



## Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

### Women's Human Rights Defenders in Saudi Arabia

#### Panel I



**Sarah Leah Whitson** is the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division, overseeing the work of the division in 19 countries. She has led dozens of advocacy and investigative missions throughout the region, focusing on issues of armed conflict, accountability, legal reform, migrant workers, and political rights. She has published widely on human rights issues in the Middle East in international and regional media, including *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Los Angeles Times*. She appears regularly on Al-Jazeera, BBC, NPR, and CNN. Before joining Human Rights Watch, Whitson worked in New York for Goldman, Sachs & Co. and Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley and Harvard Law School. Whitson is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She speaks Armenian and Arabic.



**Omaima al-Najjar** is a Saudi blogger and activist currently in political exile in Italy. She started writing about religious extremism and religious rights in 2010, shortly after studying with Freedom to Write recipient Eman Al-Nafjan at King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Science in Riyadh. Omaima [says](#) that Eman's teaching was an eye-opening experience for her; "Eman taught us the value of freedom of speech and tolerance, insisting that all of us - whether conservative or liberal - expressed our opinions openly." In 2011 when Omaima's blog was blocked by the Saudi government, Eman helped her share her campaign to have the blog unblocked, a campaign which ultimately succeeded. Omaima joined activists in their campaign against the driving ban and continues to speak out on Saudi women's human rights abuses and to advocate for the release of Eman and other imprisoned activists.



**Safa Al Ahmad** is a journalist and documentary filmmaker who has produced films on uprisings in the Middle East, most notably in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Her film “Saudi’s Secret Uprising,” produced for BBC, revealed the largely unreported protests in Eastern Saudi Arabia and the violence directed at protesters. After the release of the film, she was exposed to online harassment including threats of violence and has been warned not to return to Saudi Arabia. Safa was reporting on the ground in Yemen when she produced her films “The Fight for Yemen” and “Yemen Under Siege.”

The latter received two Emmy awards. Safa received the [2015 Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award](#) for Journalism, the [El Mundo award for journalism for her body of work in 2015](#), the [2015 Canadian Journalists for Free Expression International Press Freedom Award](#) and the Association of International Broadcasting Best International Investigation “Saudi's Secret Uprising” in 2014. She was twice a finalist for the [Rory Peck Sony Impact Award 2012-2014](#).



**Seth Binder** is the Advocacy Officer at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED). Previously, he served as the program manager and research associate at the Center for International Policy’s (CIP) Security Assistance Monitor program, where he focused on U.S. security assistance and arms sales policy. He has authored articles and publications on U.S. security assistance to Palestine, Yemen, and Tunisia and has been quoted in numerous outlets including *TIME*, Al-Jazeera, and *Foreign Policy*. Seth received his B.A. in History from Oberlin College and M.A. in International Relations from Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs where

he received certificates in Advanced Study in Middle Eastern Affairs and International Counterterrorism.

### Moderator



**Thomas O. Melia** is Washington Director of PEN America, an organization standing at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and around the world, and a monthly columnist for *The American Interest*. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Free Russia Foundation and chair of the board of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED).

Mr. Melia served as Assistant Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development for Europe and Eurasia from December 2015 to January 2017 and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Democracy and Labor from 2010 to 2015. In 2017 and 2018, he was a Fellow with the Human Freedom Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute where he helped lead a bipartisan effort to reaffirm core values of freedom, free markets, and liberal democracy in U.S. foreign policy. Previously Mr. Melia was Deputy Executive Director of Freedom House; Vice President for Programs at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs; and a legislative assistant to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY).