



2016 began violently in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom began the year with the execution of 47 Shiites accused of “terrorism.” Despite this violence directed specifically against a Saudi minority group, the Canadian government continued to defend its contract of \$15 billion with the Saudis for the sale of armoured vehicles. In the face of such dealings, Canadian human rights groups question the probity of Saudi-Canadian relations.

### **What is Saudi Arabia’s Human Rights record?**

Saudi Arabia is known as one of the most repressive governments in the world: Sharia (Islamic religious) law is the basis of the legal system in the country.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia has also never signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. According to Amnesty International (AI), Saudi Arabia violates international law in terms of “torture and other cruel punishments, the equality of women, unfair and secret executions, religious liberty, freedom of speech, the rights of human rights groups, freedom of the press, the right to a fair trial, and arbitrary detention.”<sup>2</sup> The new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz, who took the throne at the beginning of 2015, does not appear to want to challenge the status quo.

In terms of executions, AI reported that 2015 was the most deadly year since 1995: on average, a person was killed every day by the Saudi government in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Decapitation is the preferred means of execution. In Saudi tradition, the condemned criminal is made to kneel in a public square, and the beheading is performed with a sword. According to AI, this barbaric means of execution is practiced only by government in the world: Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> In its executions, the Kingdom systematically discriminates against religious minorities, the Shiites being the primary target recently: the assassination of Shiite leader Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr as well as his 17-year-old nephew being prime examples. In another example, more than a dozen human rights activists have received lengthy criminal sentences.<sup>5</sup> Liberal writer and blogger Raif Badawi, detained since 2012, was condemned in 2015 to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes. His sister and lawyer are also currently being detained.

### **Why might Canada fear upsetting relations with Saudi Arabia?**

Criticized for his choice to maintain diplomatic and economic relations with a country that doesn’t respect human rights, Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion defended himself arguing, “a policy of engagement works much better than a policy of isolation.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there are perhaps other explanations as well. In a document made public by The Canadian Press, high level Canadian bureaucrats strongly recommended that the government strengthen its ties with the Saudis.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for this recommendation were numerous: Saudi Arabia is highly influential in the Gulf Council (a group of Gulf states including the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar), and Canada wishes to have good relations with this Council. Saudi Arabia is also the only Arab country which is a member of the G20, and represents “a first order contributor to the world’s energy security and Canada’s first economic partner in the region.”<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia was the first buyer of Canadian military equipment in 2012 and 2013.<sup>9</sup> In terms of oil production, Saudi Arabia is the number one exporter of oil in the world. In 2016, the Kingdom declined to offset other OPEC countries, and took effective control of the market through its overproduction. This act precipitated the drop in oil markets and the 2015 devastation of Canada’s oil industry. Saudi Arabia remains the only country that can influence oil markets by expanding or restricting its production.<sup>10</sup>

### **Could Canada use economic sanctions to improve human rights in Saudi Arabia?**

Although economic or diplomatic sanctions have sometimes been used in an attempt to address human rights violations in a country, their effectiveness is sometimes questioned. According to a study by professor Dursun Peksen of the University of Memphis Political Science Department, economic sanctions almost always have a negative effect on civilians, even when the sanctions are intended to improve the human rights situation. According to Peksen’s research, the history of such sanctions indicates that often the oppressive regime is almost never affected, and the repression actually increases.<sup>11</sup> Worse, Peksen’s research suggested that this effect is even worse when sanctions are multi-lateral. Middle East specialist at l’UQAM, Samir Moukal, agrees. Moukal argues that Saudi Arabia has many economic

partners, and that a severing of diplomatic and economic ties with Canada would have no ultimate impact on the Kingdom. In terms of the arms sale with Canada, Saudi Arabia would simply move the contract elsewhere. There were, or course, many bidders for the original \$15 billion contract.

Nevertheless, the success of sanctions on apartheid South Africa cannot be denied. Despite the hardships endured by its black population during the international boycott, sanctions against Apartheid South Africa certainly ultimately brought about a dramatic improvement in rights for blacks in that country. There are other cases where sanctions have worked as well, although none as dramatic as the case of South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

One is also hard put to argue that taking a “business as usual” approach to such regimes as Saudi Arabia is appropriate either. Trying to find a middle ground, some international studies made recommendations on the application of sanctions, including, “fine tuning of sanctions to reduce unintended consequences, technically competent monitoring, more effective administration of humanitarian exemptions, model legislation, and special measures for targeted financial sanctions, arms embargoes, and travel bans. The symposium concluded that ‘a strategy for more effective sanctions should target pressure on decision-making elites, while avoiding to the greatest extent possible adverse humanitarian consequences.’”<sup>13</sup>

### **Should Canada cancel its arms contract with Saudi Arabia?**

Yes, probably. However, in the end, human rights in Saudi Arabia may not improve as a result – at least not in the short term. If Canada were to cut ties with Saudi Arabia, it would probably improve the image of Canada internationally and perhaps domestically. However, considering Saudi Arabia’s oil reserves and its influence on this global commodity, many countries will maintain strong economic relations with it regardless of its human rights record. In such a context, Canada needs to use tools like the new Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) to get greater buy-in around the world to prevent the sale of arms to authoritarian regimes. The arms contract aside, Canada should have a long-term strategy which encourages respect for human rights, and yet enables Canada to continue to have a meaningful role to play. (Note that Canada is also an important trade partner, and even arms exporter, to other Arab dictatorships, including Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>14</sup>)

But naturally, the existence of an *ongoing* arms contract with Saudi Arabia makes the current situation unique. The current issue is not one simply of economic relations, but the sale of armoured vehicles that may very likely be used against Saudi Arabia’s civilian population. AI has asked Foreign Minister Dion to formally review the arms contract with the Saudis. AI recommends that Canada suspend the transfer of the vehicles until a human rights evaluation of Saudi Arabia be completed, and the results and the evaluation criteria be made public.<sup>15</sup> If such a study indicates that Canadian arms would be used to potentially perpetrate crimes against civilians, then Canada will need to alter the terms of the contract, or cancel it outright.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ansary, Abdullah F. “A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System,” Hauser Global Law School Program, July 2008

<sup>2</sup> “Joint letter to Ministers Dion and Freeland about arms sales to Saudi Arabia,” Amnesty International, January 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “Saudi Arabia : 151 executed this year in highest recorded toll in nearly two decades,” Amnesty International, November, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> “The Ultimate Punishment: Saudi Arabia ramps up beheadings in the Kingdom,” Amnesty International, April 6, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Human rights watch. « Saudi Arabia ».

<sup>6</sup> “Dion défend l’approche canadienne à l’égard de l’Arabie saoudite,” Radio-Canada, January 2016.

<sup>7</sup> “Trudeau invité à soigner ses relations avec l’Arabie saoudite,” Radio-Canada, January 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Commerce et droits de la personne : le dilemme canadien face à l’Arabie saoudite,” Radio-Canada, Janvier 2016.

<sup>10</sup> “Pétrole : l’Arabie saoudite veut contrôler le marché, coûte que coûte,” Les Affaires, Janvier 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Peksen, Dursun. 2009. « Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights » Journal of Peace Research no. 46. P. 59-77 In Sage Journals.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Adam. « 13 times that economic sanctions really worked » The Washington Post, 28 avril, 2014

<sup>13</sup> L. Minear, D. Cortright, J. Wagler, G. A. Lopez, and T. G. Weiss, “Toward More Humane and Effective Sanctions Management: Enhancing the Capacity of the United Nations System,” Occasional Paper no. 31 (Providence, RI: Thomas J. Watson Jr Institute for International Studies, 1998). The sponsoring institutions are the Humanitarianism and War Project at Brown University, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame, and the Fourth Freedom Forum of Goshen, Ind.

<sup>14</sup> Bérubé, Nicolas. « Ces dictateurs qui s’arment au Canada ». La Presse. 25 janvier 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Adam, “13 times that economic sanctions really worked,” The Washington Post, April 28, 2014