

Saudi regime continues brutal siege against Shia minority

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At least 12 people are feared dead in the escalating government offensive against Awamiya, the Shia city in Saudi Arabia's governorate of Qatif in the Eastern Province, amid the destruction of whole districts of the city. It brings the total killed in the months-long siege to 24.

While the security forces claim to be fighting gunmen in the city, activists on social media accuse them of driving local people from their homes by firing indiscriminately into residential areas and making life unbearable.

Tensions grew after reports that the government had given consent to the Albrahim property development corporation to demolish and regenerate Almosara, which it claims is being used by armed gunmen, and the district of al-Shweikah, 6 kilometres south of Almosara.

Houses and shops have been destroyed in the fighting, electricity has been turned off, and water, garbage collection and other essential services shut down. According to the web site *Middle East Eye*, hundreds of people have been evacuated or forcibly evicted from their homes. While the government claims that the residents whose homes have been demolished will be rehoused in the city of Damman, most of those made homeless have yet to be rehoused.

According to the newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, out of a list of 23 wanted "terrorists" in the city, 10 had handed themselves in, several had already been killed and three were still at large.

Videos and photos from Saudi activists indicate that the monarchy has deployed armoured vehicles against the population. The Canadian government, which recently concluded a \$15 billion arms deal with Riyadh, has raised "concerns" about the use of the Canadian-made vehicles.

The Shia minority in the oil-rich province suffer from crushing poverty following decades of economic neglect and political marginalisation. Their villages and towns such as Qatif, al-Hasa and particularly al-Awamiya, lack the infrastructure of their Sunni counterparts.

Since 2011, the city has witnessed protests against the brutal dictatorship of the House of Saud, calling for political reform and the release of political prisoners held for years without charge.

It was the home of the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr who was executed along with 46 others in January 2016 by the Saudi government on false charges of terrorism due to his advocacy of secession if the government did not change its policy of oppression and discrimination against the Shia.

Last week, the highest court confirmed the death sentences on 14 Shia activists—convicted in a secret counter-terrorism court—much to the concern of human rights organisations and United Nations officials. According to Reprieve, some of the 14 were sentenced to death for using cell phones and social media to organise protests, while at least one of the defendants had no access to a lawyer and no evidence was presented against another.

The so-called regeneration of Almosara appears to be part of a broader plan to change the demographic composition of the region that produces the majority of the House of Saud's wealth and effect a reduction of the Shia population.

The venal monarchy has promoted a wave of Sunni-based Saudi nationalism and whipped up sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia, not just in Saudi Arabia but throughout the region, in opposition to Iran's support for Riyadh's political rivals in Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

This serves to divert attention from the discontent within the country where social tensions are explosive.

Saudi Arabia has seen a sharp reversal of its fortunes in recent years with massive budget deficits, plummeting foreign reserves and growth of less than 1 percent, the lowest for almost four years. The fall in oil prices, upon which the country depends for 70 percent of its revenue, has led to a drastic cutback in public expenditure, the imposition of a value-added tax and the proposed sale of 5 percent of Aramco to fund an economic diversification programme.

In addition, the 31-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed, who is king in all but name in place of his ailing 82-year-old father King Salman, has pursued an aggressive foreign policy, launching a murderous war—with US backing—in Yemen in March 2015 that was aimed at suppressing Houthi rebels and reinstating the puppet government of President Abdrabbah Mansur Hadi.

The war has killed at least 16,000 people, of whom at least two thirds were civilians. While failing completely to achieve its military and political objectives, it has produced the complete breakdown of Yemen's physical and social infrastructure and produced a humanitarian catastrophe, with over 400,000 reported cases of cholera and 7 million people on the brink of dying from famine.

At the same time, the war has come at an enormous cost to Saudi Arabia. The first nine months of the war cost \$5 billion, with military operations now running at around \$700 million a month.

Mohammed has overturned the Kingdom's decades-long policy of buying political quiescence with a social contract that provided some security—via low utility prices, social subventions and public sector jobs—for the Saudi population.

In September last year he slashed housing, vacation and sickness allowances and reduced some civil service salaries by a third. Utility bills rose as subsidies fell, fuelling poverty levels while he splashed out on a multi-million-dollar yacht.

In June, the government tightened restrictions on foreign workers who constitute about 12 million of the country's 33 million population in a bid to reduce unemployment among Saudi nationals, reserving retail jobs for Saudis.

The official unemployment rate of 12.7 percent is

widely believed to be an underestimate. Other estimates suggest it is 27-29 percent, rising to 33 percent among young people between 20 and 24 years of age and 38 percent for 24- to 29-year-olds, in a country where two thirds of the population are under 30. Some 1.9 million Saudis out of a total citizenry of 20 million are expected to enter the workforce in the next decade.

While Saudi Arabia's huge oil wealth is owned by a royal family that lives in the lap of luxury, at least 20 percent of Saudis suffer "crippling" or "severe" poverty, and between 2 million and 4 million people live in poverty in Riyadh alone.



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