

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
Human Rights in Saudi Arabia

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

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In 2018, just weeks before ordering the detention of dozens of women’s rights activists, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman toured the United States, meeting with politicians, celebrities, and business executives. He was praised as a “reformer” despite having already ordered an extra-judicial shakedown of Saudi businessmen, entered into a war in Yemen—which had already led to mass civilian casualties and other well-documented human rights violations—and consolidated an unprecedented amount of power.

The crown prince has committed gross human rights abuses inside and outside the kingdom, targeting anyone perceived to be a critic of his rule. His disregard for the rule of law and internationally recognized human rights and norms, and his reckless decision-making have affected regional stability and the human rights of Saudis, Yemenis, Americans, and many others.

It was not until October 2018, with the brutal murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, that U.S. elites were forced to reckon with the crown

prince's brazen and repressive tactics for ruling and maintaining power. Unfortunately, the current administration has maintained its full, unconditional support for this regime. Instead of pushing back, the Trump administration has emboldened the kingdom's human rights abuses, even ignoring U.S. law in its efforts to protect the crown prince.

Although, in 2018, all 100 members of the Senate approved a resolution stating directly that "Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is responsible for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi," the administration shielded him from accountability for the murder, as President Trump openly boasted to journalist Bob Woodward. The president also continued supporting the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, which included issuing a legally dubious and rarely used emergency waiver to push through billions of dollars in arms sales. He also vetoed a number of unprecedented congressional resolutions that would have blocked arms sales and ended U.S. support for the war. He even downplayed a terrorist attack inside a U.S. naval base carried out by a Saudi military officer who was receiving military training inside the United States.

Congress, on the other hand, has continued to pressure the Saudi regime, repeatedly pressing the kingdom to address its human rights abuses. In addition to groundbreaking bipartisan bills that were blocked by presidential veto, Congress has passed legislation that required the president to release a report that identifies those responsible for the murder of Khashoggi, held critical hearings and briefings (like this one), and continued to speak out in opposition to the detention of Saudi women's rights defenders and other human rights abuses. They have also introduced important legislation to protect Saudi dissidents and

journalists, and to reform the arms sales process to strengthen Congress' hand in export decisions, among others.

Congress has been limited in its effectiveness, hindered by structural limitations and power it has ceded to the executive branch, coupled with this administration's complete embrace of the crown prince. With a new administration taking office in January next year, however, both Congress and the Biden administration have an opportunity to realign and restructure the relationship to elevate human rights as a national security interest of the United States.

Saudi Arabia remains an important country—with its influence on oil markets, counterterrorism support, and other regional interests—but the new administration should not continue to ignore Saudi abuses at home and abroad that are driving regional instability, undermining U.S. interests, and infringing on the basic rights of Saudis. Continued U.S. support for the crown prince and his regime, in the absence of significant reforms and changes in behavior, not only risks providing the kingdom with the capabilities to take actions in opposition to U.S. interests and values, it gives tacit approval to the crimes of the Saudi regime.

## **Recommendations**

The new Biden administration should follow through on its campaign promise to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, and should extend that promise to include the suspension of all U.S. arms transfers to the coalition. It should also take steps to secure accountability for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi by releasing the

intelligence report the Trump administration classified, sanctioning any individuals in the report identified as responsible for the crime who are not already sanctioned, expelling a number of Saudi diplomats given their abuse of diplomatic facilities, and refusing to hold high-level meetings with Saudi officials.

The administration should use the leverage gained by taking these steps to secure meaningful concessions from the Saudi government, including:

1. Releasing and exonerating all human rights defenders, bloggers, journalists, and civil society activists, including the women's rights activists arrested in May 2018;
2. Abolishing the male guardianship and kafala systems;
3. Adhering to the UN Convention against Torture;
4. Ending the blockade of Qatar;
5. Halting the punishment and harassment of peaceful critics, and permitting freedom of expression within the political sphere; and
6. Ceasing all enforced repatriations, disappearances, arrests, and travel bans on individuals perceived as oppositional to the regime.

Congress can help strengthen the U.S. position by following through on legislation it has introduced over the last few years. In particular, Congress should pass:

1. Representative Connolly's "Protection of Saudi Dissidents Act";
2. Representative Schiff's "Jamal Khashoggi Press Freedom Accountability Act";
3. Senator Murphy and Senator Young's resolution requesting information on Saudi Arabia's human rights practices in Yemen; and

4. Arms sales reform largely introduced as a result of Congress' inability—despite majorities in both chambers—to stop sales to Saudi Arabia. These could include Senator Murray's "Values in Arms Export Act"; Senators Menendez, Leahy, and Kaine's "Safeguarding Human Rights in Arms Exports"; Representative Omar's "Stop Arming Human Rights Abusers Act"; or revitalizing former Senator Biden's arms proposal that would require congressional authorization for arms sales rather than a veto-proof majority to prohibit a sale.

Some argue that creating greater distance in the relationship with Saudi Arabia would result in instability within the kingdom and the wider region. This view, however, overlooks the destabilizing effects of the crown prince's authoritarian, one-man rule and reckless foreign policy. The new administration and Congress must impart some consequences for the kingdom's actions in order to rightsize the relationship. By using its leverage and securing significant reforms, the United States can begin to take steps to return to a positive, mutually beneficial relationship with Saudi Arabia.