

Saudi Arabia Update: Ongoing Siege of Al Awamiyah

The end of last month saw a renewal in violence in the city of Al Awamiyah located in the eastern province of Qatif in Saudi Arabia. This area has been under extreme lock-down since July 26th, and 8 killed so far. The majority Shia population has been promised safe conduct of leave. Before, however, soldiers milled the streets firing at anyone walking by. Vehicles packed with luggage exited the city hanging white T-shirts as white flags with hopes that soldiers won't fire upon said vehicle. A group of Asian migrants were forced to strip and lie on their stomachs in the middle of the street. Al-Musawarah, a neighborhood with structures dating back to the Ottoman Empire, is falling victim to Saudi bulldozers.

In February of 2011, this region was the source of Shia protests, calling for equality and democracy. The government cracked down on the protestors, and in 2014, Riyadh redefined an anti-terrorism law to target activism. Doing so allowed government activists and critics to be sentenced to death.

So far at least 66 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia since the start of 2017 as of July 24th and following 14 Shia waiting to be executed:

1. Hussain Muhammdal-Muslim
2. Muhammad Mansur al- Mansure
3. Mustafa Ahmad Darwish
4. Fazil Hussain Labbad
5. Saeed Mihammadal-Sakafi
6. Salman Amin al-Quraish
7. Mujtaba'a al-Sweikat
8. Muneer Abdulah al-Adam
9. Abdulah Salman al-Sarih
10. AbdulAziz Hassan al-sahwi
11. Ahmad al-Rabia
12. Ahmad Feisal al-Darwish
13. Hussain Hassan al-Rabia
14. Abdula Hani al-Tarif

On 10 May, 2017, masked Saudi special security forces and bulldozers surrounded the historic neighborhood with the intention of raiding the area, forcing out the inhabitants and bulldozing their homes. Roads were blocked, preventing evacuation, and snipers were deployed on building rooftops, firing either aimlessly or into family homes.

The Saudi government justified their actions by stating that the buildings of the district needed repair and were on the verge of collapsing. The inhabitants, however, stated that restoration projects could have salvaged the situation, pointing out that the government had restored buildings in other neighborhoods without total demolition. Even the United Nations condemned Saudi demolition of historic buildings on 24 May, saying that “the work erased cultural heritage and violated human rights.”

Today, Saudi forces have renewed their offensive of the city, lobbing mortars and even artillery in order to destroy more homes, and they are brazenly and arbitrarily walking the streets shooting at civilians including women and children. Not only have homes been targeted but also essential infrastructure, limiting basic needs such as electricity. Just as Riyadh had done with the law, the government changed the rhetoric from “restoration” to “anti-terrorism” in order to justify the use of arms.

Shia Rights Watch calls an end to Saudi hostilities, and for the government to respect the human rights of the citizens it is supposed to protect. Al Awamiyah is an enclave of a Shia minority, but those minorities are still citizens to the Saudi government. In order to prevent a long-term conflict that could only hurt Saudi Arabia, the government must recognize that the solution is not violence.