



Weekly Press Review

31st of July – 6th of August

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SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia executes at least 40 in the first half of 2021



Image source: Amnesty.org

Saudi Arabia's G20 presidency saw a sharp decline both in the use of the death penalty and the prosecution of activists. However, in the first half of this year, Saudi Arabia has cracked down heavily on human rights defenders and dissidents and drastically increased executions, according to Saudi human rights groups and Amnesty International's death penalty tracking.

According to these midway reports, since Saudi Arabia handed over the G20 presidency, the state has prosecuted, sentenced, or upheld sentences from unfair trials of at least 13 people. After an 85% decrease in recorded executions in 2020, at least 40 people were executed in the first half of 2021, which is more than the total number of executions in all of 2020. Human rights groups argue that the human rights reforms and improvements seen in 2020 in Saudi Arabia were simply a PR stunt, with Amnesty International noting that "as soon as the G20 spotlight on Saudi Arabia faded, the authorities resumed their ruthless pursuit of people who dare to express their opinions freely or criticize the government."

Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court, or SCC, has greatly increased its activity this year, following the 2020 lull. The SCC re-arrested, re-sentenced, or increased sentences of human rights defenders after the G20 presidency ended, and has continued that trajectory with unfair trials and convictions based on torture. The reports released this week on the first half of 2021 show continued torture, unfair trials, unjust sentencing, and a heavy reliance on the death penalty to dissuade freedom of expression and human rights defense.

SCC convictions this year include imprisonment based on charges such as "seeking to disrupt social cohesion and weaken national unity" and "publishing a book containing suspicious views." Currently, at least 39 known activists, human rights defenders, or dissidents remain imprisoned due to the SCC resurgence, with many others facing extended travel or speaking bans after their release.

Brief review

Palestine – The Journalist Support Committee, a Geneva-based rights group, released a report this week tallying 61 known Israeli violations against Palestinian journalists in July. Israeli forces used extreme force, detention, sentencing, travel bans, and confiscations to prevent freedom of expression and speech. These violations include targeting and wounding 22 Palestinian journalists, arresting and detaining at least seven, sentencing at least five, and banning and obstructing the work of more than 20.

Iran – On August 2, Iran secretly executed Sajad Sanjari, only informing his family when a prison official asked them to come collect his body. Sajad was first sentenced in 2012 for murder, when he killed an attacker in self defense when he was just 15 years old. His self defense plea was rejected after the court heard testimony defending the character of his attacker. The secrecy of his execution prevented his family and other advocates from intervening.

Tunisia - Yassine Ayari, a member of the Tunisian parliament, was arrested after accusing president Kais Saied of seizing power unconstitutionally. This came after Saied dismissed the prime minister and froze parliament in what some have been calling a coup. Ayari posted to facebook that Saied, "made a constitution by himself and is enforcing it with guns," and was arrested just days later. News sources state that Ayari has been arrested previously in 2015 and 2018 for being critical of the military.

SYRIA

Tensions increase in Daraa, Syria amongst government and rebel forces



Image Source: AFP

Daraa, Syria was one of the first locations in which regime opposition took hold with many calling it the “cradle of the revolution”. Now, a decade later, conflict has resumed in this region resulting in civilian casualties and calls for peace negotiations. Conflict in Daraa-al Balad, Syria has worsened over the past few weeks with 23 people killed on Thursday alone. 28 people total died last week due to government and rebel clashes, 11 of which were civilian deaths.

The clashes come as a result of failed negotiations between rebel forces and the government's forces of the Fourth Division. Areas in Daraa such as Daraa al-Balad, Muzayrib, and Tafas saw heavy bombardment on Tuesday. The attacks on Daraa came after the Syrian Defense Minister visited the area and threatened that the army would, “restore the authority of the state over the entire Syrian territory” and storm the region if their demands were not met. While the violence has escalated, negotiations between the army, security officials, and a committee of Daraa’s residents have been ongoing with pressure from Russia to resolve the conflict.

Although peace negotiations are underway, many have decided to flee the cities under attack to avoid harassment by government forces, get access to necessary medicine, and find some sense of normalcy in a region devastated by a decade of violence. The situation is still ongoing with local fighters attacking military positions, youths blocking the Damascus-Daraa international highway in protest, and the regime planning to install nine military checkpoints in Daraa-al Balad. This resurgence in conflict is causing an already troubling human rights situation to become worse with further displacement and civilian deaths. The regime installing an excessive amount of checkpoints will also put Daraa under increased surveillance and likely result in further escalation.

Brief review

Egypt – Egyptian authorities have summoned at least five prominent human rights defenders in July 2021 in what Human Rights Watch calls arbitrary prosecutions. The human rights defenders are prosecuted over the so-called Case 173 of 2011 over allegations of receiving foreign funds. This is not the first time Egyptian authorities summon human rights activists: since 2016, 30 human rights activists have been placed on arbitrary travel ban lists as well as the authorities have frozen the assets for over a dozen organizations and individuals.

Lebanon – One year after the Beirut explosion on the 4th of August 2020, Lebanese authorities “have spent the past year shamelessly obstructing victims’ quest for truth and justice” according to Amnesty International. Furthermore, Human Rights Watch has released an investigation providing evidence that senior officials’ mismanagement and lack of communication about the danger of the ammonium nitrate that caused the explosion. Over 217 people were killed, 7000 injured and 300.000 displaced because of the explosion.

Turkey - Turkish authorities have arrested 10 suspects over the killing of seven people from the ethnically Kurdish Dedeoglu family in Turkey. Family members claim that this brutal gun attack was ethnically motivated, while authorities blame a feud between two families. Authorities cite aggression between the families that dates to 2010, whereas the family’s lawyer and the pro-Kurdish opposition party say the victims were targeted for their ethnicity, as one of the victims reported after an attack in May that they were being harassed for being Kurdish.

Israeli Supreme Court proposal on Sheikh Jarrah expulsion rejected



Image Source: Arab News

The Israeli Supreme Court's proposal on the forced expulsion of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah was rejected on Monday the 2nd of August. Four Palestinian families have been threatened with expulsion from the Sheikh Jarrah area in occupied East Jerusalem to make way for Israeli settlers. The Palestinian families on Monday rejected the Israeli Supreme Court's proposal to give them the status as "protected tenants", recognizing settler ownership of the area. A lawyer representing the Palestinian families, told Aljazeera that "So far, we did not hear an offer that was fair enough and preserves the rights of residents. Therefore, we did not reach any compromise."

The threat of expulsion of the Palestinians of Sheikh Jarrah was the starting point of the recent crackdown on Palestinians by Israel. In late April, Palestinians started protesting the threat of expulsion of Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and were met with assault from Israeli authorities. Furthermore, Israeli mobs went to the streets, chanting "Death to Arabs" in East Jerusalem, as well as violence spread between Arabs and Jew throughout the city. This led to Hamas targeting rockets over Jerusalem, which again led to Israeli airstrikes and bombings of Gaza, damaging large parts of Gaza; killing at least 240 in Gaza and 12 in Israel.

Israel's evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem are illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention, as an occupying power is prohibited from forcibly transferring the population, as well as it is prohibited from applying its own laws to the occupied territory. In July, this led Michael Lynk, the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967, to conclude that the Israeli settlements do amount to war crime.

Brief review

Syria – Women prisoners linked to the Islamic state have been released from Al-Hol camp in Raqqa in an ongoing effort to empty the camp. The Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) released 82 families from the camp consisting of 229 women and children. Those released have found great relief in their freedom from the camp where they argue that conditions are dire with a lack of healthcare and unaccountability for crime and sexual assault.

Saudi Arabia – A Saudi court sentenced Ahmad Ali Abdelkader, Sudanese media personality and journalist, to four years in prison for "insulting the state's institutions and symbols" and "negatively speaking about the kingdom's policies." All relating to tweets and media interviews he shared on Twitter that expressed support for Sudan's 2018-2019 revolution and criticized Saudi actions in Sudan and Yemen. His trial consisted of two short sessions, one where his charges were read out to him and he couldn't defend himself, and another where he was read his sentence.

LIBYA

Nearly 400 migrants rescued in Mediterranean Sea



Image Source: Al Jazeera

Early last week, two German and French NGO rescue ships pulled 394 migrants from a dangerously overcrowded wooden boat in the Mediterranean. The two humanitarian rescue ships, Sea-Watch 3 and Ocean Viking rescued the migrants in Tunisian waters 68km from the North African coast, in a six-hour operation. The wooden boats were taking in water and their engine wasn't working. It is not clear if there were any deaths or injuries among the migrants on the boat.

The NGO ships already rescued people in operations over the weekend, the Ocean Viking alone had about 555 people, including a three-month-old infant on board by Sunday evening. Sea Watch 3 was also carrying dozens of people, many with poor health. The migrants on these boats were mainly men from Morocco, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Syria, many of whom tried to jump off the boat and swim to rescue ships.

According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 1,100 people fleeing conflict in the Middle East and Africa have died this year in the Mediterranean. Migrant boat departures have been increasing due improved weather conditions. The Central Mediterranean is dangerous, and many overcrowded vessels find themselves in distress at sea. Sea Watch called the current situation in the Mediterranean "extremely critical."

Rescue organizations criticize the interception of migrant boats by coastguards, where the migrants are brought back to detention centers in Libya. In a recent report, Amnesty condemned "the ongoing complicity of European states" for cooperating with the authorities in Libya in their continued violations of migrants. Migrants are forcibly removed and brought back to Libya by coastguards where they are exposed to sexual and physical violence.

Brief review

Palestine – Israeli forces bulldozed two residential buildings housing Palestinians in the West Bank. The individuals living in the building and the building owners were violently attacked by Israeli forces as well. A senior employee within the Israeli Ministry of Defense stated that they will "purge" the area of Palestinians. Additionally, during the Israeli demolitions of Palestinian properties, the water supply is destroyed or contaminated to make the area inhabitable for Palestinians.

Iran – Ebrahim Raesi has been sworn in as Iran's newest president. His presidency is cause for concern, due to his long history of promoting the violation of human rights. This comes at a time where tensions are high, particularly between Iran and the U.S, in the midst of discussions regarding the nuclear deal and the debilitating U.S sanctions against Iran. Additionally, Iran has faced water shortages, blackouts across the country, and a currency rapidly diminishing in value.

TURKEY

Role of media in raising public awareness on violence against women



Image Source: Getty/Daily Sabbah

The Turkish government has released a four-year plan to combat violence against women and will use media as a primary tool in combatting against it. President Erdoğan summed up the five main goals of the plan as “facilitation of access to legal services for women, integration of the all-out fight against violence to all policies, raising public awareness and proper collection of data regarding the issue.” Raising public awareness will be achieved through the usage of media, and will be vital in changing Turkish society’s perception of domestic violence and inequality.

United Nations Women Turkey director, Asya Varbanova elaborated in the context of the world, that violence against women is becoming a global “shadow pandemic”, and that violence against girls and women is the most-widespread violation of human rights. She additionally stated that although most women have certain rights pertaining to safety, they need to have the knowledge to be able to utilize those rights. Furthermore, she called upon Turkish society to further equality between men and women, stating that the violence stems from gender inequality.

The U.N has recommended that Turkey reconsider its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, as it will potentially have negative consequences. The Istanbul Convention is a treaty that was established to protect women from domestic violence. Şuay Nilhan Açıkalın, a professor at Ankara University responded that some of the countries that also signed it have not ratified it or implemented any efforts to combat violence against women and that Turkey will continue to fight violence against women in their own efforts.

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