

Saudi arms deal makes mockery of Canadian values

By Peggy Mason

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The Harper government has made defending Western values a centrepiece of its anti-terror rhetoric. But our actions both at home and abroad tell a different story.

Since the 9/11 attacks, Western democracies, in the name of fighting terrorism, have enacted countless anti-democratic measures to curtail free speech, free assembly, peaceful political dissent and most especially due process and the rule of law. At the same time, we have partnered with anti-democratic regimes abroad to counter the illegal use of force by violent extremists with our own military “reign of terror.”

Nothing can illustrate this Orwellian approach more clearly than Canada’s unholy alliance with Saudi Arabia. It is one of three countries, along with United States and Israel, that not only violent jihadists but the vast majority of moderate Islam (with much justification) hold largely responsible for preventing Muslim countries in the Middle East from taking their rightful place in the world community.

Saudi Arabia is a key regional ally in the American-led military coalition, of which Canada is a part, against the Islamic State, the Islamist movement that has taken over significant areas in northern Iraq. Yet, the 83 official beheadings carried out by Saudi Arabia in 2014 surely rival the numbers thus far attributed to either Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. And need we be reminded that almost all of the 9/11 airplane hijackers were of Saudi origin, including the mastermind, Osama bin Laden.

The sentencing of Raif Badawi, a young Saudi blogger with family in Sherbrooke, Que., has finally brought some long-overdue Canadian media attention to Saudi Arabia’s appalling human rights record. Mr. Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a public flogging of 1,000 lashes—50 per week over 20 weeks—for the crimes of insulting Islam and creating the “Saudi Arabian Liberals” website for social and political debate.

Every year thousands of people in that country are subjected to arbitrary arrest and torture, ill treatment in detention and unfair trials. Saudi judges routinely sentence defendants to thousands of lashes. The government does not tolerate public worship by adherents of religions other than Islam, a situation about which Canada’s Office of Religious Freedom has been as shockingly silent as the Harper government in general has been over the manifold Saudi.

Like other Gulf State allies in the fight against the Islamic State, such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (with whom Canada has signed a nuclear co-operation agreement), Saudi Arabia has defined terrorism to encompass nearly every form of peaceful political and intellectual activism, including criminalizing the Gulf branches of the opposition political movement the Muslim Brotherhood.

Last July the United Kingdom completed a Foreign Office review of Brotherhood activities that apparently concluded the group was not a terrorist organization. But the study is mysteriously unpublished, seemingly because it might embarrass Britain’s allies in Egypt and

the Gulf. Not to be outdone, Foreign Minister John Baird said in April that he was “tremendously concerned” about the group, but he has now gone silent in the wake of the apparent failure to find “facts and intel” to support a terrorist designation. What message does such blatant hypocrisy send to reformers and peaceful activists in the Middle East?

And of course let us not forget the Saudi role, using Canadian armoured vehicles, in putting down peaceful demonstrations during Bahrain’s short-lived Arab Spring, actions in gross violation of democratic principles. Saudi Arabia’s egregious human rights record ultimately caused Germany in April 2014 to rescind its own huge tank deal with Saudi Arabia.

Not so for Canada.

A few facts about the Canadian deal: supported by heavy government promotion and a parallel decline in Canada’s export control standards, multi-year contracts for armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia were announced by General Dynamic Land Systems Canada in February, totalling almost \$15 billion.

Variants include armoured troop carriers and tanks with large cannons, operable in both urban and rural environments. In short, these vehicles are particularly suited for the type of repression of peaceful dissent we saw in Bahrain. As Canadian expert Ken Epps has pointed out in recent commentaries, it is possible that, “in the near term at least, Saudi Arabia will rival or even replace the US as Canada’s largest arms customer and the Middle East—the world’s most heavily-armed and arguably most unstable region—will become the most economically important to the Canadian arms industry.” This will give Canada a direct financial stake in Middle East conflict rather than in its resolution.

Violent extremists like Islamic State members are able to make headway in Iraq and elsewhere because they exploit genuine local political, social and economic grievances to win local support. This is the story of the Sunni tribes in northern Iraq who, having suffered vicious sectarian repression under the Western-blessed Shia-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki, decided they had a better chance throwing in their lot with the Islamic State than their own national government.

Do we really think that we can counter violent extremism by partnering with repressive Middle Eastern governments who make a mockery of Western democratic values? By outlawing peaceful political opposition parties while doing nothing to address marginalized, impoverished minorities, these governments are fuelling that very terrorism we say we are fighting.

The Canadian arms deal to Saudi Arabia is a national disgrace. Our export control laws, going back over 30 years, have a human rights test that potential recipients are required to pass. If Saudi Arabia can meet that test, then any country can. If the Canadian government is actually serious about fighting terrorism, the very first thing it must do is to follow Germany’s principled lead and cancel this arms.

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