

Remarks of Sarah Leah Whitson, Executive Director of Democracy for the Arab World Now, to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. Congress briefing on “Human Rights in Saudi Arabia,” November 10, 2020

Thank you to the Lantos Commission for organizing this critical and extremely timely briefing on Saudi Arabia’s human rights record. My colleagues have spoken about Saudi Arabia’s dismal human rights record. I will reflect on this record briefly before I turn to where I believe America’s own obligations lie.

What I find notable about Saudi Arabia’s human rights record is not its systematic, widespread repression of political and religious freedoms in the country, enforced not only by persecutions and long prison sentences against those who speak out, but also executions, kidnappings, murders, travel bans and hostage-taking of its own citizens that put it in the league of the worst abusers in the world.

And Saudi Arabia is not alone in carrying out violations of international humanitarian law in a war zone, in this case its war of choice in Yemen, where it has indiscriminately bombarded hospitals, schools, universities, factories, and homes, and subjected tens of millions of Yemeni civilians to an air, sea and land blockade that has caused untold suffering, starvation, and disease, killing over 100,000 Yemenis.

Sadly, the Middle East region is rife with abusive governments that terrorize not only their citizens but also peoples outside their countries.

What’s notable is the extent to which the United States has allowed itself to become an accomplice in Saudi Arabia’s crimes, aiding and abetting the war in Yemen as a direct participant -- for which both the Obama and Trump administrations have feared legal liability --, authorizing unprecedented levels of military sales, almost \$100 billion dollars over the past 13 years, making Saudi Arabia our number one weapons client in the world. We’ve done this with full knowledge of Saudi Arabia’s relentless war crimes, and provided it, to boot, with diplomatic cover at the United Nations to shield it from scrutiny and accountability. We’ve also provided Crown Prince MBS and the Saudi government political cover for its domestic human rights abuses, including the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

There may not be all that much the United States can do to end Saudi Arabia’s abuses; it is a sovereign country, albeit sadly ruled as an absolute monarchy with no voice for its own citizens. International organizations like the U.N. Human Rights Council and other legal and judicial efforts are the most appropriate mechanisms the U.S. should stand behind to insist on reforms.

But there's a lot the United States *can* do to end its own role in supporting and enabling this abusive government, and to uphold its own responsibility not to commit, or contribute to, human rights abuses.

The war in Yemen and US military sales and support to Saudi Arabia did not start under the Trump administration. Some senior Obama administration officials have acknowledged their mistake in supporting Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen as a concession for the Iran deal that Saudi Arabia was forced to tolerate. The Obama administration attempted, however feebly, to curb some arm sales in the waning months of its term, faced with so many deliberate attacks on civilians in Yemen and growing public outrage.

In defiance of the executive branch, Congress has refused to go along with support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. In rare moments of bipartisan consensus, Congress has voted twice under President Trump to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and U.S. support for the Yemen war. Sadly, President Trump vetoed both efforts, and stymied all efforts to curb arms sales. Instead, he doubled-down on his support for the impulsive, reckless and sadistic Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, boasting about "saving his ass" after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, refusing to sanction him though the Trump administration sanctioned low-level accomplices, and blocking the release of the Department of National Intelligence report on the crown prince's complicity in the murder.

The heartening news is that President-elect Joe Biden has clearly and unequivocally promised to end US military and diplomatic support for Saudi Arabia, as he has promised to reassess US interests in the region and ensure they align with American values and international human rights. I want to read his words from a presidential debate last year, because they are important and we intend to hold him to his promise:

"Yes...[I will punish senior Saudi leaders]. Khashoggi was murdered and dismembered, and I believe on the order of the Crown Prince [Mohamed bin Salman]. I would make it very clear. We are not going to sell more weapons to them [Saudi Arabia]. We were going to make them pay the price and make them in fact the pariah that they are. There is very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia. ... I would... end the subsidies that we have, end the sales of material to the Saudis, [who are] going in and murdering children [in Yemen], and murdering innocent people. And they should be held accountable."

We hope that President-elect Biden recognizes that military sales are only one part of American support for Saudi Arabia. The Trump administration's stationing of thousands of troops in Saudi Arabia directly contributes to the survival of the monarchy: as President Trump bragged, "They [the Saudi government] wouldn't last a week if we're not there, and they know it."

A Biden Administration should pull out of the business of propping up unelected governments, in this case an unaccountable monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Emboldened by unconditional US backing, the Saudi regime has committed human rights abuses with impunity, including the ongoing detention of peaceful political activists, such as Salman Alodah and Walid Abulkhair, as well as senior royal princes who might criticize Crown Prince MBS, including former Crown Prince Mohamed bin Nayef, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, and his brother Turki bin Abdullah.

U.S. backing has also emboldened Saudi Arabia's destabilizing regional belligerence. This is all the more frightening in the face of existing Saudi efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Restoring a nuclear agreement with Iran and encouraging regional dialogue for peaceful conflict resolution with its neighbors, both of which Biden has promised to do, will not be aided by the continued presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia.

Holding Saudi Arabia, and specifically the Crown Prince, accountable for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, is an important goal that President-elect Biden has promised. He can readily contribute to this with the stroke of a pen, ordering the public release of the DNI report. This will help the efforts of my own organization, DAWN, as well as Khashoggi's widow, Hatice Cengiz, to hold MBS and his henchmen accountable in a court of law for luring a US-resident journalist outside of the United States in order to murder him.

President-elect Biden's stated goal of reassessing our relationship not just with Saudi Arabia, but with other abusive governments in the region, including Egypt, to better align with our values and human rights commitments is encouraging. The US is not responsible for fixing all that is wrong in Saudi Arabia or any other country in the world. Too much has gone catastrophically wrong with misguided, often false, interventions in the Middle East in the name of human rights.

A Biden administration can, and should, lead our government to exercise humility and restraint in its relationships around the world, and rejoin the multilateral organizations on which our collective survival depends. This also means ending US abuses, including support of abusive governments like Saudi Arabia, as an important measure of our humility, restraint, and respect for the peoples around the world our policies impact.