

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
Human Rights in Saudi Arabia: An Update

November 10, 2020 - 10:00 a.m.

Statement of Lina ALHATHLOUL

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, and distinguished members of the Commission - on behalf of the AlHathloul family, I'd like to thank you for organizing this briefing on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and to allow me to talk about the detention of my sister, Loujain AlHathloul, a prominent Saudi activist, and noted women's rights defender.

In May 2018, Loujain was arrested alongside a dozen human rights activists and held for 10 months without legal charges. Now Loujain is facing trial, but the worst could still come: Loujain could be sentenced for her peaceful activism and for fighting for women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

Before the recent changes in Saudi Arabia, women were not allowed to drive and were subjected to a complete guardianship system, under which a man controls nearly all aspect of a woman's life from her birth to her death.

This is the context in which Loujain began her campaign to reform Saudi Arabian society in 2013. Almost immediately she was pressured by the government to end her activism. She was first arrested in December 2014 after she tried to drive from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia. Loujain was arrested at the Saudi border and released after more than 70 days in prison and placed under a travel ban for several months. In September 2017, the Saudi government announced that the ban on women driving was going to be removed the following June. Loujain received a call before the announcement from an official in the royal court forbidding her from commenting or talking about the lift of the driving ban on social media, an order she had respected.

Loujain moved to the U.A.E. and enrolled into a master's degree in applied sociological research at Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi. But in March 2018, Loujain was pulled over by security officers while driving, forcibly put on a plane and transferred to a prison in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She was released after a few days but banned from traveling outside the kingdom and warned not to use social media. On May 15, 2018, Loujain was arrested and removed from her home without any warning or explanation. We hoped that Loujain would be released on June 24, the date that the Saudi Kingdom removed the ban on women driving. That glorious day arrived, and we were delighted to see Saudi women behind the wheel, but our sister was not freed.

In mid-August 2018, Loujain was transferred to Dhaban prison in Jeddah and our parents were allowed to visit her for the first time since her imprisonment. My parents saw that Loujain was

shaking uncontrollably, unable to hold her grip, unable to walk or sit normally. Our strong, resilient sister blamed it on the air-conditioning and tried to assure our parents that she would be fine.

After the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, we read reports claiming that several people detained by the Saudi government at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh had been tortured. Our parents visited Loujain at the Dhaban prison in December 2018. They asked her about the torture reports and she collapsed in tears. She said she had been tortured between May and August 2018, when she was not allowed any visitors. She had been held in solitary confinement, beaten, waterboarded, given electric shocks, sexually harassed and threatened with rape and murder. Our parents then saw that her thighs were blackened by bruises.

In March 2019, Loujain was finally given her official charges. The charges center around her activism, they include participating in international conferences to talk about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia, being in contact with journalists, and applying for a job at the UN.

In April 2019 the trial was postponed to February 2020, a period during which Loujain was held in solitary confinement. When the trial restarted in February, only 3 sessions took place, and there was no advancement in the trial. In March 2020, the last scheduled trial session was canceled and postponed to an indefinite date. There has been no trial session since, or notification from the courts on the trial process. Family visits to Loujain were forbidden from March until 31 August 2020. The Saudi authorities (state security) told our family it is due to the new organization due to COVID, which could have been understandable, but calls were also cut during that period as well.

On August 31, our parents were allowed to visit Loujain after 4 months of no communication. During that visit, Loujain told our family that she had to go on a 6 day hunger strike for the prison authorities to allow her to see and hear our parents' voices. After this visit, our parents had another visit on September 9 after which all contact was denied again, until October 26.

During this visit, Loujain announced to our parents that she will go on a second hunger strike as the prison is mistreating her, and denying her basic rights, mainly regular phone calls to her parents. We are deeply concerned that this hunger strike – now on its third week – will have a devastating impact on Loujain's already fragile health.

More than two and a half years have passed since Loujain was arrested in May 2018, and our sister is still indefinitely detained, her trial keeps being postponed, she is on a hunger strike, and Saudi authorities refuse to engage with us.

Since Loujain's initial arrest, we have tried every possible means to engage with the Saudi authorities directly, but we have only received the deafening sound of their silence. Therefore, we are seeking solidarity and help from the international community to help us save our sister, whose sole purported crime is being an activist and someone who has put her life in danger to defend Saudi women's rights.

Not only has it been nearly three years that Loujain is living an endless daily hell, but her imprisonment, and Saudi Arabia's new silence policy has affected my whole family. In fact, upon Loujain's return to the Middle-East and after being put under a travel ban in Saudi Arabia, my whole family was also punished for Loujain's activism, they have been put under an illegal

travel ban and remain under it till this day. When they question Saudi authorities about this ban, nobody can tell them where it comes from, and they even deny it at times.

Travel bans are extremely worrying in Saudi Arabia, as we see that the same modus operandi the state security has been applying: people are put on a travel ban and later, get arrested.

I have not seen my family in 3 years. I have graduated without having them beside me. My parents are deprived from being grand-parents. And most importantly, we all live in constant fear of reprisals and of my family's arrest. State security broke into our house once, they've brought people to convince my parents to deny the torture, they ignore us when we inquire about Loujain's health and conditions, and we get daily threats on social media.

But we won't remain silent. Silence is not the solution, and we are convinced that only speaking up will save my sister Loujain and all Human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia.

Respected co-chairs, we, the family of Loujain AlHathloul are grateful for the Lantos Commission convening this briefing to increase attention to Loujain's case and all the human rights abuses she has suffered.

We need the U.S. Congress to stand in solidarity with Loujain, let her know she has not been forgotten, encourage accountability for unjust treatment, and advocate for her immediate and unconditional release. We were heartened by the letter led by Representatives Jan Schakowsky and Ilhan Omar and signed by 45 Members of Congress that demanded the U.S. withdraw from the G20 summit unless its Saudi hosts address systemic women and human rights abuses. This was a welcome development, but we hope the U.S. Congress will take bigger, bolder steps to ensure Loujain and all victims of the Saudi regime will be reunited with their families soon.

Thank you again for your support.