

Saudi Arabia's Other War. At War Against Its Own People

At War against Its Own People

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The Saudi war on Yemen has understandably come to dominate the headlines since it began in late March 2015. The international scope of the conflict – nominally including the participation of nearly a dozen Gulf countries – coupled with the obvious political and geopolitical implications, all but assured that nearly all mention of Saudi Arabia in the news would be in the context of this war. However, there is another war being waged by Saudi Arabia, this one entirely within its own borders.

While Riyadh viciously, and illegally, bombs the people of Yemen, it also continues to wage a brutal war of repression against its own Shia population. A significant minority inside Saudi Arabia, the Shia community has been repeatedly victimized by the heavy-handed, often murderous, tactics of Saudi security forces in a desperate attempt by the House of Saud to maintain its iron grip on power. Rather than being challenged to democratize and respect the rights of a minority, the Saudi government has chosen violence, intimidation, and imprisonment to silence the growing chorus of opposition.

Were it only the Shia minority being targeted however, this overt repression might be crudely caricatured as sectarian conflict within the context of “Iranian influence” on Saudi domestic politics; Iran being the bogeyman trotted out by Riyadh to justify nearly all of its criminal and immoral actions, from financing terror groups waging war on Syria to the bombardment of the people of Yemen. However, the Saudi government is also targeting bloggers, journalists, and activists who, despite their small numbers in the oppressive kingdom, have become prominent defenders of human rights, symbolizing an attempt, fruitless though it may be, to democratize and bring some semblance of social justice to the entirely undemocratic monarchy.

At War Against Its Own People

It is a well understood fact, almost universally recognized, that Saudi Arabia is one of the principal instigators of sectarianism throughout the Muslim world. Using a “divide and conquer” strategy that has worked with insidious perfection in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, Saudi Arabia has managed to flex its geopolitical muscles and project its power without much threat to its own internal stability. However, there is increasingly a Shia movement within Saudi Arabia – we should not call it “sectarian” as it is about equality under the law – demanding its rights and legal protections that are undeniably incompatible with the absolutist, monarchical system that Saudi Arabia has erected.

Recent days have seen violent raids and clashes between Saudi security forces and

residents throughout the overwhelmingly Shia Qatif province of Eastern Saudi Arabia, the most violent of which having taken place in the town of Awamiyah. In response to protests against Riyadh's war on Yemen, the regime's security forces unleashed a brutal crackdown that perhaps most accurately could be called violent suppression. As one activist and resident of Awamiyah told the [Middle East Eye](#), *"From 4pm until 9pm the gunfire didn't stop... Security forces shot randomly at people's homes, and closed all but one of the roads leading in and out of the village... It is like a war here – we are under siege."* A number of [videos](#) uploaded to YouTube seem to confirm the accounts of activists, though all eyewitness accounts remain anonymous for fear of government retribution.

Such actions as those described by activists in Awamiyah, and throughout Qatif, are nothing new. Over the last few years, the province has repeatedly seen upsurges of [protests](#) against the draconian policies of the government in Riyadh. Beginning in 2011, in concert with protests in [Bahrain](#), Qatif became a hotbed of activism with increasingly significant demonstrations shaking the social foundations of the region, and rattling nerves in Riyadh which, with some justification, interpreted the growing democracy movement as a threat to its totalitarian control over the country. Responding to the "threat," the Saudi government repeatedly unleashed its security forces to violently suppress the demonstrations, resulting in a number of [deaths](#); the total remains unknown to this day as Saudi Arabia tightly controls the flow of such sensitive information.

Of course, these actions by the Saudi regime cannot be seen in a vacuum. Rather, they must be understood within the larger context of the events of the 2011 uprising, and ongoing resistance movement, in neighboring Bahrain. Long a vassal state of Saudi Arabia, the majority Shia Bahrain has been ruled by the al-Khalifa family, a Sunni dynasty that for years has lorded over the country in the interests of their patrons and protectors in Saudi Arabia. When in 2011, much of the country erupted in protests against the totalitarian Khalifa regime, it was Saudi Arabia which [militarily intervened](#) on behalf of their proxies.

Despite being the leading edge of what would come to be known as the "Arab Spring," the uprising in Bahrain was largely forgotten amid the far more catastrophic events in Libya and Syria. Naturally, it should be noted that Saudi Arabia played a central in sponsoring both of those conflicts, as protests were transmogrified into terrorist wars backed by Saudi money and jihadi networks. In the midst of the regional instability, Saudi intervention in Bahrain became, conveniently enough for Riyadh, "lost in the shuffle." So, while the world hemmed and hawed about "dictators" in Libya and Syria, and marshaled political, diplomatic, and military forces to bring regime change to both, the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia continued to prop up its proxies in Bahrain, while suppressing the uprisings at home.

But while many would claim that Saudi actions are dictated not by authoritarianism but a continuing geopolitical struggle with Shia Iran, such arguments seem frivolous when considering the repression of freedom of speech within Saudi Arabia.

It is not sectarianism and "Iranian meddling" that has caused the Saudi regime to convict [Raif Badawi](#), a liberal blogger and independent journalist, for the crime of "insulting Islam" for daring to question the draconian laws enforced by the reactionary monarchy and its police state apparatus. Not only was Badawi [sentenced](#) to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes, he was also originally tried on the absurd charge of "apostasy" which could have carried a death sentence. Indeed, though these charges were thrown out, [reports](#) have emerged in recent months that the apostasy charge may be brought back in a second trial;

the punishment for a conviction would be beheading. So, physical abuse, long-term imprisonment, and a possible death sentence for a blogger who had the temerity to voice his opinion about political and social issues. And this country has the gall to intervene in Yemen on behalf of “democracy”?

Speaking of death sentences handed down by Saudi authorities for publicly airing one’s beliefs, the case of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr also highlights the deeply unjust policies of the regime. A vocal supporter of the Qatif protests, Nimr was [convicted](#) of the crime of “disobeying” the Saudi government by seeking “foreign meddling” in the country. An obvious reference to the ever-present bogeyman of Iran, the spurious charges have been widely interpreted as an attempt to silence a major critic of the regime, one who has the support of the significant Shia minority. Saudi courts have sentenced Nimr to death for the “crime” of supporting the protests seeking democratization and a respect for minority rights. That decision was appealed, and last month a Saudi court [upheld](#) the death sentence.

While the House of Saud might peddle its propaganda of Iranian meddling with regard to Sheikh Nimr with some success, what of Badawi? Is he also an “agent” working on behalf of Iran? What of the [estimated](#) 12,000-30,000 political prisoners held in Saudi jails under very dubious pretexts?

Rights? What Rights?

The Saudi regime attempts to frame all of its blatant human rights abuses in the context of legitimate law enforcement. But this is a poorly conceived illusion, and cruel insult to the very concept of human rights. While the Saudis attempt to lecture countries like Syria about “human rights” and treatment of the people, Saudi Arabia remains perhaps the world leader in systematic and institutional oppression of its own citizens.

The infamous repression of women in Saudi Arabia has earned the country international scorn, but the regime scoffs at such conclusions. As the Washington Post [wrote](#) in 2013:

Saudi Arabia’s restrictions on women go far, far beyond just driving, though. It’s part of a larger system of customs and laws that make women heavily reliant on men for their basic, day-to-day survival... each Saudi woman has a “male guardian,” typically their father or brother or husband, who has the same sort of legal power over her that a parent has over a child. She needs his formal permission to travel, work, go to school or get medical treatment. She’s also dependent on him for everything: money, housing, and, because the driving ban means she needs a driver to go anywhere, even the ability to go to the store or visit a friend... The restrictions go beyond the law: women are often taught from an early age to approach the world outside their male guardian’s home with fear and shame...[they are] warned against the “dangers that threaten the Muslim woman,” such as listening to music, going to a mixed-gender mall or answering the telephone.

It takes an unfathomable degree of hypocrisy to oppress women in this way, and then lecture Syria – a secular socialist country where women’s rights and freedoms are guaranteed, and where women have every educational and professional opportunity they might have in the West – about its treatment of its citizens. It is staggering the gall required of an unelected feudal monarchy to chastise the Yemeni rebels, and make a case for “legitimacy” in government.

Naturally, Saudi Arabia gets away with such egregious hypocrisy not because it isn't obvious to the world, it most certainly is. Instead, the House of Saud is able to carry on its repression because of its powerful patron in Washington. Because the regime has for decades furthered the geopolitical agenda of the United States, it has managed to continue its brutal repression facing only minimal outcry. Though there is scrutiny from international human rights organizations, the government is not sanctioned; it is not isolated by the much touted "international community." Instead it continues on with its oppressive policies and aggression against its neighbors.

Saudi bombs are falling on Yemen as you read this. Saudi-sponsored ISIS terrorists are waging war on Syria and Iraq as you read this. Saudi-sponsored terror groups all over the Middle East and Africa continue to destabilize whole corners of the globe. Activists in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia itself are being brutally oppressed by the Saudi regime and its proxies.

And yet, the House of Saud remains a US ally, while Assad or the Houthis or Iran or Hezbollah (take your pick) are the great villain? It is plainly obvious that right and wrong, good and evil, are mere designations of political expediency for Saudi Arabia and, taken more broadly, the US and the imperial system it leads.

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