



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Human Rights in Saudi Arabia: An Update

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As prepared for delivery

Good morning and thank you for joining us today for this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission briefing on human rights in Saudi Arabia.

In less than two weeks, on November 21 and 22, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will host world leaders for the annual G20 summit. The theme of this year's summit is "Realizing Opportunities of the 21st Century for All." In late October, in preparation for the G20, the Saudis hosted the W20 Women's Summit.

Hosting events like these is part of Mohammed bin Salman's strategy to improve his country's international image and persuade the world that he is a reformer. That is the message we've been getting from the Saudi government and its lobbyists since MBS was appointed Crown Prince in 2015.

Yesterday the Saudi embassy sent us a pamphlet that lists the "human rights reforms" decreed since that year.

The list includes measures that all of us surely welcome, like the abolition of the death penalty for minors and the "effective elimination of flogging as a criminal punishment."

It also includes the decisions to permit women to drive and to travel abroad without male consent, and an easing of restrictions on public dress. Again, we can agree that these are good steps that likely improve some women's lives.

But these apparent reforms do not provide individual Saudi citizens – men or women – with any guarantees when it comes to the exercise of their human rights.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a religious monarchy that rules by decree. The royal family makes the laws and controls the institutions that enforce them. They are in control. All that really matters is what they will tolerate and how they decide to wield their discretion.

That is why Raif Badawi's original sentence of 7 years and 600 lashes for blogging was increased to 10 years and 1000 lashes after he dared to appeal.

It is also why he has only been forced to endure 50 of those thousand lashes so far, a merciful reprieve that I hope with all my heart will continue.

It's why the decision to permit women to drive went hand-in-hand with throwing the courageous women who advocated for that change in jail – among them Loujain al-Hathloul, whose sister Lina is with us today.

It's why Jamal Khashoggi could be ordered killed in the government's own consulate, and it's why those who ordered his barbaric murder have escaped all accountability.

Rule of law and human rights protections do not operate in Saudi Arabia – and those who advocate for them put themselves at risk.

During the last five years – the same years that the Saudi government has been promulgating the “reforms” it would like all of us to focus on – the opportunities for expressing dissent within the Kingdom have been progressively closed down.

Since 2017 the Saudi government has intensified its pursuit at home and abroad of those who criticize its policies. Authorities have detained activists, clerics, Islamic figures and journalists from across the political spectrum – not to mention the dozens of wealthy individuals who were rounded up and kept in the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh for months as part of a supposed anticorruption campaign.

And as you will hear today, increasingly the government is pursuing its opponents outside its borders.

Enough is enough.

The Saudi human rights record has not improved; it has gotten worse.

For me, Jamal's murder was the last straw that motivated me to introduce [H.R. 643](#), which stops all U.S. arms sales and transfers to Saudi Arabia.

By the end of the briefing this morning I believe you'll understand why the bill is necessary.

Let me turn now to Maran Turner, Executive Director of Freedom Now, who will moderate this briefing.