

Report exposes brutality of Saudi Arabian regime

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The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the principal ally of the United States in the Persian Gulf region, has been heavily criticized in a major study by a leading international human rights organization.

The Saudi government, the authors find, has carried out a systematic campaign to silence its critics by means of police and judicial repression. Dozens of demonstrations against the autocratic rule of the Saudi royal family have taken place across the country since February, in defiance of a law that bans all protests and political organizations.

The regime of King Abdullah has reacted to this opposition and the “Arab Spring” uprisings in neighboring countries with a combination of intimidation against protesters and limited public spending increases.

The report by Amnesty International, titled *Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security*, claims that thousands of people have been arrested for taking part in demonstrations or merely on suspicion of criticizing the regime, with many facing abuse and torture while in custody.

The report has received very little coverage and almost no in-depth analysis in the Western media, with a virtual blackout of its damning findings in the major US newspapers and broadcasters.

Amnesty, a UK-based charity with more than 3 million members in 150 countries campaigning for political prisoners, carried out its nine-month investigation of the situation in Saudi Arabia. Though the report records appalling human rights abuses going back over many years, its emphasis is on the Saudi crackdown that has taken place since the outbreak of revolutionary developments across the region at the start of this year.

The group uncovered evidence of routine human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, including mass arrests, intimidation, and show trials. Commenting on the findings, Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa director, said: “Peaceful protesters and supporters of political reform in the country have been targeted for arrest in an attempt to stamp out the kinds of call for reform that have echoed across the region.”

Amnesty recorded hundreds of cases where individuals were arrested at nonviolent protests and charged with “disrupting order.” Many of those detained were made to sign pledges not to protest again and summarily issued with travel bans. Others have faced criminal charges and trials, under conditions where, the report points out, Saudi police and judges have been instructed to “take all necessary measures” to suppress opposition.

The report records the case of Khaled al-Johani, a 40-year-old

man who protested against media censorship in the kingdom at the March 11 “Day of Rage” in the capital, Riyadh. He was arrested by police during the protest and charged with “communicating with foreign media.” Al-Johani has since been held incommunicado, believed to be in solitary confinement somewhere within Saudi Arabia’s notorious prison system.

Other abuses cited in Amnesty’s report include:

- Abdul Aziz al-Wuhaibi was arrested February 16, one of seven men who requested permission to form Saudi Arabia’s first political party, the Islamic Umma Party. According to Amnesty, he was denied access to a lawyer and held in solitary confinement before the Specialized Criminal Court sentenced him to seven years in prison for “disobeying the ruler” and “encroaching on power.”

- In February and March, some 300 people, mainly Shiite Muslims, were detained by police for taking part in peaceful protests in the eastern cities of al-Qatif, al-Ahsa and Awwamiya. The majority were released without charge, but many have since been dismissed from their jobs for attending the demonstrations.

- In April, an Interior Ministry spokesman claimed that 5,831 people alleged to be associated with a “deviant group,” believed to be Al Qaeda, had been arrested. Of these, some 600 had been sentenced, with another 600 referred for trial. Allegations of terrorism are used to give Saudi security forces carte blanche to detain and disappear political opponents.

- The same month, it was reported that more than 1,300 foreign nationals—mainly low-paid workers from South and Southeast Asia, who enjoy few if any rights while working in Saudi Arabia—were being tried for direct or indirect involvement with “terror plots or for conspiracy to participate in terror-group activities.”

- The trial of Dr. Said bin Zuair, held in custody since 2007, began in October. Bin Zuair, a 62-year-old cleric and critic of the Saudi government, was charged with collecting funds to support terrorism. Amnesty claims that his detention was prompted by the fact that bin Zuair was in contact with journalists from the Arab-language satellite news channel Al Jazeera, with whom he was due to discuss criticisms of the regime.

- In November, two people were killed and six wounded by security forces during a protest in al-Qatif. The demonstration, to commemorate the death of a 19-year-old at a police checkpoint the day before, was fired on with live ammunition by riot police.

One of the recent high-profile cases reported by Amnesty is that

of 16 men, including nine prominent reformists, sentenced last month by the Specialized Criminal Court to terms of up to 30 years in prison on outlandish charges of attempting to seize power by financing terrorism with laundered money. The trial, according to Amnesty, was “grossly unfair,” taking place before a court specially convened to carry out the regime’s crackdown on dissent.

The report’s authors note that “It appears that the men were arrested solely for advocating peaceful political change and respect of human rights,” and that a United Nations panel had already ruled that their detention was arbitrary.

Amnesty states that at one session of the trial, the accused were brought before the court blindfolded and handcuffed, while lawyers for the men were denied access to the courtroom for its first three sessions. The men had been held for months in solitary confinement, allegedly tortured and forced to sign false confessions, and repeatedly questioned without access to their lawyers.

Much of the state repression has focused on Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, where the country’s Shiite minority is based. The Saudi royal family, which espouses a harsh interpretation of Sunni Islam, has long viewed this Shiite area with hostility and discriminated against the local population.

The Eastern Province is home to most of Saudi Arabia’s oil production, from which the ruling elite draws its fabulous wealth, while many working class families lack access to jobs and housing.

The report by Amnesty notes the example of one Shiite cleric from the region, Sheikh Tawfiq Jaber Ibrahim, who was arrested for making statements in support of reforms and charged with “inciting public opinion.”

While the ruling family and the Sunni clergy view Shiite clerics, mosques and cultural institutions with suspicion or outright hostility, it is the working class, especially in the Eastern Province, that has borne the brunt of the Saudi crackdown. Just one week before Amnesty released its findings, police killed two Shiite youth from al-Qatif, Abdullah Iqiris, 26, and Munib Othman al-Adnan, 21, who were attending the funeral of two other men gunned down by security forces.

The investigation by Amnesty International also criticizes the Saudi government’s draft anti-terror law, which effectively criminalizes expressions of dissent as “terrorist crime” and removes the few legal rights currently granted to the accused. The definition of terrorism under the new law is expanded to include endangering “national unity,” “harming the reputation of the state or its position,” and questioning the integrity of the king.

The group stressed that the draft law would reinforce the “draconian and abusive” system in Saudi Arabia, and was “another apparent sign of the authorities’ use of the law to silence dissent.”

Amnesty’s report would come as no surprise to the US government, were its findings ever to be considered. A US State Department report in 2010 recorded “significant human rights problems” in Saudi Arabia, including systematic “torture and abuse,” “denial of fair trial,” “severe restrictions on religious freedom,” and “corruption and lack of government transparency.”

The official US report states: “Violence against women and a lack of equal rights for women, violations of the rights of children, trafficking in persons, and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity were common. The lack of workers’ rights...remained a severe problem.”

Washington has maintained close relations with this regime for decades because the Saudi monarchy acts as US imperialism’s policeman in the Persian Gulf and the guarantor of Western access to the country’s vast oil resources (estimated at nearly 300 billion barrels, the largest proven reserve of any nation).

Despite their professions of support for the “Arab Spring” and crocodile tears over human rights abuses in Libya and Syria, the governments of the United States and the European powers have turned a blind eye to the brutal repression of Saudi protesters and the complete absence of democratic rights in the kingdom.

On the contrary, the imperialist powers have relied on the Saudi regime to crack down on working class uprisings in neighboring states, propping up allied dictatorships and supporting reactionary Islamist groups opposed to the democratic and social aspirations of the Arab masses.

In a move that could only have taken place with the blessing of Washington, which maintains a large military base in Bahrain, the Saudi regime sent more than 1,200 troops with tanks to crush mass anti-government demonstrations in the capital, Manama, in March. The monarchy of Bahrain, a small island just off Saudi Arabia’s Persian Gulf coast, is closely allied to the Saudi ruling family and is seen by both Riyadh and Washington as a bulwark against Iran.

Saudi Arabia was rewarded for this act of repression, in which dozens of Bahrainis were killed and hundreds more wounded or detained, with renewed cooperation from the Western powers. In July, the German parliament approved the sale of 200 Leopard tanks to Saudi Arabia in a deal worth €1.7 billion. Not to be outdone, the United States is currently fulfilling a \$60 billion arms deal with Riyadh—signed last year, it is the largest military supply contract in US history.

Expressing the close relations between Washington and Saudi Arabia, in October President Barack Obama warmly welcomed the appointment of 78-year old Prince Naif as crown prince and heir apparent to the throne of King Abdullah, aged 87 and in poor health. “We in the United States know and respect [Crown Prince Naif] for his strong commitment to combating terrorism and supporting regional peace and security,” a statement from Obama read.

Prince Naif had for many years, until his elevation in October, headed Saudi Arabia’s Interior Ministry, with responsibility for the brutal police-state measures outlined by Amnesty International.



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