

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 26, 2020

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write to urge the State Department to increase its efforts to protect journalists around the world and hold accountable foreign leaders who seek to suppress the freedom of the press.

Recently, we marked the somber anniversary of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was brutally killed by agents of the Saudi government at its Consulate in Istanbul for openly criticizing that country's leadership. People across America were rightly appalled by the murder of Mr. Khashoggi – a U.S. resident and respected journalist – and the Saudi government's shifting explanations, inadequate cooperation with investigations, and use of authoritarian tactics to silence its critics. Further, our President repeatedly dismissed his own intelligence community's assessment. This response was not only unacceptable—it was also at odds with our values as a country.

Two years later, we have yet to see evidence that the State Department recognizes the fundamental importance of a free press. Just last month, the State Department Inspector General reported that the Administration revoked the Department's prestigious International Women of Courage Award to Jessikka Aro, a Finnish investigative journalist who faced death threats and harassment over her work exposing Russian propaganda efforts, because she authored social media posts critical of President Trump. Of particular concern is the State Department's role in initially misleading Congress and the public about the reasons for revoking Ms. Aro's award.

In recent years, countless journalists around the world have been threatened, imprisoned, beaten and even killed as they attempt to report the truth and hold their governments more accountable. On the anniversary of Mr. Khashoggi's murder, we pay special tribute to those brave journalists whose dogged pursuit of the truth never wavered in the face of these threats. Their legacy is proof that fear will not silence facts.

The United States is stronger and safer when our values – including defense of a free press – are protected at home and advanced as a central component of our foreign policy. We must make it clear that it is unacceptable to suppress, imprison, and violently target the press and that the United States will hold foreign governments who attempt to do so accountable.

Accordingly, we request answers to the following questions on what steps the State Department is taking to protect journalists at home and abroad:

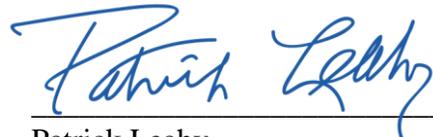
- Since the Administration sanctioned some of the people involved in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in November 2018, what additional steps has the Administration taken to hold accountable the Saudi leaders believed to have ordered his killing?
- Why did the State Department misrepresented its reasons for revoking the International Women of Courage award for Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro and what action have you taken as a result?
- What role does protecting press freedoms abroad play in the Department's efforts to counter foreign disinformation targeting Americans?
- What is the Department doing to stop foreign governments from using the coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic as an excuse for enacting emergency laws to restrict the press, limit public access to information, and suppress free speech?

We look forward to your response and to working with you to address this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



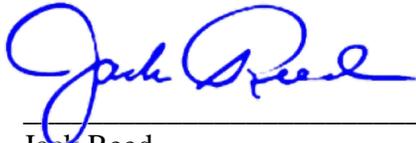
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Jeffery A. Merkley
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator