

# Canada the Latest Western Country to Fall Foul of Saudi Crackdown on Dissent



In this file photo taken on March 8, 2012, political activist Samar Badawi of Saudi Arabia is presented with an International Women of Courage Award by the US Secretary of State in Washington, DC. On August 6, 2018, Saudi Arabia expelled the Canadian ambassador and had recalled its envoy while freezing all new trade, in protest at Ottawa's vigorous calls for the release of jailed activists among them Badawi. Photo AFP

Saudi Arabia is becoming increasingly intolerant of any criticism of its poor [human rights record](#). Chrystia Freeland, Canada's foreign minister, found that out shortly after calling for the immediate release of prisoners of conscience on Twitter on 3 August 2018.

The tweet was [posted](#) following a [string of arrests](#) of Saudi women activists. The jailing of Samar

Badawi, who is the sister of imprisoned rights activist Raif Badawi, was of grave concern to Freeland.

Raif Badawi was **sentenced** in 2014 to 1,000 lashes and ten years in prison for criticizing **Islam**. Soon after his arrest, his wife and children fled to Canada where they were granted asylum and then Canadian citizenship on 1 July 2018.

Rather than ignoring Freeland's tweet, Saudi Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Salman** (also known as MBS) **hit** back hard. He expelled the Canadian ambassador, recalled the Saudi ambassador to Canada, froze all new trade, cancelled direct flights to Toronto, and ordered Saudi students and medical patients in Canada to finish their education and treatment somewhere else.

Apparently unruffled, Ottawa reaffirmed its commitment to speak out in favour of human rights. However, its closest allies have been **reluctant** to do the same. The Trump administration said that it would remain on the sidelines of the dispute.

"It's up to the **government** of Saudi Arabia and the Canadians to work this out," **said** Heather Nauert, the spokesperson for the US State Department. "Both sides need to diplomatically resolve this together. We can't do it for them."

'We do not have a single friend in the whole entire world,' **tweeted** Rachel Curran, a policy director under former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, not long after Nauert's statement.

MBS also seems to have deterred European leaders from publicly supporting Canada. The British government **urged** both sides to show restraint, **while** the spokesperson of the European Union failed to condemn Saudi Arabia's overreaction to Freeland's tweets.

Bessma Momani, a professor at the University of Waterloo specializing in Saudi relations and a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance and Innovation, **told** Global News Canada that Western governments are not defending Canada because they fear that the Saudis could exclude them from big economic deals in the future. The weapons trade, she noted, is a particularly lucrative.

"Saudi Arabia is the largest weapons purchaser in the world, so any company or country in the world that sells arms, as does Canada, is likely to be looking into how this is going to affect bilateral trade ties," she explained.

Desperate to mitigate the crisis, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau **solicited** advice from Germany and Sweden, which have been the target of Saudi backlashes in recent years.

Saudi Arabia **scaled back** trade with the former after its foreign minister criticized the kingdom for putting Lebanese Prime Minister **Saad Hariri** under house arrest and forcing him to resign last November. After French intervention, Hariri was later **released** and withdrew his resignation.

Sweden may have the most advice to offer Canada since it was in a very similar predicament three years ago. At the time, Sweden **scrapped** a major arms deal with the kingdom after its foreign minister, Margot Wallstrom, was blocked from talking about democracy and women's rights at an Arab League Summit in Cairo.

The kingdom reacted in the same way as MBS is reacting now, recalling its ambassador, cancelling business visas for Swedish nationals and threatening to sever business ties for the foreseeable future. A year later, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven **travelled** to the kingdom with the chairman of Sweden's largest arms manufacturing company. In a clear bid to repair relations, Lofven visited a women's recruitment centre where he complimented the kingdom's progress on women's rights.

So far, Trudeau appears uninterested in assuaging MBS' ego for the sake of re-establishing business ties. He has already **said** that while Canada has to consider the interests of Canadian workers, his government will not apologize for its criticism of the Saudi regime.

While modest bilateral trade, estimated at **\$4 billion** between the countries, is at risk, Saudi Arabia has **confirmed** that oil exports to Canada would not be affected by the feud.

However, an **arms deal** worth \$15 billion is in doubt. If the kingdom scraps the deal, Trudeau will have to answer to Canadian arms manufacturing companies. At the same time, within Canada there has been sharp criticism of the deal involving light armoured vehicles that could be used in the controversial **war in Yemen**.

Not even the United Nations (UN) has been able to criticize Saudi Arabia without paying a steep price. In June 2016, the UN **admitted** to removing the **Saudi-led coalition** in Yemen from its children's rights blacklist, after being barraged with threatening phone calls following the initial listing.

A diplomatic source in the UN told The Independent newspaper that it was "real blackmail". He also said that there was a risk that clerics in Riyadh would issue a fatwa against the UN, classifying it as anti-Muslim. Such a move would have severed all relations between the kingdom, many of its allies and the UN.

Canada is trying to avoid such a fate by **reaching out** to Britain and the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) – two of the kingdom's closest allies – for advice. The Guardian, a left-leaning British daily, has already offered its own advice. In an editorial published on 8 August, the paper implored European governments to stand with Canada by warning MBS that the kingdom could pay a heavy price for its bullying tactics. The plea, as expected, fell on deaf ears.

Saudi Arabia has successfully made an example out of Canada, **explained** Farida Deif, Canada's director for Human Rights Watch (HRW). Yet doing so has attracted more attention to Saudi Arabia's worsening human rights record and the hollowness of MBS' **reforms**.

The negative attention threatens to deter **investment** in the kingdom at a time when MBS is aggressively trying to privatize large segments of the economy by **2030**. Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent commentator on Saudi affairs, **warned** that MBS cannot alienate other parts of the global community if he wants to realize his vision. The brutal military campaign in Yemen and **blockade of Qatar** are already points of concern for international investors. Against this backdrop, said Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia needs to make more friends than enemies.