

Saudi Arabia Beheaded 59 People So Far This Year — But Hardly Anyone is Talking About It

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The string of beheadings of American and British hostages at the hands of the Islamic State has drawn horror and intense media scrutiny the world over, redoubling international determination to defeat the extremist group.

But with IS dominating headlines, it is easy to forget that Saudi Arabia, a member of the UN's Human Rights Council and a close ally of America in the war against the Islamist fighters, is itself routinely carrying out the practice of beheading.

Since January of this year, 59 people have been beheaded in Saudi Arabia under the country's antiquated legal system based primarily around sharia law.

Last month saw Saudi Arabia behead at least 8 people — twice the number of Western hostages who have so far featured in IS's barbaric execution videos. In August those executed by Riyadh were sentenced to death for crimes such as apostasy, adultery and "sorcery." In one case, four members of the same family were executed for "receiving large quantities of hashish," a sentence imposed, according to Amnesty International, on the basis of "forced confessions extracted through torture."

The human rights group has [reported](#) a "disturbing surge" in executions in the kingdom. Said Boumedouha, deputy director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Program, said that many are executed for petty crimes, highlighting the frequent and seemingly casual imposition of such sentences.

"The use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is so far removed from any kind of legal parameters that it's almost hard to believe," Boumedouha remarked.

Mohammed Saad-al Beshi, a Saudi state executioner, told Arab News in 2003 that he felt that he was carrying out "God's work" and that "when prisoners get to the execution square, their strength drains away."

The practice is not confined to adults. According to Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia executed at least one person under the age of 18 this year, a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The manner by which confessions are extracted also paints a bleak picture, activists say. "The executions of people accused of petty crimes and on the basis of 'confessions' extracted through torture has become shamefully common in Saudi Arabia," Boumedouha said.

The UN has sought to distance itself from Saudi Arabia on the issue, despite the membership of Saudi Arabia upon the UN Human Rights Council, a position it was elected to by the UN General Assembly.

In September, Juan Mendez, the UN special rapporteur on torture, [remarked](#) that “beheadings as a form of execution is cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and prohibited under international law under all circumstances.”

Independent experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council have also been quick to denounce the kingdom’s brutal practice, commenting that “the practice of beheading, especially after unfair trials for crimes that may not carry the death penalty under international law, is shocking and grossly inappropriate.”

However, as an oil rich Western ally seen as key to the US-led offensive against IS, there remains little hope, at least within the short term, of large scale international condemnation.

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