

The mass beheadings in Saudi Arabia

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Washington's closest ally in the Arab world, the dictatorial monarchy of Saudi Arabia, ushered in the New Year with a torrent of blood, simultaneously executing 47 prisoners.

This wave of state murders unfolded at 12 separate prisons across the kingdom. At eight of them, the condemned were beheaded, while at four others they were cut down by firing squads. The headless corpses were then crucified and left hanging in public as a hideous warning to any who would even contemplate opposing the absolute power of the ruling royal family.

The most prominent of those put to death was Nimr al-Nimr, a Muslim cleric and leading spokesman for Saudi Arabia's oppressed Shiite minority. Nimr, who was interrogated under torture and then brought before a kangaroo court, was convicted on charges that included "disobeying the ruler" and "encouraging, leading and participating in demonstrations."

These "crimes" stemmed from the mass protests that swept Saudi Arabia's predominantly Shiite Eastern Province in 2011, expressing popular demands for democratic reforms and an end to the Sunni monarchy's discrimination and oppression of the Shiite population.

Three other Shiite prisoners were executed alongside Nimr, including one who was a minor at the time of his alleged offense. The rest of those put to death were Sunnis accused of involvement in Al Qaeda attacks that took place in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006.

The barbaric killing spree carried out by the regime in Riyadh was a calculated political act driven by both domestic and international objectives. The Saudi monarchy joined the execution of Nimr with those of the alleged Al Qaeda members to drive home its identification of any opposition to its rule as an act of terrorism. In the first instance, its aim is to intimidate the Shiite minority, which constitutes approximately 15 percent of the population and is concentrated in the Eastern Province, a key oil-producing region.

At the same time, the House of Saud was sending a bloody signal that it will ruthlessly suppress any attempt to bring home the kind of Islamist terrorism it has fomented, funded and ideologically inspired elsewhere, with particularly horrific effect in Syria. The monarchy is increasingly fearful that it could fall prey to the Frankenstein monster it has unleashed in the form of groups such as ISIS and the Al Nusra Front, whose Wahabi religious ideology and mass beheadings are modeled after the state terror imposed in Saudi Arabia itself.

More generally, the whore-masters and parasites who make up Saudi Arabia's ruling family fear that conditions are building up for a social explosion that could land them in the same spot as previous royal houses, with their own heads on the chopping block. The plummeting of oil prices, itself a product of the decision, backed by Washington, to reject any reduction in output—with the aim of undermining the economies of both Russia and Iran—is beginning to take its toll on the Saudi economy itself.

At the end of last year, the Saudi regime revealed that it had run a \$98 billion budget deficit in 2015 and was anticipating a similar shortfall this year. In a desperate attempt to raise revenue, it has imposed a 50 percent increase on gas prices and is embarking on further cuts in public spending, particularly the economic subsidies that have allowed the large impoverished layers of Saudi society to eke out a living. The *Financial Times* described the new budget as an exercise in "radical austerity."

Under these conditions, the sharp rise in beheadings—at least 158 people were killed in this manner in 2015—is intended to serve as a means of mass intimidation.

On the international front, the state murder of Sheikh Nimr represents a calculated provocation, designed to radically intensify sectarian strife throughout the region. It is aimed at provoking Iran, whose Shiite

Muslim leadership responded with warnings of “divine vengeance.” The execution triggered demonstrations that included firebomb attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and a consular facility in the Iranian city of Mashhad. Riyadh has responded by severing diplomatic relations.

The Saudi monarchy is determined to blow up any attempt to end the civil war in Syria without first achieving the original aim of it and its Western allies—regime-change. By exacerbating tensions with Iran, the principal ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Saudis hope to prevent any such settlement and to create the conditions for war with Iran itself.

In what is hardly a coincidence, on the same day as the mass executions, Riyadh announced an end to a supposed cease-fire in Yemen, where the Saudi military has led an illegal and deadly intervention aimed at suppressing a revolt by the Houthis, an insurgent movement whose members are drawn from the Shia population.

The execution of the Saudi Shiite cleric is designed to widen an already spiraling regional conflict in the Middle East. Like the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, it is an event with the potential of ultimately drawing the major powers into a far bloodier global conflagration.

The main responsibility for the crimes of the Saudi regime rests with its principal patron, US imperialism. The savage monarchy in Saudi Arabia is not merely some remnant of feudal backwardness. It is rather the direct product of US imperialist intervention in the Middle East, from the concessions secured by Texaco and Standard Oil in the 1930s and 1940s to the current massive arms sales that make the Saudi monarchy today’s number one customer of America’s military-industrial complex.

Washington has responded to the mass beheadings in Saudi Arabia as an event of little consequence, having nothing to do with the policies of the US itself. Both the White House and the State Department issued mealy-mouthed statements “reaffirming” pro forma calls for the Saudi regime to respect human rights but making no direct condemnation of the political murder of Sheikh Nimr.

The Pentagon and the CIA are full partners in the Saudi monarchy’s repression at home, while the US

has provided the bombs and targeting information, along with the midair refueling of Saudi bombers, that have made possible the nine-month war in Yemen—a criminal aggression that has killed thousands of Yemeni civilians while turning hundreds of thousands more into homeless refugees.

The blood-soaked Saudi monarchy is a manifestation of the predatory policy pursued by US imperialism in the Middle East. Washington’s defense of and reliance upon this ultra-reactionary regime expose all of the pretexts given for the successive US military interventions in the region, from the so-called “war on terrorism” to the supposed promotion of “democracy” and “human rights.”

In the final analysis, any policy that is predicated on an alliance with the House of Saud is a house of cards that will come crashing down with the revival of the class struggle in the Middle East.

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