

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
Human Rights in Saudi Arabia

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Thank you to everyone on the panel for their incredible work for justice in Saudi Arabia, and for my colleagues at Freedom Forward, the Freedom Initiative and the Saudi American Justice Project for their incredible and tireless dedication to justice in Saudi Arabia.

So many of our brave colleagues in Saudi have been wrongfully detained, harassed, tortured, silenced and even murdered for trying to speak, and others on the ground risk their lives to speak the truth, so thank you for this platform to speak on the realities on the ground. This conversation is important now more than ever, as the Saudi government has poured millions of dollars into propagating globally that it is a country in the process of meaningful reform. This misinformation has fogged the reality on the ground in a dangerous way, which has literally cost people their lives. The repressive male guardianship system and the foreign sponsorship system or “kafala” system in Saudi Arabia are entrapping women and children from all around the world and subjecting them to extreme violence, abuse, and trafficking, including U.S. citizen women and children.

In 2019, the Saudi government announced cosmetic “reforms” to the male guardianship system, which applied to a privileged group of Saudi women, and left the disadvantaged exactly where they were prior. It was enough to be applauded around the world by individuals who didn’t understand that women’s rights defenders were sitting in prison cells, that “disobedience” to a male guardian or husband is still punishable under the law, and therefore, even a woman who allegedly had the right to drive or travel, could not drive if her husband told her not to.

Similarly, Last week the Saudi government announced reforms to the discriminatory foreign sponsorship system or “kafala” system – where every foreign resident in Saudi Arabia is required to be under the sponsorship of an employer or spouse. In the same way, the reforms applied only to private sector employees – who were largely Western, upper middle-class, and unimpacted prior by these issues. The Saudi ministry of labor and social development specifically announced that the reforms would not apply to personal drivers, domestic workers, farmers, shepherds, and security guards – nor would it apply to spouses of residents. The application of this “reform” to a select minority of privileged workers in Saudi Arabia while maintaining the racist, classist, and sexist status quo for the most disadvantaged, abused, and vulnerable in society is unacceptable, and yet another demonstration that Saudi Arabia is making reforms not with human beings or human rights at the center – but instead with the intent whitewashing human rights abuses and fooling the international community into investing.

I stand before you today, not only having personally witnessed unspeakable horrors on the ground in Saudi Arabia for nearly a decade while conducting my doctoral human rights research, but eventually, as someone who was entrapped, for a time, against my will. I was wrongfully held in the country with my daughter, who is a dual U.S. and Saudi citizen, under the country’s repressive Kafala and male guardianship systems. These systems are merely a glance into the systemic and violent discrimination within the Saudi judiciary. In July of 2019, I was stripped of custody in courts for being “too American” to parent, the Saudi judge wrote in the court record, that my 4-year-old child needed to be protected from my American culture and traditions. Evidence of abuse was ignored. In 2019, I had several baseless arrest warrants, was given a 10-year-travel ban, faced criminal charges for violating dress code, all without due process or chance to defend myself. The Saudi government failed to protect my child from abuse, neglect, and manipulation. The Saudi judiciary in collaboration with the Saudi Human Rights Commission, violated its own due process laws, derailed my rightfully filed appeal, and forced me to reconcile with my abuser, to degrade myself and my body, and re-expose my child to a toxic and abusive environment – I had to beg the male guardian of my child to let us out. My case is not unique, nor is it even as severe as others. Last weeks reforms would have translated into no difference in our case.

My daughter and I, against all odds, returned to my home state of Washington in December of 2019, where we have been granted temporary emergency jurisdiction from the courts, but we are still fighting the possibility of being forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia in Washington State now. In February of 2020, I founded the Saudi American

Justice Project with another Saudi/American mother who faced the same violations. Dozens of women started reaching out to us from around the world, who had been subject to rape, repeat abuse, the kidnapping of their children to Saudi, where the male guardianship laws protect Saudi fathers who kidnap their children. 43 of the cases that I've worked on were of U.S. citizen mothers and their children, and this is only a small glimpse into a problem that has span for generations and continues today. Today, a constituent of Representative Bishop and Senator Romney, Kaytlin and her baby girl Aria, both U.S. citizens, were trafficked and held in Saudi Arabia by their father. Instead of being offered protection from this man who gave her stiches, subject her to marital rape which is not a crime in Saudi Arabia, and threatened her life on several occasions - they detained her and are refusing to let her leave a police unit, until her abuser, her husband, gives permission for them to leave. Kaytlin and Aria, and so many others are not protected by these reforms.

In 2018 I met a Filipina Woman at her embassy in Riyadh. She came into Saudi Arabia as a domestic helper. She had been repeatedly raped by her sponsors 16-year-old son. When she went to the police to report it, they called her sponsor to pick her up, and she was beaten when she returned home. When she became pregnant, due to her faith, she declined to have an illegal abortion when her sponsor asked her to. They forced her, and held her down while a coat hanger was shoved violently inside her body. When that failed to cause an abortion, the family decided to lock her up inside the house until she gave birth, take the child, and have her deported. She didn't know if her baby was killed, or if it was taken and raised as someone else's. She would not be protected by the reforms to the kafala system announced last week.

These are only a few examples. The population that is suffering will continue to suffer. The Saudi government has failed to protect both it's own citizens as well as non-Saudis, women, religious minorities, and children from extreme discrimination, violence abuse, and even murder.

I am so grateful to everyone in congress who have passed legislation and taken action for justice in Saudi Arabia. However, sometimes even as constituents are literally being raped and trafficked to Saudi Arabia, I still hear, "Saudi is our friend and strategic ally in the war against Iran". A friend does not kidnap our children, or violently abuse and rape our women. A friend does not spit in our face and say that we are unfit to be parents, then turn around and beg us to place our military at risk to protect them, a friend does not make us complicit in war crimes in Yemen which will now destabilize the entire region for years to come, a friend does not ask a sitting president to "save their ass" from accountability for dismembering a human being and lawful resident of the United States in a diplomatic facility.

The only solution to is an aggressive and just foreign policy which places human rights at the forefront; not weapons sales, not business interests, but human beings. We must finally use the immense leverage that we do have as the global superpower, to ensure that we are putting human rights at the forefront of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.