

# Canadian Political Parties - Comparison and Facts *Partis politiques canadiens - comparaison et faits*

CJPME 2019 Election Guide / Guide électoral 2019 de CJPME

## RESPONSE TO SAUDI HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES RÉPONSE AUX ABUS SAUDIENS

### Assessment / Évaluation

 Conservative Party of Canada / Parti conservateur du Canada	<b>F</b>
 New Democratic Party / Nouveau Parti démocratique	<b>A</b>
 Liberal Party of Canada / Parti libéral du Canada	<b>D</b>
 Bloc Québécois	<b>n/a</b>
 Green Party of Canada / Parti Vert du Canada	<b>A-</b>

### Executive Summary

Since 2015, the Liberal government has condemned Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses on numerous occasions. However, the government has failed to make any concrete changes in its policy toward the Saudis. Talk with no action earns the Liberals a barely passing grade.

The Conservative response, meanwhile, is even more disappointing as the party has actually criticized Canadian-led human rights interventions. The Conservatives have also repeatedly reiterated the need for Canada to maintain strong commercial and political ties with Saudi Arabia, despite its abuses. For this, the Conservatives earn a failing grade.

Contrary to the Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois (BQ) have been quick to condemn Saudi human rights abuses. The Greens have also consistently condemned Saudi abuses, while calling for a

### Sommaire exécutif

Depuis 2015, le gouvernement libéral a condamné à maintes reprises les violations des droits de la personne en Arabie saoudite. Néanmoins, le gouvernement a échoué à mettre en œuvre des changements concrets dans ses politiques envers les Saoudiens. Beaucoup de discours sans action ont valu aux libéraux une note de passage juste.

La réponse des conservateurs, quant à elle, est d'autant plus décevante étant donné que le parti a critiqué les interventions canadiennes en matière de droits de la personne. Les conservateurs ont également réitéré à de nombreuses reprises la nécessité pour le Canada de maintenir des liens commerciaux et politiques solides avec l'Arabie saoudite, malgré ses abus. Pour cette raison, les conservateurs ont obtenu une note d'échec.

Contrairement aux conservateurs, le Bloc québécois (BQ) s'est empressé de condamner les

complete arms embargo on Saudi Arabia.

The NDP has been the most vocal in criticizing Saudi Arabia's abuses and has continued to hold the government accountable for its arms sales to the Saudis. As such three parties received strong grades.

violations des droits de la personne en Arabie saoudite. Les verts ont également systématiquement condamné les abus saoudiens, tout en appelant à un embargo complet sur les armes à destination de l'Arabie saoudite.

Le NPD a été le plus loquace dans sa critique des abus de l'Arabie saoudite et a continué de tenir le gouvernement responsable pour sa vente d'armes aux saoudiens. Ainsi, les trois partis ont reçu de bonnes notes.

## Background

As a major oil exporter and regional power, Saudi Arabia remains key to Canadian foreign policy in the Middle East. The Kingdom has always been conservative, and maintaining diplomatic relationships with Saudi Arabia while enforcing uniform standards for human rights worldwide has been a challenge. With Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) as the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia, incoming government will have to navigate Saudi Arabia's domestic civil rights abuses, especially:

**Domestic Human Rights Violations:** Under Saudi law, the rights of women and minorities continue to be restricted. Some limited reforms have been enacted; for example, the Saudi government announced in August 2019 that it would be eliminating part of its male guardianship system, finally granting women the right to obtain passports.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, key aspects of the male guardianship system remain in place. Women still need permission of a male guardian to marry or divorce, and still require a male guardian to receive elective medical care. This is merely one example of the innumerable laws that make up Saudi Arabia's prejudiced system. In addition to this gender-based repression, Saudi Arabia's puritanical government also brutally persecutes religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, activists, religious leaders and intellectuals who express opinions contrary to those of the monarchy are routinely jailed for indefinite periods. Punishments for all crimes tend to be draconian, with high rates of execution by beheading or stoning for non-violent crimes.<sup>3</sup>

**Safety of Saudi Critics Abroad:** In addition to continuing human rights abuses domestically, MbS has also targeted his critics internationally. Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who was critical of MbS, was murdered and dismembered on direct orders from MbS in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate last year.<sup>4</sup> Though MbS has refused to take responsibility for Khashoggi's murder, the ordeal sends a clear message to critics: the Saudi monarchy will not tolerate dissidence. Indeed, even residents of Canada have been targeted by Saudi surveillance, and it is not unfathomable that this overreach could escalate.<sup>5</sup>

## Liberal Position

In 2018, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland tweeted her "alarm" at Saudi Arabia's imprisonment of numerous feminist activists.<sup>6</sup> Her willingness to shed light on these human rights abuses is laudable, although this condemnation was followed by little concrete action. The Liberal Party has often boasted about its "feminist" foreign policy, which aims to support women's rights around the world. Saudi Arabia would seem to be an ideal target for this "feminist" foreign policy, as Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's most repressive societies for women. However, despite the government's "feminist" foreign policy objectives, Canada has taken no bold diplomatic steps to improve the lot of Saudi women.

Following Khashoggi's murder, Trudeau publicly stated that he would examine the possibility of cancelling arms exports to Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, the Liberals' promise to review the arms deal seems to have been a way to bury the issue in the wake of Khashoggi's murder.

The Trudeau government has largely voiced its frustration with Saudi human rights abuses through tweets. Despite its willingness to condemn abuses, however, the government has maintained strong economic ties with the Kingdom. The Liberals fail to admit that these arms exports merely embolden and strengthen the Saudi regime.

### **Conservative Position**

Whereas the Harper government did occasionally condemn Saudi abuses or agitate for the release of activists, the Conservatives under Scheer have been largely silent on the issue of Saudi abuses. Under the Harper government, former Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird called for clemency for Raif Badawi, a jailed Saudi blogger whose wife and children are Canadian citizens. The Harper government also pushed privately for the activist's release.<sup>8</sup> Despite these agitations, the Conservatives did not hesitate to negotiate a \$15 billion-dollar arms deal with the Saudis.

After the gruesome details of the Khashoggi murder emerged in October 2018, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer opposed ending the Saudi arms deal. Instead, he proposed sanctioning Saudi Arabia by ceasing to import their oil. Such contradictory stances cast the authenticity of Scheer's concern for Khashoggi in doubt.

In August 2019, the party's Foreign Affairs Critic Erin O'Toole announced that if elected, the Conservatives would prioritize the restoration of ties with Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> O'Toole has thus far promised to increase aid packages and commercial ties with the Saudi monarchy – despite its grave human rights abuses.

### **NDP Position**

The NDP has been consistent in its support for international law and has repeatedly called for sanctions against Saudi human rights abuses. NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said that he would tear up the arms deal with Saudi Arabia if he were Prime Minister, and pointed out that there was enough justification to do so even before the Khashoggi murder.<sup>10</sup> For years, MP H  l  ne Laverdi  re campaigned against the Saudi arms deal, raising the issue in the House of Commons and in op-eds at least 28 times in 2018 alone. On the whole, the party has been consistent in its condemnation of the arms deal, and has repeatedly called for its cancellation.<sup>11,12</sup>

The NDP has also been consistent in its support for Saudi dissidents and activists. In January 2016, then-Foreign Affairs critic H  l  ne Laverdi  re released a statement condemning the arrest and detention of Saudi activist Samar Badawi.<sup>13</sup>

### **Bloc Qu  b  cois Position**

While the Bloc spoke out about Saudi human rights abuses several times prior to 2015, CJPME was unable to find many statements by the party or its leaders over the past four years.

### **Green Position**

Elizabeth May and the Greens have been clear from the outset that they oppose the sale of Canadian-made weapons to Saudi Arabia. The party has long called for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia, far before the Khashoggi murder.<sup>14</sup> May also tweeted her support for Chrystia Freeland's condemnation of

Saudi human rights abuses in 2018, saying “We should have done more and cancelled tank sale long ago.”<sup>15</sup> The Greens have a long history of condemning Saudi abuses and have opposed the arms deal from the start.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Medea. “Guardianship System Eased, But Saudi Arabia Still Oppresses Women.” Common Dreams. August 2, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> BBC. “Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia executes top Shia Cleric”. 2 Jan. 2016. Accessed 18 Mar. 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35213244>

<sup>3</sup> Perper, Rosie. “Saudi Arabia is Pulling Thousands of Students from Canada in Escalating Human Rights Feud”. 7 Aug. 2018. Accessed 18 Mar. 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-canada-human-rights-students-2018-8>

<sup>4</sup> Raju, Manu. “Saudi Crown Prince Ordered, Monitored Killing of Khashoggi”. 5 Dec. 2018. Accessed 13 Mar. 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/04/politics/haspel-briefing-khashoggi/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Braga, Matthew. “A Quebecer spoke out against the Saudis- then learned he had spyware on his phone”. CBC. 10 Oct. 2018. Accessed 13 Mar. 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/omar-abdulaziz-spyware-saudi-arabia-nso-citizen-lab-quebec-1.4845179>

<sup>6</sup> Freeland, Chrystia. Twitter, 2 Aug. 2018. Accessed 13 Mar. 2019. <https://twitter.com/cafreeland/status/1025030172624515072>

<sup>7</sup> Kassam, Ashifa. “Justin Trudeau defends Canada’s arms sales to Saudi Arabia”. 21 Mar 2018. Accessed 13 Mar. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/justin-trudeau-defends-canada-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia>

<sup>8</sup> Baird John. Twitter. 20 Jan. 2015. Accessed 18 Mar. 2019. <https://twitter.com/Baird/status/557703688341692418>

<sup>9</sup> Blatchford, Andy. “Conservatives, if elected, would work to restore ties with Saudi Arabia.” CBC. August 2, 2019. Accessed August 8, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> CTVNews Staff. “Singh Urges Ottawa to Cancel Arms Deal”. 20 Oct. 2019. Accessed 18 Mar. 2019. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/singh-urges-ottawa-to-cancel-15b-saudi-arms-deal-1.4142992>

<sup>11</sup> <http://helenelavardiere.ndp.ca/the-ndp-on-canadian-arms-exports>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ndp.ca/news/ndp-calls-foreign-affairs-minister-retract-comments-saudi-arms-deal>

<sup>13</sup> “NDP Statement on Samar Badawi’s Arrest by Saudi Arabia.” NDP. January 12, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.greenparty.ca/en/media-release/2016-03-09/green-party-calls-arms-embargo-against-saudi-arabia-over-actions-yemen>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/elizabethmay/status/1026250431112962048?lang=en>