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SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Canada Saudi Crisis: Background and Implications

Policy Analysis Unit | August 2018

Diplomatic Breakdown for Canada and Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

Relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Canada were stretched to breaking point following Canadian criticism of the Saudi human rights record last week. This latest diplomatic crisis followed comments by the Canadian Foreign Ministry and the Canadian Embassy in Riyadh on 2 and 3 August 2018, regarding a campaign of arrests of human rights activists. Saudi responded with punitive measures, declaring the Canadian ambassador in Riyadh “persona non grata” and giving him 24 hours to leave the country, as well as recalling their own ambassador. They also cancelled all direct flights between Canada and Saudi Arabia, and suspended student exchange programmes, medical treatments and import of wheat. The Saudi measures were intended to pressure Canada to issue an official apology, which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has refused to do, and to deter other Western countries from discussing human rights issues in the Kingdom.

The full picture

On 2 August 2018, the Canadian Foreign Ministry expressed its concern about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia with a tweet: “Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia.” The tweet was followed with another stating, “Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi.”¹ Canadian Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland had earlier expressed her sympathy for the Badawi family (Raif and his sister Samar)². Saudi authorities had launched a campaign of arrests against civil rights activists working for human rights and women's freedoms, including Samar Badawi, winner of the US

¹ “Canada is gravely concerned about additional arrests of civil society and women’s rights activists in [#SaudiArabia](#), including Samar Badawi. We urge the Saudi authorities to immediately release them and all other peaceful [#humanrights](#) activists,” Canada Foreign Policy Twitter account, 3/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2M752L9>

² “Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi.” Chrystia Freeland Twitter account, 2/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://twitter.com/cafreeland/status/1025030172624515072>

State Department's "International Women of Courage Award" in 2012, and Nasima Al-Sada, a human rights activist in the Eastern Province³. Canada re-published the same statement in Arabic for its embassy in Riyadh on 5 August 2018⁴, which led to the outbreak of the crisis. Canada has not commented on the arrest of other activists, nor on the arrests of Islamist reformers for nearly a year.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry issued a statement accusing Canada of blatant interference in the Kingdom's domestic affairs, "which calls for an appropriate response," which they enacted through the aforementioned punitive measures. In addition, the Saudis froze all businesses transactions and investments linked with Canada, while retaining the right to pursue further action ahead⁵. In a press conference on Wednesday, 8 August 2018, Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir called on Canada to apologize for its "interference in the internal affairs" of his country. He announced the establishment of two operations rooms at the Saudi Embassy in Canada and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assist Saudi citizens affected by the various measures taken by the Saudi government.

This is not the first time that the Canadian government has criticized the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. The wife of activist Raif Badawi, detained since 2012 on charges of blasphemy and apostasy, fled to Lebanon immediately after the ruling, before continuing to Canada where she was able to obtain citizenship in 2018⁶. She met with the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who announced his solidarity with Raif Badawi on more than one occasion⁷. Canada also gave political asylum to young Saudi activist Omar Abdulaziz, who presents a YouTube program called *Fitna*⁸. Canada is also the second-largest destination for Saudi asylum seekers

³ "Prominent Saudi Women Activists Arrested" *Human Rights Watch*, 1/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/01/prominent-saudi-women-activists-arrested>

⁴ Arabic text of Canada Foreign Policy Tweet, Canada Embassy KSA Twitter account, 5/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2OZQSKt>

⁵ "The negative and surprising position of Canada is a totally false claim to the truth," Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7/8/2018 [Arabic], accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2nyQ3eZ>

⁶ Morgan Lowrie, "I'm a proud Canadian': Wife of jailed Saudi blogger sworn in as Canadian citizen," *Global News*, 1/7/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2B7yM6j>

⁷ "Rock and Rights x Justin Trudeau," *Rock and Rights*, 25/1/2018, accessed on 14/08/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2B6s00E>; "Trudeau raises 'serious concern' over jailed blogger in call with Saudi king," *The Guardian*, 25/4/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2qVPJsV>

⁸ "Activist says Saudi police threatened his family after he tweeted about diplomatic row with Canada," *CBC Radio*, 10/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2MBG6bV>;

after the United States with 212 asylum applications, of which 87 were accepted: the highest global success rate for Saudi asylum applications⁹.

The Canadian Position

The Canadian authorities remained composed in their statements responding to the Saudi media campaign and punitive measures. The Prime Minister of Canada has expressed his unwillingness to apologize, considering the issue little more than a diplomatic dispute over different points of view. He reiterated his call to the Saudi authorities to release the detainees and stressed that Canada would continue to speak clearly and firmly on human rights issues at home and abroad and whenever it was deemed necessary¹⁰. Canada has sought help from Germany and Sweden to resolve the crisis as they have experienced previous crises with Saudi Arabia for similar human rights criticisms. In 2015, the Saudi ambassador was re-called from Stockholm, and Saudi cut off business with German companies in 2018 for the same reasons¹¹. The Canadian Foreign Office has tried to benefit from the two countries' experience in resolving this type of conflict, which Canada considers a difference in moral values¹².

⁹ "Asylum applications of refugees from Saudi Arabia," world Data, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2nAD5gP> .

¹⁰ [Ashifa Kassam](#), "Trudeau defies Saudi Arabia and says Canada will stand up for human rights," *The Guardian*, 8/8/2018, accessed on 13/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2nnNRXX>

¹¹ Mark Gollom, "Saudi Arabia 'allergic to criticism', making example out of Canada, analysts say", *CBC News*, 8/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/saudi-arabia-sanctions-canada-ambassador-1.4776502>

¹² "Canada seeks help from allies to end tension with Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Monitor*, 11/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018 at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180811-canada-seeks-help-from-allies-to-end-tension-with-saudi-arabia/>

Implications

The measures taken by Saudi Arabia are expected to have significant implications for Saudi students and Saudis with Canadian scholarships, and will have some clear negative effects in certain Canadian economic and service sectors. These include¹³:

- Cancelling all Saudi flights to Toronto from 13 August 2018, which are relied upon for Canadian Muslims embarking on Hajj, Saudi patients receiving treatment in Canadian hospitals, and Saudi students and tourists.
- Freezing all new trade and investment between Saudi Arabia and Canada. Trade between the two countries reached a value of three billion dollars in 2017, according to statistics provided by the Canadian government. Saudi Arabia has now also suspended the purchase of Canadian wheat and barley.
- Terminating all training programs, scholarships and fellowships to Canada, and discussing ways of transferring students to other countries through two operations rooms at the Saudi Embassy in Canada and the headquarters of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Around 12 thousand Saudi citizens, including 7 thousand students, as well as their chaperones or family members, will be affected directly. The withdrawal of Saudi trainees and employees in the Canadian health sector will have a logistical and material impact, according to many medical organizations and institutions in Canada¹⁴. This is in addition to the tuition fees that Canadian universities will lose due to the departure of Saudi students¹⁵.

According to Saudi Energy Minister Khalid A. Al-Falih, the current crisis will not affect the Saudi oil supply towards Canada. The current oil policy of the Kingdom aims not to expose Saudi oil

¹³ "New Saudi Measures against Canada" *BBC Arabic*, 8/8/2018, accessed on 13/8/2018 at: <https://bbc.in/2KBH1Hi>

¹⁴ Adam Kassam, "The Saudi-Canada Crisis Will Damage People's Health," *The Atlantic*, 9/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2vEC77O>; Blair Crawford, "Ottawa hospitals face exodus of Saudi doctors and medical trainees," *Ottawa Citizen*, 10/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2B4oCn7>; "Statement from the President of the Ontario Medical Association," *Twitter*, 7/8/2018, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2OBijJM>

¹⁵ "Canadian studies shattered by Saudi row," *The Daily Star*, 10/8/2014, accessed on 14/8/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2KQdPfs>

supply to any political crises, which means the current crisis will unlikely affect the relations of Aramco and its Canadian partners¹⁶.

Conclusion

By taking these measures against Canada, Riyadh appears to be sending a message to deter anyone who dares criticize the Kingdom's increasing human rights violations and persecution of civil society activists. It seems that they chose to direct these actions against Canada in particular, as Canada has become an easy target following deteriorating relations between US President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which was clearly exhibited at the G7 summit in Canada in June 2018. The Saudi authorities also seem encouraged by statements made by the US State Department. that Washington appears to be blaming Canada for the crisis with Saudi Arabia by saying it would not denounce the campaign of arrests in the way Canada did, although the annual report on human rights in the world issued by the US State Department usually addresses violations in Saudi Arabia.

It does not appear that Canada is ready to apologize on demand, especially as it believes itself to have taken a global moral stance, unrelated to the concept of sovereignty and domestic interference. The crisis will likely continue in the foreseeable future, and Saudi nationals, students and doctors trained in Canadian hospitals and universities, and Canadian health and education sectors will remain affected. However, Saudi Arabia's human rights and civil rights record has received more attention than ever, with the latest Saudi PR campaign producing a reverse effect. The situation in the Kingdom has been further highlighted, especially since the crown prince has already worked to attract international attention. He is now trying to distract global attention from the vast disparity in his reforms between the modernization of consumption and recreation on the one hand and the further repression of political and civil rights on the other. This is shown clearly in the way women have been permitted the right to drive in contrast to the arrest of women who dared to demand that right in the first place.

¹⁶ ""Despite the crisis ... a message of reassurance from Saudi Arabia to Canada" *Sputnik Arabic*, 9/8/2018, accessed on 13/8/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2MJBhxi>

