



Open Letter to President Biden

December 6, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden

The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

On the eve of the Summit for Democracy, I am writing this open letter to you to propose a new and transformative path forward for the United States and all countries that value and seek to advance democracy and human rights. I commend you for putting democracy and human rights at the forefront of US rhetoric when talking about international relations and there is no better time than now to address this critical issue head on.

Authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights violations are increasingly prevalent around the globe -- growing stronger in problem countries and gaining new footholds in countries that have avoided them in the past. To stop and reverse this trend, I encourage bold, innovative, collaborative, and decisive action by the US and its allies who value living in a world where freedom and liberty are realities for citizens, not just memories.

I want to share with you my experience as the Executive Director of Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain. First, I applaud the fact that the Government of Bahrain was not invited to participate in the Summit for Democracy. Bahrain is a serial, chronic, and unrepentant abuser of the rights of its people that has repeatedly side-stepped opportunities to improve its reprehensible record on human rights and anti-democratic abuses. The Kingdom of Bahrain is rightly a focus of a forum dedicated to promoting democracy and human rights, not a participant.



I believe that Bahrain provides a useful case study in what does not work when trying to encourage improvements and I believe Bahrain should be embraced by your Administration as a test case for a new approach to promoting democracy and human rights globally.

For more than a decade, the US State Department has repeatedly and consistently described in stark terms the egregious violation of the human rights of the people of Bahrain at the hands of their government. The *State Department's 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bahrain* says:

Significant human rights issues included: torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; harsh prison conditions, including lack of sufficient access to medical care in prisons; arbitrary detention; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on freedom of expression, the press, and the internet, including censorship, site blocking, criminal libel, and arrests stemming from social media activity; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; overly restrictive laws on independent nongovernmental organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement, including revocation of citizenship; restrictions on political participation; and significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

Major human rights non-governmental organizations have consistently corroborated these grave, ongoing, and unmitigated violations of human rights by the Government of Bahrain.

Despite undisputable evidence to the contrary, at his Senate confirmation hearing on October 5, 2021, Steven Bondy, your nominee to be ambassador to Bahrain, responded to a question by Senator Tim Kaine about the Bahraini government's human rights record by saying, "If we were to rewind ten years ago, as you said, when there was quite a bit of strife in the [Bahrain], we would have to say that the trendlines since then have been exceedingly positive."

It is incomprehensible that the person nominated to be the US' top diplomat in Bahrain would publicly state that anything about the Government of Bahrain's human rights record is "exceedingly positive." It is precisely this kind of signal given to the Government of Bahrain by Mr. Bondy that emboldens anti-democratic behavior and human rights violations against peaceful civilians. The type of ambivalent approach to fundamental rights and freedoms articulated by Mr. Bondy must be abandoned and replaced with a coherent and effective US strategy.

Despite indisputable evidence that Bahrain continues to be a major violator of human rights and democratic standards, the US has failed to exercise potential points of pressure available to it to affect change. The US continues to sell the Bahrainis arms, Bahrain enjoys a free trade agreement with the US, and no Bahraini official has been sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Act. Why? Because the US



has created a scenario that has made it dependent on Bahrain as a base for the US fifth fleet and other military assets.

The solution I propose is that you proactively and consciously reduce US dependency on Bahrain by removing the elements in the relationship that lead the US to compromise our principles and turn a blind eye to clear and obvious human rights violations, anti-democratic actions, and blatant corruption. As you have stated, “Democracy doesn’t happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it.” This is nowhere truer than in Bahrain. Now is time to defend, fight for, strengthen and renew Bahraini democracy and human rights.

Materials describing the Summit for Democracy indicate that participating national leaders are expected to announce specific actions and commitments to meaningful internal reforms and international initiatives that advance the Summit’s goals. As the host, please be bold with your commitments. I ask that you change the direction of current US policy and announce a new and paramount U.S. commitment to promoting democracy, ending human rights violations, holding their perpetrators accountable, shining a bright light on corruption, and prosecuting those guilty of it, coupled with a new policy of disentangling our national interests from the whims and fortunes of chronic human rights abusers.

Mr. President, based on its demonstrated lack of commitment to human rights and democratic principles, I urge you to announce a five-year plan to disentangle the United States from its relationship with Bahrain, starting immediately. The plan would include removing all US security forces from Bahrain, suspending all weapons sales to Bahrain, suspending the US-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement, and commencing rigorous investigations into Global Magnitsky Act enforcement focused on Bahraini officials at all levels of government. These actions are entirely appropriate and even overdue given the callous and notorious abuses perpetrated by the Government of Bahrain, and authoritarian dictatorship, against its own people.

The disentanglement plan would only be paused if Bahrain completely meets each of a set of benchmarks in human rights and democracy, which would include, at a minimum: release all political prisoners and do not arrest any more people for peaceful political activity, permit the political opposition to exist in Bahrain, begin a dialogue with the political opposition, permit the media to operate freely in Bahrain, hold perpetrators of torture and other human rights abuses accountable regardless of how high in the Bahraini government they are, repeal laws that perpetuate the repressive police state in Bahrain, and permit United Nations and other neutral observers unfettered access to the country.



Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

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To be clear, the optimal outcome of this policy in relation to Bahrain would not be US disengagement from Bahrain, but rather a shift to democracy and human rights by the Government of Bahrain that results in strengthened relations between the two countries and enhanced security for both the US and Bahrain. However, the US must be genuine and resolute in its commitment to fully enforce the policy of disentanglement if the Government of Bahrain does not fully meet all of the established human rights and democracy benchmarks. I believe that this approach could be a model for US relations with numerous other countries.

I ask that you commit at the Summit for Democracy to a path of clear and unwavering leadership in promoting human rights and democracy by establishing consistent consequences for egregious violators like the Kingdom of Bahrain. By bravely enforcing the consequences even when there are crosscutting interests -- whether they be security, economic, historic affinity, or concerns of allies -- the US can restore itself as a beacon of hope for oppressed people in countries like Bahrain.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you and I look forward to meaningful outcomes from the Summit for Democracy.

Sincerely,

Husain Abdulla
Executive Director,
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain