



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing
Women's Human Rights Defenders in Saudi Arabia

Thursday, May 23, 2019
10:00 – 11:00 a.m.
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning and thank you for joining us today.

We are here to celebrate the courage and persistence of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia – especially those who defend the rights of women.

Just about a year ago, as the Saudi government under the supposedly “enlightened” leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman got ready to lift its ban on women drivers, authorities began an unprecedented crackdown on well-known women’s human rights defenders.

First they came for Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan and Aziza al-Yousef.

Then Nouf Abdelaziz and Mayaa al-Zahrani.

Then Hatoon al-Fassi.

Then Samar Badawi and Nassema al-Sadah.

What these women have in common is their history of advocating for basic freedoms that women here in the U.S. and in many parts of the world freely enjoy: the right to get into a car and drive. The right to obtain a passport, or travel abroad, or enroll in higher education, or marry. The fundamental right to live one’s life without having to ask permission from a male guardian.

The modest reforms that MBS put into place last year came after years of advocacy by these women and others like them. But he took the credit and threw the real heroines in jail.

The women activists were not the only human rights defenders subjected to arbitrary arrest last year by the Saudi government. Men who supported women's rights, businesspeople and reformist clerics were also targeted.

They joined others, like Raif Badawi, who have been imprisoned for years for exercising basic rights like freedom of expression.

In Raif's case, the government has gone after his whole family. Samar Badawi is his sister. Her former husband, Waleed Abu al-Khair, is also in prison, serving a 15-year sentence for his human rights work.

Long before the brutal assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi authorities were signaling very clearly that any peaceful dissent was intolerable to them. The Saudi government seems to be very afraid of its own people.

Today we will be privileged to hear from brave Saudi citizens who continue to fight for human rights in their homeland. I welcome them and thank them for coming here to share their stories, as difficult as that can be.

Our panelists' visit to Washington came about because PEN America conferred its annual *PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award* on three of the women imprisoned last year:

- journalist, blogger, and activist Nouf Abdulaziz,
- activist and social media commentator Loujain Al-Hathloul, and
- blogger, columnist, and activist Eman Al-Nafjan.

All had challenged the restrictive male guardianship system through their writing.

The PEN award is one piece of an advocacy campaign on the broader issue of Saudi censorship and repression, and the panelists are part of that effort.

I want to thank PEN America for their decision to recognize the Saudi women, for facilitating the presence of today's panelists – **and** for their support for accountability for the extrajudicial killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

I also welcome back to the Commission Sarah Leah Whitson of Human Rights Watch and Seth Binder of POMED. Their research and advocacy are indispensable and very much appreciated.

Last but not least, I want to recognize my fellow Members of Congress who serve as advocates for Saudi human rights defenders through the Commission's Defending Freedoms Project (DFP):

- Ro Khanna, who advocates for Waleed Abu al-Khair;
- Salud Carbajal for Dr. al-Fassi;
- Jackie Speier for Samar Badawi; and
- Joe Wilson for Aziza al-Yousef.

For other Members represented in the audience today who may be looking for ways to stand up for human rights in Saudi Arabia, I highly recommend taking up a defender's case through DFP. None of the three women honored by PEN have congressional advocates yet, and all three could use them.

Thanks again for being here. I turn now to Thomas Melia of PEN who will introduce the panelists and moderate the briefing.