

The rotten foundations of US policy in the Middle East

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Thirteen migrant workers, most if not all of them from Bangladesh, died January 11 in a blaze that tore through an overcrowded labor camp set up in a crumbling building in Manama, the capital of the Gulf sheikdom of Bahrain.

Such incidents are appallingly routine in Bahrain and the other monarchical regimes that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. Just last May, a fire in another overcrowded labor camp in Manama claimed the lives of 10 other Bangladeshi workers.

Both the Bahraini monarchy and private construction companies have rejected efforts to require improved housing and safety standards in the industry.

The deadly fire in Bahrain came just two days after the beheading of a Sri Lankan domestic worker in Saudi Arabia that provoked worldwide revulsion. Rizana Nafeek, who had lied about her age and left an impoverished family in northeastern Sri Lanka in search of better wages in Saudi Arabia, was sentenced to die for the death of an infant for whom she had been forced to care at the age of 17, without either training or experience. Saudi authorities beat a confession out of her that she subsequently recanted, insisting the child had choked while taking a bottle and she had been unable to revive it.

The Saudi monarchy has vehemently rejected international condemnation of the barbaric execution—carried out in violation of international treaties barring capital punishment for alleged crimes committed by minors—calling it an “intervention in its affairs and judicial verdicts.”

Again, this repellant action is by no means an aberration. The Saudi regime executed 79 people by beheading last year and 82 the year before.

According to news reports in the wake of the state murder of Rizana Nafeek, at least 45 Indonesian maids

are on death row in Saudi prisons, waiting to be beheaded. There are believed to be Sri Lankan, Filipina, Ethiopian and Indian women domestic workers facing the same fate, but their number is not known.

In many cases, these women have been convicted of murder for defending themselves against violent physical assaults and rape by their employers. In others, women have suffered mental breakdowns after years of abuse and being forced to work 15- and 20-hour days, seven days a week, without breaks, days off or, in many instances, any salary.

Punishment for the severe and often deadly abuse meted out to the 1.5 million female domestic workers in Saudi Arabia is rare. Among the more infamous cases was that of Sumiati Binti Salan Mustapa, an Indonesian house maid whose Saudi employer cut off her lips with a scissors, burnt her scalp with a hot iron and inflicted multiple stab wounds and broken bones over a protracted period of fiendish abuse. A Saudi court acquitted the employer, claiming there was no evidence of torture. In many other cases, women thrown off of buildings have been listed as suicides.

Underlying these atrocities—both the deadly fires and the beheadings—is a system that amounts to a modern-day form of slavery. Traditional chattel slavery, based on the outright buying and selling of human beings, was abolished in the Saudi kingdom only in 1962.

The new system, rather than relying on the abduction and forced enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans, is fed by a globally integrated capitalist system and its impoverishment of billions of people, particularly in Asia, who are forced to seek work abroad.

These workers fall victim to recruiting agencies that charge exorbitant fees for getting a job, forcing the migrants into indentured servitude when they arrive in

Saudi Arabia and the other monarchical Gulf States. Once there, they also fall under the kafala, or sponsorship, system, which endows sponsor-employers with unlimited power over the migrant workers. They commonly seize the workers' passports, making it impossible for them to return home.

Those who try to quit dangerous and exploitative jobs are not allowed to seek employment elsewhere without their sponsor's permission, and are generally deported, often without their pay. Unions for these workers are illegal, and wage levels have remained stagnant for two decades, even as the cost of living has climbed rapidly. It is common for employers to "rent" out their workers to others to make a profit.

There are some 15 million of these workers in the Gulf States. They account for over half of the workforce and the overwhelming majority of workers in the private sector. It is they who have built the high-rise towers, luxury palaces and highways of Manama, Dubai and Riyadh, paid for with the oil earnings of the parasitic ruling dynasties.

Their abysmal conditions are no secret. They are acknowledged in the annual country reports issued by the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. The report on Bahrain states that domestic workers "had to give their identity documents to employers, had little time off, were malnourished, and were subject to verbal and physical abuse, including sexual molestation and rape." It went on to note that "in numerous cases employers withheld salaries from foreign workers for months or years and refused to grant them permission to leave the country." This describes a condition of virtual slavery.

The US State Department found similar conditions in Saudi Arabia, where some 8.5 million foreign nationals toil. In both countries, the reports, noted, political parties are banned, torture is commonplace, censorship is enforced, religious minorities (or, in the case of Bahrain, the Shia majority) are brutally suppressed, and political dissidents are murdered and imprisoned.

These reports, however, are for show. They have no impact on US policy in the region, which rests upon the dictatorial regimes in Saudi Arabia, Washington's key Arab ally, Bahrain, which hosts the American Fifth Fleet, and Qatar, the site of the Pentagon's Central Command Forward Headquarters and Combined Air Operations Center.

These are the Obama administration's key allies in fomenting and arming a sectarian civil war in Syria in the name of "human rights" and "democracy" and preparing a war against Iran.

Nothing serves as a more searing indictment of US imperialism's predatory policy in the Middle East than the conditions of the overwhelmingly migrant and semi-enslaved working class in these countries and the ultra-reactionary and medieval character of the regimes that rule them.

The foundations upon which this imperialist policy rests are utterly rotten and must produce, sooner rather than later, revolutionary explosions.



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