

US-backed Saudi regime set to behead female activist and four others

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State prosecutors in Saudi Arabia have called for the execution by beheading of 29-year-old political activist Israa al-Ghomgham, her husband, Moussa al-Hashem, and three others for the “crimes” of peacefully demonstrating against the country’s monarchical dictatorship, chanting slogans against the regime and posting videos of their protests on social media.

The death sentences, including the first for a Saudi woman based on alleged political offenses, are emblematic of a criminal regime that counts as Washington’s closest ally in the Arab world.

The protests that led to the charges took place in the port city of Qatif in the Saudi kingdom’s oil-rich Eastern Province, home to the bulk of the country’s Shia minority population. Beginning in 2011 and continuing since, the protests have challenged the systematic discrimination against and oppression of the Shia population by a monarchy that is bound up with the official, state-sponsored religious doctrine of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative Sunni sect.

The demonstrations, demanding equality, improved social conditions in a region that remains deeply impoverished despite its oil wealth, freedom of expression and the release of political prisoners, have been answered with a police state crackdown that has seen entire communities subjected to military siege.

Israa al-Ghomgham and her husband were arrested on December 6, 2015 when security forces staged a night raid on their home. They have been imprisoned ever since, held for 32 months, most of that time without access to a lawyer and without being presented with any formal charges against them. From a working class background, Ghomgham’s family did not have the money to pay for a lawyer. It was only after her father began a public attempt to raise funds that an attorney volunteered to defend her.

She and her co-defendants were tried in the Saudi regime’s Specialized Criminal Court, set up in 2008, ostensibly to try terrorism cases. The court’s proceedings, in which the rights of defendants are virtually non-existent, amount to a show trial, with the verdict as well as the sentence determined in advance by the monarchy.

The court is tasked with implementing the notorious 2017 counter-terrorism law, which describes insulting the Saudi king and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the 33-year-old heir to the throne, as an act of terrorism.

The same court in 2014 sentenced to death prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and seven other Shia activists. They were put to death in a mass execution of 47 people on the same day in January 2016. The court sentenced 14 others to death on similar trumped-up political charges in 2016.

The regime routinely crucifies the headless corpses of its victims in an attempt to terrorize the population and intimidate any potential opposition to the absolute rule exercised by the royal House of Saud.

It is with the same end that the regime now proposes to execute, for the first time, a woman charged with political opposition. Many other women have been executed after being convicted for other offenses. Women convicted of adultery are routinely stoned to death. A Saudi executioner told the Saudi daily *Sabq* that he found women more resistant to beheadings than men, and had resorted to shooting them in the head.

Saudi Arabia executes far more people per capita than any other country on the planet. Last year, nearly 150 individuals were beheaded. This year appears destined to top that grisly toll, with the number of beheadings in the first quarter of 2018 increasing by 70 percent compared to the same period last year.

In addition to political opposition to the monarchy, such executions are meted out to those found guilty by Saudi courts of atheism, blasphemy, adultery, homosexuality or witchcraft.

The Trump administration has issued no statement on the impending execution of Israa al-Ghomgham and her co-defendants. The media has been relatively silent. No major editorials have appeared decrying their fate.

The attention paid to this barbaric state crime represents not even a fraction of the coverage lavished by the corporate media in the United States on the “reforms” introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, principally his allowing Saudi women—those who can afford a car—to drive. There has been little mention of the fact that Saudi women activists who advocated equal rights were rounded up by the security forces, with an estimated 14 of them still behind bars.

Figures identified with the #MeToo movement have been noticeably silent about the threatened execution of a Saudi woman for speaking out against oppression. Their supposed defense of women never extends to the victims of capitalism or conflicts in any way with the global interests of US imperialism.

When bin Salman toured the US in April he was feted not only by the Trump administration, but also by the media and an array of American billionaires, from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos to Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates and Apple CEO Tim Cook.

Involved in the lionization of this state criminal and murderer are not only the profit interests of energy conglomerates, arms manufacturers, banks and numerous other corporations seeking to profit off of Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth.

Democratic and Republican administrations alike have for more than seven decades supported the Saudi monarchy, one of the most reactionary regimes in the world, as a linchpin of US policy in the Middle East, arming it to the teeth. This support has only intensified as the Trump administration has ratcheted up US aggression against Iran, seeking to cobble together an anti-Iranian coalition including both Saudi Arabia and Israel for the purpose of rolling back Iranian influence in the region and asserting US hegemony.

Just as the Trump administration has remained silent about the threat to behead a Saudi woman and her fellow defendants for peaceful protest, so the Obama administration made no significant response to the mass

execution of political prisoners when it was in office. Instead, both Democratic and Republican White Houses signed hundreds of billions of dollars of arms deals with the regime.

So too, both administrations provided indispensable military support for the near-genocidal war led by Saudi forces against the impoverished country of Yemen, where some 16,000 have been killed and more than 8.5 million have been brought to the brink of starvation.

On Thursday, it was reported that 27 civilians—22 of them children—were slaughtered in a Saudi air strike that demolished a vehicle in which a family was fleeing from an embattled neighborhood in the besieged port city of Hodeidah. This atrocity comes just two weeks after the August 9 strike in which a US-supplied bomb tore to pieces a bus filled with school children, killing 51 people, 40 of them children. These acts of mass murder have also received scant attention in the media and elicited no change in US support for the savage war.

The Saudi royal dictatorship, its monstrous crimes, and US support for them constitute the appropriate yardstick against which all of the “human rights” propaganda pumped out by Washington to justify its predatory aims from Venezuela, to Syria, to Iran, Russia and China should be measured.



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