play in international agreements with such a massive impact on U.S. security, economic relations, and national interests. Further, by leading by example and demonstrating how checks on power function in our democracy, you will send a strong message to our partners—and adversaries—of what democratic governance looks like.

The risks of a security agreement with Saudi Arabia, in light of its persistent conflicts in the region, including its catastrophic war in Yemen, make such a review more critical than ever. Secretary Blinken eloquently [explained](#) why such an alliance would be bad for U.S. security interests, noting when such an alliance was last proposed during the Trump administration that “an anti-Shia coalition masquerading as a Middle Eastern security alliance will only fuel . . . sectarian fires and produce more, not less, terrorism” and risks “dragging the United States into new misadventures in the Middle East. Exhibit A is Riyadh’s counterproductive campaign in Yemen.” We urge your administration to be transparent with the American people and to explain why your administration now believes such an alliance would serve U.S. interests.

2. **Meet with Saudi Civil Society Activists:** As you are well aware, the Saudi government has a deplorable [human rights record](#), including torture and unjust prosecution of Saudi civil society activists. Human rights organizations and other independent civil society groups are banned in the country, and criticism of the government is deemed a crime of terrorism for which prosecutors can seek the death penalty. This conduct not only breaches Saudi Arabia’s human rights obligations, but is an attack on the universal values of freedom and justice that you have defended.

To show your abiding commitment to independent civil society and freedom of speech, we ask that while in Saudi Arabia, you take the time to meet with civil rights activists and human rights defenders, especially women’s rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul, who have faced unjust persecution and ongoing repression by the Saudi government. You have [spoken out](#) on behalf of al-Hathloul in the past, using the case of her imprisonment—and eventual release—to highlight the importance the United States places on universal human rights and the rule of law. Meeting with al-Hathloul during your visit to Saudi Arabia would reinforce your administration’s support of independent civil society and reiterate the importance of these values to advancing American interests.

3. **Publicly Urge Saudi Arabia to End its Blockade of Yemen:** As you know, the war in Yemen and the many atrocities suffered by the Yemeni people have gone on for far too long. Like you, we are grateful for the recent ceasefire and hope that it lasts. And while this ceasefire is critical, the Saudi and Emirati land, air, and sea blockade of the country continues with very little exception, and much more must be done to ensure that adequate levels of humanitarian aid reach the Yemeni people.

On this trip, we ask that you publicly press the Saudi leadership to end the blockade of the country. We also ask that you publicly assert that the Saudi authorities at minimum allow more fuel into Hodeida, as well as unlimited amounts of food, medicine, and humanitarian supplies. Such a request only asks the Saudis to comply with unobjectionable international legal principles and basic humanitarian norms. It would also incentivize the Houthis to allow humanitarian assistance into Taiz, a [besieged city](#) of 400,000 people virtually cut off from the rest of the country during the last seven years, and where daily life for many Yemenis is a [struggle](#).

Mr. President, as you yourself have explained, America's national security interests depend on global respect for democracy, human rights, and international law. We undermine our own interests when we support authoritarian and abusive governments in the Middle East, and make it harder for people around the world to support our values in places like Ukraine. This trip provides an opportunity to address and alleviate at least some of the human rights harms caused by the Middle Eastern governments we support, and to ensure that we avoid increasing the risks to our country with new security entanglements in the region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Whitson', with a long, sweeping underline.

Sarah Leah Whitson
Executive Director, Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)