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Arrests in Saudi Arabia: What Next?

Hanan Amarna

In a surprise move, the Saudi authorities carried out a series of arrests of preachers and intellectuals, including Sheikh Salman Al-Awda and his brother Khaled Al-Awda, Mohamed Mousa Al-Sharif, Fahd Al-Sunaidi, Awed Al-Qarni and the well-known female preacher Ruqqaya Meharib. Saudi human rights and political sources said that the number of detainees has so far reached 150, which is expected to increase. However, the arrests were not restricted to preachers and intellectuals, but others were also arrested, including Prince Abdul Aziz bin Fahad, son of the late King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, and Ziyad bin Hijab bin Nahit, the well-known poet and son of the leader of Harb tribe – one of the largest tribes in the Kingdom, in terms of number – who has always been close to the regime.

The Saudi authorities accused the detainees of not responding to a request by the royal court for attacking Qatar, where they received phone calls from Royal Court Advisor Saud al-Qahtani, who is close to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Also, they reportedly received calls from Al-Arabiya TV Director Turki al-Dakhil, who asked them to attack Qatar immediately. One of the ‘detainees’ then justified his rejection, saying: "Soon you will reach reconciliation, and put us to shame." So, the immediate response from the regime was arrests and ready-made ‘terrorism charges’.

First: interpretations

The arrests of Saudi scholars and intellectuals by authorities have several causes, including:



1- To move towards radical changes and transformations in the Saudi regime, and allow Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to extend his influence over the whole Saudi territory. These changes included all Saudi institutions, starting with the removal of former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef from his post, through the adoption of several decisions warning of a marked shift in the established rules on which the structure of political, social and religious in Saudi Arabia is based.

2- Saudi Arabia, according to analysts and observers, is clearly on the path of secularism, especially in light of the media campaigns on Saudi channels – which adopt the new orientations – supporting and explaining the benefits of civil constitutions and the civil state. Thus, Saudi authorities attempt to prepare the Saudi public opinion for this historic and quick shift, which could pull the rug from under the feet of the religious institution altogether.

3- The arrests came at a time when Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Saudi Vision 2030" has been launched – which is aimed at reducing the Kingdom's dependence on oil, the backbone of Saudi economy, finding other sources to support the Saudi economy, and preparing for adoption of a liberal approach of governance. In this context, the Saudi regime views the detained preachers as an obstacle in the way of renaissance and development.

4- Mohammed bin Salman's attempt to please the West and acquit Saudi Arabia from the charge of sponsoring terrorism was behind arrests of Saudi preachers and intellectuals for fear that they may not be supportive of his new trend. Hence, the arrests were an attempt to prevent the scholars' expected protests. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the number of detainees in Saudi prisons is about 30 thousand Saudi citizens.

5- The talk about an imminent peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and "Israel", including a comprehensive and permanent normalization between the two sides, is



one of the reasons behind the recent detention campaign in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, a question arises: Can Saudi society accept rapprochement with “Israel”, which is seen by many Arabs as the nation’s enemy? We see that there is a significant change in the attitude of the Saudi street towards Israel now. For example, some tweets and comments from Saudis on the social media say that ‘Israel has not launched any aggression against the Kingdom’ – in the context of controversy on the attitude towards “Israel”, especially in light of the escalating hostility and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

6- The Gulf-Qatar crisis and the position of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE highlighted the fact that the two countries (Saudi Arabia and UAE) have been scrambling towards secularization in order to satisfy the United States and the West, even if this was at the expense of the fundamentals and religious pillars. It is noteworthy that UAE Ambassador to Washington Youssef Al-Otaiba revealed these intentions late in July in a TV interview, saying: “If you asked the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Bahrain what kind of Middle East they want to see in 10 years, they would have a view opposed to that of Qatar. We want strong, stable and prosperous *secular* governments.” Therefore, the crisis with Qatar has nothing to do with the 13-demand list declared by the four blockading countries. In fact, the blockading countries wanted to silence opponents at an early stage to facilitate the process of infiltration within the society with secular ideas that some quarters want to enforce in Saudi Arabia.

Second: Scenarios

In light of this, many analysts and experts in Saudi Arabia believe that there are several important scenarios, most notably:

Scenario I: A likely clash could take place between Wahhabism, which is a fundamental reference in Saudi society, and the newly growing liberal thought in this Gulf state.

Scenario II: A policy of security alert and an "iron fist" could be adopted by Saudi authorities, in a pre-emptive step before the actual inauguration of Mohammed bin Salman as King of Saudi Arabia, ensuring no opposition from prominent figures during his reign. It is noteworthy that the shy calls for protests on September 15, 2017 did not receive an adequate response, which led organizers – most of whom live outside Saudi Arabia – to express their demands through social networking sites.

Scenario III: A political division within the ruling family could occur, especially after the removal of former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in favor of his cousin Mohammed bin Salman. According to Western reports, Bin Nayef is now under house arrest. A strong indication that there is a sharp dispute over Bin Salman's new position as crown prince is that his picture was absent from his uncle's office (Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, the former interior minister).

Scenario IV: A popular mobilization is likely to take place against the policy of gagging people's mouths. This movement may lead to political transformations within the Kingdom, or at least strengthening the parties opposed to Mohammed bin Salman's new position.

Conclusion

In light of the Saudi regime's hasty procedures and decisions, including the arrest of preachers and thinkers, and the shy responses from other preachers, we believe that the second scenario is likely to take place in the Saudi arena. More arrests are expected for rights activists, writers and poets as pre-emptive steps to prevent Saudi people's right to freedom of expression.