

Six killed in “preemptive” security operation in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province

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10 January 2019

The bloody siege by security forces of a village in the coastal Qatif region of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province has left at least six people dead and a number of others wounded.

The assault, described by Saudi officials as a “preemptive” security operation, saw heavily armed troops storm the village of Al-Jish after surrounding it for 15 hours. The Saudi regime claimed that the operation was aimed at capturing “terrorists” and that those killed had been given a chance to surrender but died in an “exchange of fire.”

No credibility whatsoever can be given to this official story from a monarchical dictatorship that describes anyone who opposes its rule or dares to insult the Saudi king or the country’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as a “terrorist,” whose offenses are punishable by beheading.

The Eastern Province, where the siege took place, has been the scene of continuous repression by the Saudi regime since 2011, when demonstrations broke out among the area’s Shia population demanding democratic rights and an end to the systemic discrimination exercised by the monarchy, whose rule is bound up with the official, state-sponsored religious doctrine of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative Sunni sect.

The leader of the 2011 protests, the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who called for an end to the monarchy, was executed in January 2016, along with 46 others on charges of “terrorism.” Forty-three were beheaded, and four were shot to death by firing squads.

The brutal repression has left the region, which is a center of Saudi Arabia’s oil industry, but whose population is the poorest in the country, seething. Sporadic demonstrations have continued, even as the Saudi regime maintains what amounts to a military

occupation.

In 2017, dozens were killed in protests over the regime’s decision to raze the historic Musawara district in Awamiyah, which had been al-Nimr’s hometown. Some 30,000 people fled the town to escape the state terror. The pounding of Awamiyah into rubble was executed shortly after Crown Prince bin Salman took the reins of power.

The Saudi regime has continued to carry out arrests, imprisonment and executions of Shia prisoners convicted in rigged trials. Among those on the Saudi death row, threatened with beheading, is Isra al-Ghomgham and her husband, Moussa al-Hashem, along with three others, who were convicted under Saudi Arabia’s notorious 2017 “counter-terrorism” law of the “crimes” of peacefully protesting against the dictatorship, chanting anti-regime slogans and posting videos of the protests on social media.

Al-Ghomgham would be the first woman to be executed for political opposition. Saudi Arabia has put many other women to death for other offenses, including adultery, for which women are routinely stoned.

The latest state violence in the Eastern Province came as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was conducting his eight-nation tour of the Middle East aimed at shoring up Washington’s anti-Iranian axis in the wake of President Donald Trump’s announcement of a planned Syria troop withdrawal, whose timetable has become ever vaguer amid suggestions that US forces could stay on indefinitely.

Saudi Arabia, one of Pompeo’s scheduled stops, is the linchpin of this axis, along with the other Sunni oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf.

The repression in the Eastern Province is bound up with Saudi Arabia’s regional role in promoting war

against Iran along with terrorism and violence against non-Sunni populations. Among the motives for the US-backed Saudi war against Yemen, pitting the region's richest nation against its poorest, is the fear that the rise of the Houthi rebels, who follow an offshoot of Shiism, could inspire a revolt by the impoverished working class Shia population.

Unable to achieve its objectives in Yemen, despite a savage war that has claimed the lives of at least 60,000 people and brought two-thirds of the population to the brink of starvation, the Saudi monarchy has also proven incapable of suppressing social unrest in the Eastern District and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Riyadh is going through the motions of a trial of 15 state officials charged with carrying out the gruesome murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist and former regime insider, at the country's Istanbul consulate on October 2.

Not on trial is Crown Prince bin Salman, whom the CIA has declared with "high confidence" ordered the murder of Khashoggi. Also in doubt is the status of his senior advisor, Saud al-Qahtani, who reportedly participated in the abduction, torture and murder of Khashoggi via a Skype connection between Riyadh and the Istanbul consulate. Turkish intelligence reported that he had instructed the 15-member assassination team sent to Istanbul: "Bring me the head of the dog."

During the course of the assassination, bin Salman sent at least 11 messages to al-Qahtani. The leader of the assassination team was recorded by Turkish intelligence as telling Qahtani, "tell your boss" that the job had been completed.

Qahtani has been reported sighted in various parts of Saudi Arabia and is apparently not being detained or being brought into the Saudi court. His prosecution would only point to bin Salman's role as the chief instigator of the murder.

In a conference call with the media, a senior US State Department official said that the Trump administration was "pleased" to see the beginning of the trial of the alleged Khashoggi assassins but added that the legal process had not yet "hit that threshold of credibility and accountability."

How such a "threshold" could be reached without the indictment of bin Salman, Trump's closest ally in the Arab world, is unclear, to say the least.

While the brazenness of the Khashoggi assassination

triggered a brief wave of protest within the US political establishment and the media—including a *Time* magazine cover—the issue has now been largely dropped.

Both of the major US capitalist parties support the continuation of the alliance between US imperialism and the House of Saud, which has been the axis of counterrevolution in the Middle East for over seven decades.

Despite the passage of largely symbolic resolutions in the US Senate last month condemning bin Salman for the murder of Khashoggi and calling for an end to US support for the near-genocidal Saudi war against Yemen, Washington's support for Riyadh continues unabated.

Under a deal approved by the State Department last month, nearly \$200 million worth of upgrades to Saudi Arabia's missile defense systems are being carried out by American military contractors.

Meanwhile, the weapons used in the repression of oppressed workers in Saudi Arabia's Eastern District are largely supplied by the US, while the special operation troops that carry it out are trained and advised by the US military.



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