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The Saudi kingdom of terror

by [Jackson Diehl](#)

Saudi women's rights activist Malak al-Shehri fled to the United States a year ago amid a wave of arrests of other women who had advocated the right to drive. After the murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last October, it emerged that some of those women had been held in secret prisons and [brutally tortured](#). In the wave of international outrage that followed, a big question in Washington was whether Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who likely ordered both operations, would respond to Western entreaties to rein in his thugs.

The past month has brought a decisive answer: no way. On April 4, Shehri's husband, Ayman al-Drees, [was arrested on the couple's farm](#) in Saudi Arabia, among at least 14 other people with ties to one of the imprisoned activists. The new detainees have been held without charge and have been allowed only one phone call to their families. Their condition is unknown.

That's not the only message MBS, as the crown prince is known, has sent to his domestic and foreign critics. On April 25, Norway's security service [notified Iyad el-Baghdadi](#), a close collaborator of Khashoggi who lives in Oslo, that he was the target of a threat from the Saudi government. And on May 16, Saudi planes once again [bombed civilian targets](#) in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, killing seven people, including at least four children. That attack came weeks after Congress passed — and President Trump [vetoed](#) — legislation that would have ended all U.S. support for Saudi forces in Yemen.

Shehri was [arrested in 2016 for posting a picture of herself](#) without a head covering on social media. She was released after outsiders protested. But times, she says, have changed. Then, the Saudi leadership was sensitive to Western public opinion. Now, she says, "I don't think they care anymore, because they think Trump is supporting them."

Shehri and several other exiled Saudi activists were in Washington last week attempting to change MBS's calculus. Like Iraq's Saddam Hussein before him, the Saudi ruler is betting that he faces no serious risk of U.S. punishment for perpetuating his brutality, whether it is the torture of peaceful feminist activists or the bombing of schoolchildren in Yemen. And why not? Trump doubled down on his support for the regime after the murder of Khashoggi. And Congress, despite expressions of outrage, has failed to coalesce around meaningful sanctions that could evade a Trump veto.

Envoys from Congress have been telling MBS for months that he must release political prisoners and settle the war in Yemen, or face another push for U.S. legislation. The only visible result has been the [provisional release of eight of the female activists](#) arrested last year. It's a highly conditional gesture: The women remain on trial in a Riyadh court and are constrained from speaking publicly. And several of the best-known activists, including Samar Badawi and Loujain al-Hathloul, remain imprisoned.

It's not hard to guess why Hathloul is still behind bars. Her family, including brother Walid and sister Lina, have been [outspoken on her behalf](#), including about the torture she says she endured: waterboarding, beatings, electric shocks and sexual harassment. "They are saying, 'Because you guys are speaking out, Loujain is not going to be released,' " says Walid al-Hathloul. It's a way of ensuring that other families remain silent about arrests and mistreatment of activists.

Thanks to such tactics, Saudi activists and human rights groups have been unable to determine how many political detentions have occurred since MBS came to power. Including religious opponents of the regime and members of the royal family, the total could number in the thousands, says Safa al-Ahmad, a filmmaker who has documented Saudi repression.

"Many families keep quiet" about arrests, she said. "The fear is palpable. We are afraid to directly contact people on the ground, because talking to us is a crime." She is not exaggerating: Among the [charges faced by Loujain al-Hathloul](#) is communicating with foreign journalists and Human Rights Watch.

The relative good news is that many in Congress remain fixed on the problem of MBS, who they understand is capable of single-handedly destroying the 75-year-old U.S.-Saudi alliance. The Saudi activists were widely received on Capitol Hill, including by senior Republicans. Legislation is still possible: Sen. James E. Risch (R-Idaho), the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, has been working on a bill that could subject the Saudi elite to visa restrictions until political prisoners are released.

The bad news is that the crown prince is evidently not taking the threat of congressional action seriously. Which means that unless he is proved wrong, Saudis advocating women's rights and other liberal reforms are likely to remain at risk both at home and abroad.