

Canada and Saudis in raucous diplomatic spat over Ottawa's posturing over human rights

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The diplomatic standoff between Canada and Saudi Arabia that was triggered by a Twitter post late last week by Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland shows no sign of abating.

Riyadh has announced sweeping measures to punish Ottawa for Freeland's hypocritical criticisms of the absolutist regime's human rights abuses. The vehemence of the Saudi reaction has stunned Canada's Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government and elite. But what has most perturbed, even roiled, Ottawa is Washington's refusal to take any steps to rein in its Saudi ally.

The row erupted when Freeland tweeted her alarm at the news that Saudi security forces had arrested women's rights activists, including Samar Badawi, the sister of jailed blogger Ralph Badawi, whose wife is a Canadian citizen.

Freeland's post was a continuation of the Liberal government's efforts to conceal Canada's substantial economic ties with, and political support, for the Saudi dictatorship—including a massive \$15 billion arms deal—behind vacuous human rights propaganda.

But to Ottawa's shock and dismay, the Saudi regime chose to take great umbrage at Freeland's post. Denouncing the Trudeau government for interfering in its "internal affairs," Riyadh has kicked Canada's ambassador out of the country, ordered 7,000 Saudi foreign students to leave Canada, suspended flights to the country of the Saudi national airline, vowed to prevent future commercial deals with Canadian companies, and ordered a fire-sale of Saudi-owned Canadian assets.

For several days it was unclear whether the 75,000 barrels of oil that Saudi Arabia exports to Canada daily would be affected. But on Thursday, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih said Riyadh has a "firm and longstanding policy" that political disputes should not impact on its oil sales.

A close ally of US imperialism in its predatory wars across the Middle East and preparations for war with Iran, Saudi Arabia is one of the world's most vicious and repressive dictatorships. It regularly beheads prisoners and arrests dissidents at home, while waging a near genocidal war in neighbouring Yemen that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of civilians and displaced millions.

Riyadh's aggressive response to Canada's diplomatic slap-on-

the-wrist reflects the growing power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Through militarism and the promotion of a virulent Saudi nationalism, bin Salman is seeking to strengthen Riyadh's role as a regional hegemon allied with Washington.

That being said, Ottawa's attempt to pose as a defender of human rights reeks of hypocrisy and cynicism. The reality is that the Trudeau government, like its Liberal and Conservative predecessors, has invoked "human rights" to justify a series of violent Canadian imperialist military interventions around the globe. These began with Canada's participation in the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 and continue to this day with Canada's involvement in the US-led war in Syria and Iraq and its leading role in NATO's drive to threaten and strategically encircle Russia.

In 2011, a Canadian general led the NATO "regime change" war in Libya that toppled the Gaddafi regime—a war justified in the name of protecting the civilian population, but in which NATO used al-Qaeda aligned Islamists as its shock troops and which has left the oil-rich North African country in ruins. Canadian troops deployed to Libya described themselves, according to the Ottawa Citizen, as "al-Qaeda's air force." Canada has similarly collaborated with far-right forces in US-orchestrated regime-change operations in Haiti in 2004 and Ukraine in 2014.

While Trudeau today grandstands in the face of the Saudi reprisals, saying Ottawa will never apologize for advocating for human rights, the reality is Canada and his government have hitherto been staunch allies of the Saudi regime, including in its invasion of Yemen.

Canada's \$15 billion deal to sell Canadian-made armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia only took effect because the Trudeau government approved it and Canadian officials have continued to defend it, including again this week, as commensurate with Canada's defence of "human rights." This has involved Ottawa willfully ignoring evidence that the vehicles have been used to violently repress the Shia minority in eastern Saudi Arabia and in the illegal Yemen war.

Although publicly Canada's government is making a show of

defiance, it is anxious to mend ties with Riyadh so as to ensure Canadian big business interests are not harmed. Behind the scenes, Freeland is reportedly in contact with her Saudi counterpart. She is also said to have approached several European countries, including Sweden and Germany, in the hopes they might mediate an end to the dispute.

However, the Canadian elite's biggest concern over the developments of the past week is that they have provided yet further proof that Washington is intent on redefining its relationship with Ottawa.

When asked to comment on the Canada-Saudi dispute, the US State Department, in a carefully-worded statement, described both Canada and Saudi Arabia as important partners, and pointedly refused to either criticize Riyadh for the jailing of the women's rights activists or urge it to withdraw any of its retaliatory measures. This has been interpreted in the Canadian media as a slap in the face for Canada given Ottawa's decades-long strategic partnership with US imperialism, including in the NATO alliance and through NORAD, and its prominent role in the current American military-strategic offensives in the Middle East and against Russia and China. The *Globe and Mail*, Canada's purported "newspaper of record," led its Wednesday edition with the front page headline, "US refuses to back Canada in Saudi Arabia dispute."

Washington's refusal to sign on to Freeland's hypocritical criticism of the Saudis' human rights record reflects the fact that under Trump, US imperialism has all but dispensed with any attempt to conceal its global predatory ambitions behind a cloak of "humanitarian" propaganda. More fundamentally, Washington clearly does not see it to be in its interests to ruffle feathers in Riyadh. Not when it is expecting Saudi Arabia to play a vital role in its war drive against Iran, both by ramping up oil production to compensate for the unilateral US embargo on Iranian oil exports and to spearhead a military coalition of Arab Sunni states against Tehran.

By striking a pose of neutrality in the Canada-Saudi dispute, the Trump administration has reiterated the message it has already spelt out in the NAFTA "renegotiation" and through its demand Ottawa increase military spending far above the Liberals' planned 70 percent hike by 2026: if the Canadian bourgeoisie wants to continue to enjoy a privileged partnership with Washington it will have to be still more accommodating to US interests.

The growing rift between Canada and the US is part of a much broader unravelling of the post-Second World War, American-led capitalist world order.

Under conditions of deepening economic crisis, all of the imperialist powers, Canada included, are seeking to aggressively assert their interests, through intrigue, diplomatic power-plays, protectionist measures, rearmament and war, in a struggle for markets and profits that is being waged increasingly openly as each against all.

Significantly, none of Canada's ostensible European allies

has come to its support in the dispute with the Saudi absolutist regime.

The diplomatic spat with Riyadh has also brought divisions in Canadian ruling circles to the fore. Leading Conservative Party figures, emboldened by corporate Canada's growing criticism of the Trudeau government, have denounced Freeland and Trudeau for allowing human rights concerns to get in the way of "national security" considerations.

The Unifor trade union has also expressed concern, lest the dispute impact its involvement in the \$15 billion arms deal with Riyadh. Unifor is the bargaining agent for workers at the General Dynamics' plant in London, Ontario, where the armoured vehicles are built. In 2015, after then NDP leader Thomas Mulcair criticized the Saudi arms deal in the hopes it would boost the party's flagging election campaign, Unifor officials prevailed on the social democrats to drop the issue like a lead balloon.

"There is an absolute clear and present risk to jobs," declared Unifor Local 27 President Jim Reid this week following Riyadh's threat to cut commercial ties with Canada.

Far from being concerned about the fate of the General Dynamics' workers, Unifor, which has spent the past three decades imposing vicious concessions and job cuts on workers in auto and other sectors, fears the impact the unraveling of the Saudi arms deal would have on its dues income.

On the other hand, the Trudeau government has won plaudits from the NDP for its posturing as a defender of "human rights." Issuing not a word of criticism over the bogus character of the Trudeau government's humanitarian credentials, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh told CBC, "There are other nations we can look at in terms of access to oil. I think we should look at that as an alternative to dealing with a nation that has a serious track record of human rights violations ..."

Singh's suggestion that Canadian imperialism can be a protagonist for human rights on the world stage is both absurd and deeply reactionary. It comes from the leader of a party that has endorsed every Canadian imperialist military intervention over the past two decades. Singh's remarks underscore how the NDP serves as a key prop of Canadian imperialist foreign policy and of the interests of an important section of the ruling elite which views human rights propaganda as a useful means to advance its economic and geo-strategic interests in the Middle East and around the world.



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