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Catastrophe in Saudi Arabia, pillar of Washington's Middle East policy

Bill Van Auken

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The horrific and massive death toll stemming from a stampede of Muslim pilgrims near Mecca is symptomatic of a deepening crisis of the Saudi monarchy, a lynchpin of reaction and key pillar of US policy in the Middle East.

Thursday's catastrophe was reported by Saudi officials to have killed at least 717 people and injured 863 others, with warnings that the death toll would almost certainly rise. The head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization said that the number of deaths is expected to climb to 1,500, which would make it the worst disaster at the site in recorded history, surpassing the deaths of 1,426 pilgrims in a similar incident 25 years ago.

The Saudi monarchy's instinctual reaction to the latest tragedy was to blame the pilgrims themselves for allegedly not "respecting the timetables," as Health Minister Khaled al-Falih told local media. Prince Khaled al-Faisal, head of the regime's central Hajj committee, went further, blaming the stampede on "some pilgrims with African nationalities" in a clear appeal to reactionary anti-foreign and racist sentiments.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saudi issued a statement insisting that the catastrophe in no way discredited the country's security forces.

Aside from a general desire to deny the obvious blame that befalls those responsible for controlling the crowds—the same armed forces upon which the power of the monarchy ultimately rests—it appears there may have been a far more specific reason for King Salman's disclaimer, one involving his son and eventual heir, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud.

The Lebanese daily *Al Diyar* reported late Thursday that the stampede was triggered by the arrival on the scene of a large militarized convoy transporting the 30-year-old deputy crown prince, who is also the country's defense minister.

“The large convoy of Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, the King's son and deputy crown prince, that was escorted by over 350 security forces, including 200 army men and 150 policemen, sped up the road to go through the pilgrims that were moving towards the site of the ‘Stoning the Devil’ ritual, causing panic among millions of pilgrims who were on the move from the opposite direction and caused the stampede,” the newspaper reported.

The formal title of Saudi Arabia's king is “the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques [Mecca and Medina].” Thursday's disaster, which follows close on the heels of another 107 deaths in a September 11 crane collapse at Mecca's Grand Mosque, inevitably is politically damaging to the monarchy. If his son played a direct role in triggering the mass slaughter, it may well prove fatally destabilizing.

Indeed, on the eve of the latest disaster, a letter surfaced written by an unnamed grandson of King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, calling on the royal family to convene an “emergency meeting” essentially for the purpose of deposing the king and his key supporters.

The letter indicts Saudi interventionism in Yemen and Syria as “totally miscalculated” acts that have “weakened the trust of our people and [incited] other people against us.”

It points to the country's growing economic crisis, fueled by the collapse in oil prices, which in turn has been driven in large measure by the monarchy's decision to continue full production with the aim of inflicting damage on Iran and Russia. The result has been a sharp decline in revenues, threatening to raise this year's budget deficit to as much as 20 percent of GDP. If the monarchy is forced to implement austerity measures, cutting back on social spending, it may well trigger an explosive revolt in a country where an estimated 40 percent of the population lives in poverty, and where 40 percent of young workers, between the ages of 20 and 24, are unemployed.

The letter concludes by asking the House of Saud to “isolate the incapable King Salaman, the extravagant and vain Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, and the rotten thief Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salaman.”

As defense minister, the deputy crown prince is no stranger to mass killings and contempt for human life. He has been the monarchy's point man in the six-month-old Saudi-led war against Yemen, pitting the monarchical dictatorships of the richest countries of the Arab world against the people of the poorest.

Saudi warplanes, supplied, armed and refueled in mid-air by the Pentagon, have carried out non-stop bombings that have killed thousands of civilians while destroying schools, hospitals, factories, residential neighborhoods and world heritage sites. More than 1.5 million people have been driven from their homes, and at least 21 million, 80 percent of the country's population, have been left in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

The war is part of a more bellicose foreign policy pursued by the Saudi monarchy since the succession of King Salman at the beginning of this year. It is directed in the first instance against Iran and all those perceived to be in its orbit. This has included not only the Houthi rebels in Yemen, but also Syria, where Saudi money and arms have been key to the war for regime change fought by Al Qaeda-linked militias, also with US coordination and backing.

War abroad has been combined with the intensification of hideous repression at home. The Saudi regime is already on track to double its number of executions compared to last year. According to an Amnesty International tally issued in late August, the regime put to death, either by beheadings or firing squads, at least 175 people over the previous 12 months. This is more than triple the number of state killings carried out during the same period in the US, which has 10 times the population of the Saudi kingdom.

In the face of international outrage, the despotic monarchy is preparing to execute Ali al-Nimr, who was arrested as a 17-year-old high school student for taking part in a 2011 protest. He is sentenced to death by beheading, with his headless corpse to be publicly crucified. Like most sentenced to die, he was convicted in a drumhead trial, based on a confession extracted through torture.

Incredibly, Saudi Arabia has recently been selected to chair a key UN human rights panel. A State Department spokesman this week said that Washington "welcomes" this grotesque move, because Saudi Arabia is a "close ally."

As the proverb says, "by your friends shall ye be known." That Saudi Arabia is Washington's closest ally in the Arab world is the clearest exposure of the predatory and criminal character of US imperialism's protracted intervention in the Middle East.

It likewise is an undeniable refutation of every propaganda claim made to justify the successive US wars of aggression. Washington has supposedly waged a "war on terrorism," while allied with a Saudi regime that is the principal font of Islamist ideology and main paymaster for Islamist militias throughout the region. It has claimed to wage proxy wars for regime change in Libya and Syria in the name of "human rights" and "democracy", while giving its unconditional backing to one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies, infamous for its beheadings, floggings and torture.

In the final analysis, however, that Washington counts on Saudi Arabia as a pillar for its drive for hegemony over the Middle East only underscores the fact that US imperialism's policy resembles nothing so much as a house of cards, set to collapse into new and ever greater debacles in the face of inevitable crises and mounting social struggles.

