

Mr. Liam Payne
c/o Sol Parker
Coda Music Agency
1-3 Wenlock Road, London, N1 7SL, United Kingdom

Dear Mr. Payne,

According to reliable information obtained by the [Human Rights Foundation](#) (HRF), you will be traveling to Saudi Arabia to perform at [Jeddah World Fest](#) on July 18, 2019.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is the individual who authorized and is financing your seven-figure performance at the event. I am writing to urgently inform you of the human rights crisis in Saudi Arabia; to explain the role that the regime of MBS has played in violating the rights of tens of millions of Saudis; and to request that, in light of your status as a global personality, you cancel your appearance as a symbol of solidarity with the ongoing suffering of the Saudi people. Since coming to power in 2017, MBS has spearheaded a crackdown on human rights, especially those of the women who live in his Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. Its legal system is predominantly based on Islam's Shari'a law, as advocated by the Wahhabi movement. Unlike most Muslim states, Saudi Arabia has not codified the Shari'a in local statutes or codes. Under the Wahhabi doctrine, the law is subject to judicial interpretation of holy texts and jurisprudence based on a particular judge's religious beliefs and personal understanding of Islam. As a consequence, most areas of the law, including criminal law, are regulated by religious principles that are not embodied in a written legal instrument and are therefore subject to the arbitrariness and discretion of Saudi judges.

In practice, the unlimited authority of the judiciary has led to the prosecution of innumerable peaceful activists and dissenters on politically motivated charges. The lack of independence and impartiality of the judiciary is also evidenced by the control of the Ministry of Interior over prosecutors and administrative courts. The Specialized Criminal Court, a security and counter-terrorism court established in 2008, is the epitome of the encroachment of the executive branch over the judiciary. The Ministry of Interior through the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution of the Specialized Criminal Court, can order the court to charge individuals at its sole discretion, flouting fundamental rules of criminal procedures and the essential principle of judicial independence.

Recent cases demonstrate the political manipulation of key judiciary institutions by the executive power. In 2014, the government-controlled Specialized Criminal Court sentenced two peaceful dissidents to death and five others to long prison terms, for attending demonstrations

organized by members of the Shia minority, for taking and sharing photos of the protests, and assisting journalists to cover the protests. The overly broad and politically motivated charges included “breaking allegiance to the ruler,” and “harming the government of the kingdom.”

Due to the overt control of the executive power over prosecutors and judges, it is evident that the judiciary is not independent in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the wide authority given to Saudi judges in interpreting and applying Islamic laws contribute to creating a judicial system characterized by pervasive arbitrariness and abuse of power.

Saudi Arabia is also among the worst violators of basic individual rights, and in particular the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The Kingdom scored the worst possible grade in Freedom House’s 2019 Freedom in the World index, which focuses on civil liberties and political rights in a particular country. Although the Kingdom has signed several United Nations human rights treaties, it has firmly opposed the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights for allegedly being in contradiction with the principles of the Shari’a Law.

The Saudi Basic Law of Governance broadly establishes the obligation of the State to protect human rights but fails to specify any of these rights. The protection of human rights is furthermore conditioned on mandatory compliance with the principles of the Islamic Shari’a. Because Shari’a law is uncodified and subject to the discretionary interpretation of legal scholars and judges, this formulation allows the Saudi government extensive freedom of interpretation and does not safeguard compliance with internationally recognized criteria.

In addition, the royal family exerts overt control over most newspapers and media broadcast. Self-censorship is widespread, and freedom of the press is practically non-existent. According to the Reporters Without Borders’ 2019 World Press Freedom Index, Saudi Arabia ranks near the bottom, holding the 172nd position out of 180 countries. The Kingdom is particularly intolerant to criticism directed toward the government and its officials, to religion, and politics. Article 39 of the Basic Law of Governance states:

Mass media and all other vehicles of expression shall employ civil and polite language, contribute towards the education of the nation, and strengthen unity. The media is prohibited from committing acts that lead to disorder and division, affecting the security of the state or its public relations, or undermining human dignity and rights.

The 2011 Law on Electronic Publications and the 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law explicitly eliminated the online haven for cyber activists by extending these indefinite limits to the virtual world. In order for the government to tighten its grip on expression in the cyber-realm, the Law on Electronic Publications introduced a requirement on all news website and any sites offering

audio and video content or advertising to obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Information.

On the basis of these laws, hundreds of online activists were arrested, detained, and had their social media accounts disabled in retaliation for expressing their opinion about the government, reporting on protests, or discussing religion through social media networks. In 2012, Saudi national Ra'if Badawi was arrested and charged with “insulting Islam” for creating a website to discuss religion. He was sentenced by the Criminal Court in Jeddah in May 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes, followed by a 10-year travel ban, a ban on using media outlets, and a fine of one million Saudi Arabian riyals (about US \$266,600). In addition, between 2011 and 2012, the Saudi authorities, fearing an overspill of the protests occurring in neighboring countries, blocked around 400,000 websites and applied strict monitoring of online content.

For decades the Saudi government has harassed, arrested, and sentenced dissidents violating their freedom of expression, opinion and assembly. Not only does the Kingdom hold a seat at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Saudi Arabia was recently appointed to lead an influential panel that “selects top officials who shape international human rights standards and report on violations worldwide.” Still, the Kingdom regularly engages in the systematic repression of activists and human rights defenders, often leading to numerous years of imprisonment, without trial, and the use of repressive measures against them.

Advocacy organizations are not allowed to exist. There is no association law except for a regulation governing civil society organizations that carry out “charitable or voluntary work.” These organizations are required to obtain a license from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Except for organizations affiliated with the government, no human rights group has been granted a license so far. As a result, these groups operate without a license despite the high risks of persecution, and, despite the risks mentioned above, use social media to document and condemn violations by the Kingdom.

Public demonstrations and protests are illegal even though there are no express laws regulating or prohibiting assembly or demonstrations. The Ministry of Interior issued a communication on March 5, 2011 declaring that demonstrations were banned, and that the Ministry will take “all necessary measures” against those seeking to “disrupt order.” A day later, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars declared, “demonstrations are prohibited in this country.”

Participating in demonstrations and even writing about it are harshly punished. In 2013, the Kingdom sentenced seven government critics to prison terms ranging from five to ten years, for “inciting protests and harming public order” after they wrote about the protests on Facebook.

Civil society is not allowed to operate freely in the Kingdom. Criminalizing the establishment of human rights organizations and prohibiting demonstrations leave Saudis with no means to express their opinion about the government or politics in general without facing arbitrary arrest, lengthy detention, and imprisonment.

The Saudi Arabian State is ruled by an absolute monarchy, in which there is no independent judiciary, no independent media, no plural regime of political parties, and where citizens have no freedom of thought, expression, religion or association. The Kingdom is ruled by a fully authoritarian regime or dictatorship. Under this regime, there is no guarantee of independence in the administration of justice or respect for the fundamental rights of citizens, especially for those who openly express their disagreement with the government.

Mr. Payne, as you can see, you are scheduled to perform at a state-sponsored event in one of the most repressive regimes on earth — a country whose leader has also led a relentless campaign to silence women’s rights activists. Many of the women who have advocated to lift the driving ban in Saudi Arabia are currently in jail and being subjected to torture that includes electric shocks, flogging, and rape. Currently, one of the women in prison is Loujain al-Hathloul. [More than a year ago](#), Loujain — at just 29 years old — was a victim of a wave of arrests that took place a few weeks before the driving ban was lifted on June 24, 2018. She was wrongfully accused of “treason” and “undermining national security,” along with Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, Aisha al-Manea, Nouf Abdulaziz, Mayya al-Zahrani, Hessah al-Sheikh, Ibrahim al-Mudaimigh, and Mohammad al-Rabea.

Loujain became known as an advocate against the ban on women driving when she was first arrested in 2014 after she attempted to drive from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia. Loujain’s siblings have spent the past year advocating for the release of their sister, and bringing light to the suffering that Loujain has endured at the hands of the Saudi regime. Her brother, [Walid](#), spoke at the [2019 Oslo Freedom Forum](#) in a talk called “[Jailed for Driving](#)” to raise awareness about his sister’s case. As of March of this year, Loujain’s trial began, but was [postponed](#).

In April, our organization partnered with Saudi activist [Manal al-Sharif to raise awareness](#) of the human rights abuses of MBS—a campaign that began in your hometown of New York City, where Manal spoke at the [2019 Women of the World Summit](#). Saudi Arabia hosted its first public concert by a female artist just two years ago and gender segregation between unmarried men and women is still strictly enforced. Saudi Arabia’s male guardianship law requires women to obtain permission from a male for everything from registering for school to checking into a hospital. Any woman attending your performance will require permission from a man and will have to be accompanied to go there.

Mr. Payne, you are well known for speaking up about your support for women's rights. [You recently wrote](#) on Instagram that the legislation around abortion in Alabama is “completely taking away the rights of women and the ownership of the bodies that belong to them.” You [also expressed your solidarity](#) with the LGBTQ community.

If you move forward with this performance for a festival sponsored by the Crown Prince, you will be in league with the people who respond to freedom of expression and thought with murder.

Considering the information above, HRF believes that your participation in a performance sponsored by a murderous, repressive regime involved in gross human rights violations—especially of women and sexual minorities—would be highly unfortunate. Furthermore, it would be disastrous for a public figure of your standing who has articulated a commitment to education, women's rights, and social justice.

HRF asks you to urgently consider canceling your performance, scheduled for July 18, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. If you have any questions, you can contact me at (212) 246-8486 or by email at info@hrf.org.

Sincerely,



Thor Halvorssen
CEO and President
Human Rights Foundation