

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission



Briefing
on
Human Rights in Saudi Arabia: An Update

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FREEDOM NOW

Statement of Maran Turner
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Good morning. I'm Maran Turner, the Director of Freedom Now, a US-based organization that works to eliminate government repression. My organization has advocated for the release of political prisoners around the world and provides legal representation to Loujain al-Hathloul, whose sister is with us here today.

I want to thank Representatives McGovern and Smith and the Lantos Commission for organizing the event and for your dedication to sharing the truth about what is happening in Saudi Arabia. With Riyadh's hosting of the G20 less than two weeks away, this briefing will provide members of Congress, government officials, and the public with a better understanding of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and how the U.S. can pursue more constructive engagement in the next administration.

Saudi Arabia has earned considerable notoriety in recent years for its military campaign in Yemen, the shocking murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the systematic repression of its citizens from whom it accepts no criticism of its authority and no deviation from its policy.

Within the country, nearly every aspect of political and civil life is tightly controlled by authorities. Employing repressive laws and mass surveillance, the Saudi government has imprisoned thousands. Mohamed Al-Qahtani, Raif Badawi, and Waleed Abu Al-Khair are among those who symbolize imprisoned critics. Even members of the royal family have not been shielded. And Jamal Khashoggi is among many whose punishment for speaking out has been death. Dissent in Saudi Arabia is simply not permitted.

The government spends considerable money and energy to hide its systematic human rights abuses by showcasing reform, a supposed change in mindset spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But despite headline-grabbing announcements, repression is still the norm. In the lead up to the G20, Saudi Arabia has convened groups to highlight issues related to the role of women and civil society, while at the same time many women's activists are imprisoned and civil society space remains heavily restricted.

The whitewashing campaign has not gone unchallenged. Human rights organizations and activists, international media, and foreign governments have raised the volume on their criticisms of Saudi Arabia's hypocrisy. Policy makers in the U.S., the U.K., and the European Union called

on their governments to downgrade participation in the summit and some invitees for associated G20 events, like the mayors of New York and London declined. In Washington, Representatives Jan Schakowsky and Ilhan Omar led more than 40 of their colleagues in a letter earlier this month calling on Secretary of State Pompeo to boycott the G20 this year.

Today we will hear from a panel of five distinguished experts on Saudi Arabia, all of whom have considerable knowledge about the country and its abuses, and some of whom have first-hand experience with the regime. I will introduce each speaker when it's time for them to speak, and I ask the panelists to speak each for about five minutes so that we have some time for questions at the end.

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