



10 Things you need to know about the Saudi Arabia

On Saturday 2 January 2015, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry confirmed the Kingdom had executed 47 individuals, who were supposedly executed for adopting *takfiri* ideology, joining "terrorist organisations" and implementing various "criminal plots." They were executed in 12 different cities and the list included Sunnis convicted of involvement in al-Qaida attacks in the kingdom in 2003 and 2004. Executions also included prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, two foreigners, an Egyptian and a Chadian. The executions have created international outrage and is being viewed through the Sunni-Shi'ah lens. With this in mind, there are 10 key issues that should be kept in mind, regarding this issue and Saudi Arabia generally.

1. Saudi Arabia has for long presented itself as an Islamic state that implements the Shari'ah and represents the global Muslim Ummah. Due to this, Saudi has presented its punishment system as something Islamic and it has become its most visible symbol of Islam. In reality though the Saudi Kingdom is run by a monarchy that has used the veneer of Islam from the very first day it was created by Ibn Saud. Maintaining the monarchy is the regime's number one issue, everything else in just fits around this. This is why dissent is absolutely not tolerated. Saudi in reality is a dictatorial monarchy.

2. Islam plays a convenient role for Saudi Arabia, something it uses to achieve its other goals. Saudi builds mosques around the world and constantly reiterates its Islamic nature, but it has consistently looked in the opposite direction when it has come to Islamic issues. Saudi Arabia chooses which oppressed Muslims to defend; despite its avowed claim to be an Islamic state. The Jewish entity, the invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussain, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and maintaining adequate oil production are all areas Saudi Arabia has supported western causes, whilst other directly Muslim related conflicts has seen Saudi sit on the side-lines as it views these issues not from an Islamic lens but a nationalist one. So Palestine, Rohingya Muslims and Syria has seen no rescuing of the oppressed Muslims, despite Saudi possessing the capabilities to do so. But when it came to Bahrain and Yemen, Saudi wasted no time in intervening in these countries. These countries share borders with Saudi, which show that Saudi is nationalist rather than Islamic.

3. In order to gain global legitimacy, Saudi has presented itself as a defender of the Muslim Sunnis in the battle with Shi'ah Iran that wants to impose Shi'ah fiqh over all Sunnis. Any incident, bombing and controversy is presented by the Saudi monarchy, as a Shi'ah Iran plot. Both Iran and Saudi are competing with each other to dominate the region and both use Islam to justify their positions, but both in reality are not based upon Islam and are nationalist driven. Saudi Arabia immediately deployed its armed forces when the Arab Spring kicked off in Bahrain, Bahrain is linked to Saudi via a causeway. The fact that the Sunni minority monarchy neglected and oppressed its majority Shi'ah population, was secondary to Saudi, as only Iran could be behind the uprising, Saudi intervened. Once again showing its Saudi national interests that drives its actions.

4. Saudi foreign policy is subordinate to the West. Saudi Arabia has supported all western initiatives, even against other Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia has accepted the Jewish entity's occupation of Palestine and even attempted to normalise this by holding talks between Israel and the surrounding nations... In its foreign policy Saudi is largely a subordinate nation to the West, it has historically shifted from a subordinate to the US and Britain.

5. Saudi Arabia rules by a mix of laws, some of which are Islamic and some are man-made. However, to maintain the Islamic perception, it refrains from calling them laws. Saudi uses specific terminologies to differentiate between the Islamic laws and the man-made ones. In an Arabic book on the constitution of Saudi Arabia the author states, "*The words 'law (qanoon)' and 'Legislation (Tashree')' are only used in Saudi to refer to the rules taken from the Islamic Shari'ah As for the man-made such as 'systems (Anthimah)' or 'instructions (Ta'leemaat)' or 'edicts (Awamir)' ...*"¹ Aside from this Saudi Arabia is a hereditary monarchy that uses the religious establishment as a tool to control opposition to its capitalist and pro-West agenda.

6. The religious establishment exists purely to justify the Saudi monarchy. The descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th century founder of the Wahhabi school of thought support the Saud family and thus legitimizes their rule. The most important religious posts are closely linked to the Al Saud family by a high degree of intermarriage. These scholars have promoted the royal family as defenders of Islam through their international efforts in constructing mosques. In situations in which the public deemed certain policies of the royal family questionable, the scholars invoke fatwas to deflect any dissent. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa opposing petitions and demonstrations in the middle of the Arab Spring, his fatwa included a “*severe threat against internal dissent*.”² These muftis are so out of touch with the modern world, that recent edicts include banning the children's game Pokémon, telephones that play recorded music on hold and the habit of sending flowers to hospital patients.

7. The Saudi legal system has long been dubious, full of contradictions and is used as a political tool to deal with dissent. Half of the executions conducted are against immigrants, who have marginal legal rights. The moment a migrant becomes a suspect, causal mistreatment threatens to spiral into sanctioned legal abuse. Their peripheral legal status assures them very limited access to representation or legal aide, as well as disproportionate and asymmetrical punishments. Many judicial decisions are very dubious. In March 2015, a 19-year-old woman who was the victim of a violent gang rape was sentenced to 200 lashes and six months in jail after being found guilty of being “indecent” at the time of the attack because she was not accompanied by a male guardian.³

8. The global media has focussed on the sectarian element of the executions, with Sheikh Nimr execution. He was a vocal supporter of mass protests in 2011 and Saudi used the sectarian card during the Arab Spring to present the neglect, oppression and outright discrimination that led to the uprising, as a Shi'ah plot, backed by Tehran. Much of the reporting is by lazy journalists who rather than research the details of incidents in the region, always view them through a sectarian lens, irrespective if they really are. Some have an agenda to present Islam as fractious, which is used to undermine the concept of one Ummah and justify secularism and western intervention.

9. Many of the executed members are accused of being members of al-Qaeda or of plotting against the Saudi monarchy. The Saudi monarchy is extremely familiar with al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups as it established, armed and funded such groups. Saudi Arabia played a central role in training the individuals that went on to become al-Qaeda. But after the Afghan Jihad many of these individuals saw through the façade of Saudi Arabia and realised the monarchy only cared for Saudi national interest and is the main state in protecting western interests. They then turned against the Saudi monarchy and this struggle still continues today.

10. Saudi Arabia has constructed its foreign relations to protect and enrich the monarchy and in turn the family of Saud. Put within the context of its immense mineral wealth and military riches, Saudi Arabia's role in the world is largely limited to a mere symbolic leadership due to having the two holy Islamic sites, Makkah and Madinah, within its borders. Saudi Arabia has played a role in a handful of regional issues such as hosting negotiations for the two-state solution and being a hosting ground for US bases. It is dominated by the royal family who have maintained an internal balance, which keeps them in power. Saudi Arabia was a nation created by the Saud family for the Saud family.

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¹ “The Constitutional Laws of the Arab Countries,” chapter “The Constitution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

² <http://islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/fatwa-council-senior-scholars-kingdom-saudi-arabia-warning-against-mass-demonstrations>

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2015/03/saudi-gang-rape-victim-punished-with-200-lashes-and-six-months-jail/#sthash.OQEG3kV0.dpuf>