

Saudi Arabia cracks down on protesters

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Saudi Arabian security forces cracked down on demonstrators in the country's Eastern Province Tuesday. The protest, near the coastal city of Qatif, appears to have been in response to a raid by Saudi security forces on Monday, in which two local men were abducted from their homes.

The men, both in their seventies, were seized by police in the Qatif suburb of Al-Awamiya. There are reports that they are being held in an effort to force their sons, who are accused of taking part in earlier anti-government protests, to give themselves up to the authorities.

Human rights groups and journalists reported that scores of masked protesters clashed with police in Al-Awamiya in the hours after the arrest of the elderly men.

A video posted on YouTube shows a large group of masked demonstrators in Al-Awamiya chanting, "Down with Mohammed bin Fahd," the governor of the Eastern Province and a nephew of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah.

Eleven policemen and three demonstrators were reportedly injured in Tuesday's clashes.

Saudi state media quickly sought to demonize the protesters and whip up sectarian divisions, claiming that those involved in "rioting" were guilty of treason.

The official SPA news agency quoted the Saudi interior ministry, which said that "a group of outlaws" in Al-Awamiya had tried to create "insecurity with incitement from a foreign country that aims to undermine the nation's security and stability."

The claim of foreign involvement is directed against Iran. The Saudi monarchy, which promotes a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, views the Iranian Shiite clerical regime as its major rival in the Persian Gulf region.

Eastern Province is home to Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority, some 2 million people, which has faced

decades of religious persecution and social discrimination. Most of the country's vast oil reserves are located in the province.

The Saudi government also blamed protests by Shiites around Qatif earlier this year on Iranian influence. The Eastern Province has been subjected to harsh security measures since the outbreak of the outbreak of revolutionary struggles in Tunisia and Egypt this spring, with police checkpoints and raids deployed in an attempt by Saudi Arabia's rulers to intimidate all opposition.

Despite Riyadh's claim that any sign of unrest is a product of Iranian incitement, the numerous protests in Saudi Arabia this year—by people from Sunni and Shiite backgrounds—reflect the growing demand by workers and youth for political freedoms and social rights across the Middle East and North Africa.

Just a few miles off the coast of Qatif, in the small Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain, the Saudi-backed Sunni monarchy of King Hamad al-Khalifa has also attempted to blame the mass working class uprising by the majority-Shiite population on Iranian "interference."

The Saudi armed forces led the crushing of protests in Bahrain in March, with more than 1,500 soldiers in tanks and armored vehicles sent across the causeway between the two countries to shore up al-Khalifa's security forces.

Secure in the knowledge that Riyadh and Washington are behind it, the Bahraini regime has launched a vicious campaign of reprisals against any sign of dissent. Thousands of people have been kidnapped, arrested, tortured, fired from state jobs and otherwise harassed by the Bahraini security forces.

This week, a special military court in the capital, Manama, sentenced another 14 people to lengthy prison sentences in the latest show trial aimed at intimidating all opponents of the regime.

The 14 men were accused of killing a police officer during the mass demonstrations that rocked Bahrain in March. Their conviction is a travesty of justice. They were denied proper access to legal counsel, tortured in prison, and tried by a specially convened National Safety Court.

They face sentences of 25 years each for killing “with a terrorist aim.” In a separate trial, 15 students were imprisoned by the court for up to 18 years on unfounded charges ranging from attempted murder to kidnap to arson.

This follows the frame-up trial of 20 doctors last week, who were sentenced for “occupying a hospital.”

Many international human rights organizations, the United Nations and several foreign governments have criticized the procedures and sentencing of Bahrain’s National Safety Court. The US-based charity Human Rights Watch has condemned the trials in Bahrain as an attempt by the monarchy to “punish anyone and everyone who criticizes the government.”

Throughout the brutal crackdown in Bahrain and the repression of protests in Saudi Arabia, the reactionary Gulf monarchies have received the full backing of the Obama administration and the US military. The US Congress is expected to approve a new \$50 million arms deal with Bahrain, already agreed to by the Department of Defense, to replenish King Hamad’s stock of armored personnel carriers, missiles and night vision equipment.

Washington looks to the Saudi regime in particular as its key ally in the Persian Gulf. Not only is Saudi Arabia a source of oil—it has the largest proven reserves in the world—but it is also a key purchaser of US military hardware and a partner in US imperialism’s efforts to police the working class in the region.

As well as playing the leading role in suppressing the mass uprising in Bahrain, the Saudi government has offered sanctuary to Tunisia’s deposed dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and supports the military junta that has ruled Egypt after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. It has also backed the NATO-led war for regime change in Libya.

Reflecting the closeness of the alliance between Riyadh and Washington, the most recent US State Department communiqué on Saudi Arabia should come as no surprise. Issued by Hillary Clinton on the occasion of Saudi National Day, September 22, it

praises absolute monarch King Abdullah’s “leadership” and promotion of “moderation and tolerance” in the kingdom and the region.



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