

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 23, 2020

Her Royal Highness Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud  
Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
601 New Hampshire Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Your Royal Highness:

We write to request that you urge political leadership in Riyadh to release women political prisoners being unjustly detained in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These extraordinary women peacefully worked to advance the cause of women's and human rights in the Kingdom.

We call for releasing these individuals on the merits of their cases, but today, we also urge you to act quickly on health and humanitarian grounds. The rapid spread of COVID-19 is a threat to all people and nations, but prison populations are at a heightened risk due to the inability to practice social distancing, poor sanitation, and lack of adequate medical care. In March 2020, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called upon governments to release "political prisoners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views" in order to slow the spread of the virus and protect the health of both detainees and the broader population. We encourage the leaders of the Kingdom to seize this opportunity during this global crisis by immediately releasing these individuals.

While we are greatly concerned about all individuals detained for acts of peaceful expression, we draw your attention to five women political prisoners in particular, who remain in detention:

In May 2018, **Loujain al-Hathloul**, a prominent women's rights activist who campaigned against the driving ban and the male guardianship system, was detained and held without charges or trial for ten months. She was later charged with promoting women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Last year, the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that her imprisonment and deprivation of liberty are arbitrary. She should never have been detained for exercising her right to freedom of speech, and we urge the Kingdom to release her.

In a continued crackdown on women's rights activists, writer and activist **Nouf Abdulaziz** and fellow activist **Maya'a al-Zahrani**, were arrested and detained in June 2018. Abdulaziz had written about women's rights and publicly expressed solidarity with other female activists arrested in May of 2018, and al-Zahrani had supported her. Both women have been held incommunicado in detention. Two more women human rights defenders, **Samar Badawi** and **Nassima al-Sada**, were subsequently detained in July 2018 for their peaceful activism. These women should not have been arbitrarily imprisoned for peacefully expressing their views and supporting human rights, and we call for their immediate release.

These women have been wrongly detained simply for exercising their fundamental rights, and justice demands they be released. Moreover, in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting the health and safety of all people is critical. Countries around the world have released prisoners, understanding that these pressing times require urgent humanitarian relief. We urge the leaders of the Kingdom to do the same and release Loujain al-Hathloul, Nouf Abdulaziz, Maya'a al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sada, and all other prisoners of conscience unjustly detained.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez  
United States Senator



Marco Rubio  
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons  
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator