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Why is Canada sanctioning Saudis while ignoring Iran?

By Danny Eisen and Sheryl Saperia

Iran has executed thousands of its own citizens and it has the blood of more than one Canadian on its hands



A meeting of Iran's Revolutionary Guard commanders in 2016. The Guard has been involved in nearly every case involving dual nationals or those with Western ties being detained. *AFP/Getty Images*

Despite the Trudeau government's efforts to reach out to the Muslim world, Ottawa has recently found itself in a state of estrangement from two of the Middle East's most formidable Islamic states.

Over the course of 2018, Saudi Arabia and Iran essentially recused themselves, albeit in different ways, from normative engagement with a Canadian government that has never lifted a legislative finger against either of them. Notably, both took

this turn amidst disputes with Canada related to their human rights violations involving Canadian residents and citizens. The schism has highlighted the need for Canada to re-examine its assumptions regarding national interests and human rights advocacy, as autocracies become increasingly more muscular and brazen in offending the human rights sensibilities of Western countries.

The murky nature of human rights diplomacy has now reared its head again, with Ottawa imposing sanctions on 17 Saudi nationals who were identified as responsible for the murder and dismemberment of Washington Post journalist and Saudi citizen, Jamal Khashoggi.

The sanctions represent the first time Canada has employed the provisions of the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, more commonly known as the Magnitsky Act, against officials of a Middle Eastern regime. The law bars human rights abusers and corrupt foreign officials from entering Canada, freezes their assets, and outlaws any dealings with them.

Regrettably, these Saudi listings represent a somewhat unfortunate first foray in a region so heavily populated with human rights abusers. It constitutes an almost official nod by Ottawa to the Saudi narrative that claims these individuals — and not the regime or its leadership — bear responsibility for the Khashoggi debacle. This has enabled Canada to project an image that it is doing “something” right, while bolstering the Saudi leadership claim that it has done nothing wrong. This works reasonably well for both parties, but very poorly for the objectives of the Magnitsky statute.

The Khashoggi case is also an odd starting point for addressing Saudi human rights violations as this is hardly Riyadh’s first experience with dismembering dissidents and other undesirables. Beheadings, amputations and crucifixions are ordered by Saudi courts quite regularly and,



unlike the Khashoggi incident, very publicly. But they have never resulted in Canadian sanctions. Clearly, though, not all dismemberments are equal.

Canada did not want to be out of step with Western allies that have taken particular umbrage at the Khashoggi killing, and Ottawa found a way to do so that, from a Saudi perspective, would be acceptable. Ottawa is perhaps hoping that such restraint will play well in rehabilitating Canada's troubled relationship with the Kingdom at a later stage.

The Saudi listings have also highlighted another glaring omission: Ottawa's refusal to list any member of the most malevolent regime in that region — the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Unlike the Saudis, Iran is not a key economic ally or a strategic asset in a Middle East that the regime has sought to destabilize. Unlike Tehran, Riyadh has not ordered the bombing of foreign embassies and Jewish community centres. Nor is Saudi Arabia, despite its rich history of funding Islamist extremism, the current global leader in the state-sponsorship of terrorism. That distinction also belongs to Iran, which was the subject of a parliamentary motion passed last June with the support of the Trudeau government. The motion condemned Iranian misbehaviours and called for designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist entity, which the Canadian government has yet to act on.

There is therefore a certain incongruence in Ottawa's listing of 17 Saudis involved in one grisly murder, while failing to list even a single member of the Iranian regime, which is home to thousands of the worst human rights violators on the planet. Tehran has been directly complicit in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Syrians; it has executed and tortured tens of thousands of its own citizens; it continues to plan bombings and assassinations in Western countries; and it has the blood of more than one Canadian on its hands.

Yet in contrast to the Khashoggi case, the international community is not clamouring to impose sanctions on Iran's vast industry of oppressors, and

Ottawa seems unmotivated to act, perhaps hoping to leverage the gesture in future negotiations with the regime.

Ottawa is likely to be disappointed. While Riyadh may reward Canada for leaving the Saudi royal family off the Magnitsky list, an Iranian pass is unlikely to produce a comparable dividend and temper Tehran's rejection and disdain for Canada's efforts at re-engagement. Indeed, Iran has an almost spotless record of neither reciprocating nor moderating its behaviours in response to outreach efforts from the West. Furthermore, Iran may well have concluded that Canada will eventually submit to Iranian terms for re-engagement, on the assumption that Ottawa's apparent hunger for diplomacy will overtake its commitment to principle.

Tehran must be resolutely disabused of that perception. Robustly listing Iranian violators under the Magnitsky legislation, in concert with designating the IRGC as a terrorist entity, would be important and necessary first steps to that end.

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