

She Wanted to Drive, So Saudi Arabia's Ruler Imprisoned and Tortured Her

The U.S. should pressure Saudis to respect the human rights of outspoken women.

Jan. 26, 2019

Loujain al-Hathloul in London in 2017. Nina Manandhar





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Remember this name: Loujain (pronounced Loo-JAYNE) al-Hathloul. She is 29 years old and a courageous advocate for gender equality — so she is in a Saudi Arabian prison, and reportedly our Saudi allies have tortured her, even waterboarded her.

There has properly been global outrage at Saudi Arabia's murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a columnist for The Washington Post and resident of Virginia. Jamal was a friend of mine, and I find it infuriating that President Trump and other officials won't hold Saudi Arabia accountable for killing and dismembering him.

Still, we can't bring him back. So let's direct equal attention to those still alive — like Hathloul, along with nine other women's rights activists who are also in custody, including some who say they have endured torture.

Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Jared Kushner bet big on the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, but they were bamboozled. M.B.S. isn't a great reformer, and he isn't coming clean about Khashoggi's murder.

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Nor is he releasing Hathloul, who, along with others, had peacefully and persistently campaigned for years to allow women the right to drive.

In 2014, she was arrested when she tried to drive into Saudi Arabia with a driver's license from the United Arab Emirates, nominally valid also in Saudi Arabia. Then in 2015, Hathloul was one of the first women to run for a seat on a municipal council. (She lost.)

Loujain al-Hathloul recorded a video in 2014 showing her driving in the United Arab Emirates toward the border with Saudi Arabia. Loujain al-Hathloul, via Associated Press



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She moved to the emirates. But in 2017, Saudi security forces [effectively kidnapped](#) her and her husband and returned them to the kingdom. The couple have divorced, and while accounts differ, some believe this is because of pressure the government placed on the husband.

Shortly before women were allowed to drive last June, the government rearrested Hathloul, along with other women's rights activists who had fought for the right the government was about to grant.

“She said she had been held in solitary confinement, beaten, waterboarded, given electric shocks, sexually harassed and threatened with rape and murder,” her sister, Alia al-Hathloul, who lives in Belgium, wrote in [a searing Op-Ed](#) in The Times this month, recounting what Loujain had told their parents when they saw her. “My parents then saw that her thighs were blackened by bruises.”

Despite being threatened with rape and murder and having her body thrown into the sewage system, Hathloul would not stay silent and reported the torture to her parents.

Her sister said Loujain was “shaking uncontrollably, unable to hold her grip, to walk or sit normally.”

The other imprisoned women suffered similar treatment, according to Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and their families. They were said to have been subjected to electric shocks, whippings, forced kissing and hugging, threats of rape and more. Some were tied to a metal bed and flogged.

“Loujain’s abuse exemplifies the methods of Saudi thuggish and lawless leadership, hellbent on exacting sadistic vengeance against any citizen who dares to think freely,” Sarah Leah Whitson of Human Rights Watch told me. “The Saudi people owe a huge debt to Loujain.”

A government spokesman did not respond to my inquiries about why Hathloul was imprisoned and tortured. A pro-government newspaper did suggest that Hathloul is a traitor who could even deserve to be executed.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has stepped up the pace of executions, with about [150 reported](#) last year. Apparently for the first time, prosecutors have sought the death penalty for a woman who is a nonviolent human rights defender, Israa al-Ghomgham.

Trump is right that Saudi Arabia is an important ally. That’s why it’s important that it have a decent, modernizing leader, rather than one who feuds with neighbors, kidnaps Lebanon’s prime minister, invades Yemen, murders a journalist and tortures outspoken women.

Saudi politics are murky, but there are whispers that the crown prince will not necessarily be elevated to king on the death of his father. Yet Trump, Pompeo and Kushner are acting as M.B.S.’s protectors and backers — so

the world could be stuck with M.B.S. as a destabilizing and oppressive ruler for the next half century.

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America doesn't have much leverage to improve human rights in countries like China, Venezuela or Iran. But we have enormous leverage over Saudi Arabia, because it depends on us for its security. Yet Trump, Pompeo and Kushner refuse to use that leverage.

I can't find any indication that any official in the Trump administration has even publicly mentioned Hathloul's name or called for her release. So I hope Congress will step up, oversee the relationship and ask tough questions about why we are silent when our close ally waterboards a woman seeking equal rights.

Saudi Arabia will never live up to its potential as long as it treats women as second-class citizens. What's at stake is not only justice but also stability, economic development and peace in the region.

Thus I urge the Nobel Peace Prize committee to consider selecting Hathloul this year.

Nicholas Kristof has been a columnist for The Times since 2001. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for his coverage of China and of the genocide in Darfur. You can sign up for his free, twice-weekly [email newsletter](#) and follow him on [Instagram](#). [@NickKristof](#) • [Facebook](#)