

Bribery over Human Rights Violations: Her Majesty's Government, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UN Human Rights Council

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Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Wither human rights - especially when it comes to strategic partnerships. The UK-Saudi Arabia relationship has been one of a seedier sort, filled with military deals, mooted criticism and hedging. When given the John Snow treatment as to what Britain's role behind securing Saudi Arabia its position on the UN Human Rights Council was, Prime Minister David Cameron fended furiously before embellishing Riyadh's value in its relations with the West.[1]

The paper trail in such matters is always useful, and given that Britain remains one of the most secretive states in the western world, those things are not always easy to come by. Light, however, was already shed by cables released through WikiLeaks suggesting that a degree of haggling had taken place between the states over the subject of compromising human rights.

The Saudi cable trove, made available to WikiLeaks last June, has spurred various groups to comb through the foreign ministry collection with an eye to decoding the Kingdom's sometimes inscrutable positions.[2]

The relevant documentation in this case touches on talks between Saudi and British officials ahead of the November 2013 vote on membership of the 47 member body. Cables from January and February 2013, separately translated by UN Watch and *The Australian*, discloses proposed positions of support.

One cable posits how:

"The [Saudi] delegation is honoured to send to the ministry the enclosed memorandum, which the delegation has received from the permanent mission of the United Kingdom asking it for the support and backing of their country to the membership of the human rights council (HRC) for the period 2014-2016, in the elections that will take place in 2013 in the city of New York."

It goes on to say how:

"The ministry might find it an opportunity to exchange support with the United Kingdom, where the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would support the candidacy of the United Kingdom to the membership of the council for the period 2014-2015 in exchange for the support of the United Kingdom to the candidacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." [3]

The cables also reveal how money was expended for the campaign to gain the seat, noting a transfer of \$100,000 for “expenditures resulting from the campaign to nominate the Kingdom for membership of the human rights council for the period 2014-2016.” While the itemisation of that item is not available, the Kingdom’s record on sugaring and softening its counterparts to improve its image is well known.

A spokesman from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office attempted to nip any suspicions in the bud in rather unconvincing fashion. “Saudi Arabia took part in an uncontested election for a seat as one of the Asian Group members in the UN’s Human Rights Council.”[4]

Besides, the UK’s position, so went the argument, was of no consequence, whatever might have been said behind closed doors. The UK might not publicise “how it votes” but as “this was not a contested election within the Asian Group... the UK’s vote was immaterial.”

The situation has also been further excited by the mass execution on Saturday of 47 individuals, including the outspoken Shia cleric Sheik Nimr al-Nimr. It was the largest show of death put on by the Kingdom since 1980.

Neither the Green Party leader, Natalie Bennett or Tim Farron of the Liberal Democrats, could let that one pass. “In light of the weekend’s events,” claimed Bennett, “the government should be launching an inquiry to establish who made the decision to so abuse the UN process and the principle of universal human rights.” The perennial problem here is that any government inquiry tends to be an exercise of exculpation rather than revelation.

The response from the British FCO to the spectacular bloodletting on Saturday was of the tepid, pedestrian variety, taken straight out of its precedent book of tepid, pedestrian responses.

“The UK opposes the death penalty in all circumstances and in every country. The death penalty undermines human dignity and there is no evidence that it works as a deterrent.”

The statement goes on to suggest that the foreign secretary is doing his job, regularly raising “human rights issues with his counterparts in countries of concern, including Saudi Arabia. We seek to build strong and mature relationships so that we can be candid with each other about these areas on which we do not agree, including on human rights.”

So candid were these exchanges, they led to a compromise regarding Britain’s own stance on human rights abuses. If anything, it induced a cynical caricature, one of positioning and sponsorship for an image distinctly at odds with the reality. For Riyadh, this could not be seen as anything other than a coup in international diplomacy. The Kingdom had found its own useful, complicit fool.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jon-snow-challenges-david-cameron-over-deal-with-s>

audi-arabia-read-the-transcript-of-the-interview-a6684161.html

[2] <https://wikileaks.org/saudi-cables/>

[3]

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/29/uk-and-saudi-arabia-in-secret-deal-over-human-rights-council-place>

[4]

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-government-urged-to-reveal-its-role-in-getting-saudi-arabia-a-key-un-human-rights-role-a6794801.html>

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