

“60 Minutes” Airs Dreadful Segment on Prince Salman

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Hopefully this piece will be a bit of help to those demonstrating against Prince Salman’s #TrillionaireTour of the U.S. (Aramco, the kingdom/Saudi family-owned oil company is valued at \$2 trillion.) Another piece I wrote about Saudi Arabia and the colleges that take Saudi elite money is at The Nation.

Millions of people saw “60 Minutes” on Sunday March 18 or saw it online. It featured an interview with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. It was just awful. The journalist who interviewed the prince was Norah O’Donnell. The segment consisted of a bunch of softball questions mixed with admiring views of his offices and Saudi shopping malls.

O’Donnell tells us that the prince is “cracking down on corruption.” How are we to know this? We do know he arrested a bunch of billionaires and princes, kept them locked up in a hotel for months without bail, and only let them out when they forked over huge sums in settlements. The prince said it all was a matter of Saudi law, but we (and the Saudi people) never heard what they were accused of and what laws they supposedly broke. As far as we can tell they never had access to lawyers. Were there any judges involved or was it all up to Salman? O’Donnell never asks. Is there anything like “due process of law” in any of this?

Prince Salman says he got \$100 billion out of the people arrested. Where did this money go? The prince is widely known to spend lavishly on houses and paintings etc. His brother, the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., bought a \$12 million mansion in Great Falls, Virginia, and flies around regularly in a Boeing 767 at \$30,000 an hour. Who pays for all this? Is there a division between the funds of the monarchy and that of the government of Saudi Arabia or is it all in one big pot?

Is my carping just cultural blindness, a Westerner ignorant of sharia? I confess I do not know Islamic Law, but I strongly suspect sharia doesn’t allow such high-handedness. Salman’s “anti-corruption” drive sounds more like a good old-fashioned shakedown.

O’Donnell then helps him along and frames this in language an American can understand. She suggests that the prince’s goal was to show “there’s a new sheriff in town?” He replies “Absolutely.”

O’Donnell and Salman go into the question of whether Saudi Arabia is “harsh” and “intolerant.” His response (and he said the same thing to flatter *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman last year) is to agree, but claim that the harshness only started in 1979 as a reaction to events in Iran. That sounds preposterous, but let’s say it’s all true. What has Salman changed? In her introduction O’Donnell said, “his reforms inside Saudi Arabia have been revolutionary. He is emancipating women.” Emancipation is a rather big word. It usually means freeing people from slavery. So what is the nature of this “emancipation”?

Well, women will be allowed to drive (in June). Women can go to soccer matches. They don't have to wear headscarves in public (except "60 Minutes" does air video online where O'Donnell's crew shows how religious police stopped one of them and told her to cover up her hair). Some students (given permission from their university head) are willing to speak on camera. They can vote in municipal elections and it will be easier for them to start businesses. Anything else?

What about getting rid of the guardianship laws? O'Donnell briefly brings them up. She says, "But there have also existed these guardianship laws that, in order to travel, a woman has to get the permission of a male in her household. It seems so throwback."

Prince Salman answers, "Today, Saudi women still have not received their full rights. There are rights stipulated in Islam that they still don't have. We have come a very long way and have a short way to go." A "short way" to go, he says.

Except the guardianship laws involve much more than travel. In 2016 Human Rights Watch had an article about the laws in a piece called "Boxed In." It starts: "In Saudi Arabia, a woman's life is controlled by a man from birth until death. Every Saudi woman must have a male guardian, normally a father or husband, but in some cases a brother or even a son, who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf."

A guardian needs to give permission for a woman to marry, to apply for a passport, or to study abroad. If a woman is abroad she needs to live with a male guardian. It's legal for employers to require a guardian's permission before hiring a woman. And get this, if a woman was in prison, a guardian has to give permission for her to be freed and allowed home!

In the interview the question of "intolerance" never goes past women's rights. O'Donnell doesn't ask if the prince intends to make it legal for Christians or Jews to practice their religion openly in the kingdom. More importantly she never raises a question about the situation of Shia Saudis and their gross mistreatment. Nor does she ask about critics of the monarchy's religious practices like Raif Bidawi who is in prison for ten years and sentenced to 1,000 lashes for ideas written on his blog. Capital punishment is unmentioned, not even the case of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, the Shia cleric who was beheaded in 2016 and whose corpse was never returned to his family.

They talk briefly about the war against Yemen, the massive bloodletting which she minimizes as a "quagmire." He gives a reason for his bombing campaign. He talks about the insurgent group Ansar Allah commonly called the Houthis. He refers to them only as "this militia." He says, "this militia was conducting military maneuvers right next to our borders and positioning missiles at our borders." As a justification for war this is transparently false. In the early years of this decade the Yemeni group Ansar Allah was busy fighting other Yemenis. It wasn't the slightest threat to Saudi Arabia. In the U.N. Security Council resolution of April 2015 many charges against the "Houthis" are laid out, but threats to Saudi Arabia are not even mentioned.

The prince further justifies his war by talking about missiles coming from the "militia" and says, "I can't imagine that the United States will accept one day to have a militia in Mexico launching missiles on Washington D.C., New York and LA while Americans are watching these missiles and doing nothing." When he said that I immediately thought he was plagiarizing what Netanyahu said about Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Actually it's worse. The handful of missiles that were sent into Saudi Arabia were launched long after the Saudis bombed Yemen.

O'Donnell does ask him if he admits that there has been a "humanitarian catastrophe" in Yemen. She talks about 5,000 dead civilians (a number far too low. UNICEF back in 2016 said over 10,000 children had died from effects of the war.). Salman's answer is that it's all the "militia's"

fault. O'Donnell doesn't press him on this. She doesn't talk about the one million cases of cholera in Yemen in 2017.

They next focus on Iran and Salman says that Iran's Ayatollah, Khamenei is the "new Hitler." He says the comparison is valid because Iran is trying to "expand." Incredibly Norah O'Donnell then asks, "Does Saudi Arabia need nuclear weapons to counter Iran?" I found that staggering. She brings it up, not him. I'm not saying she's giving him ideas, but she's legitimizing the notion that an aggressive absolute monarchy should have atomic bombs.

Later they talk about schools and "extremism" and Salman blames it all on the Muslim Brotherhood. Absurd. This excuse has never been brought up before in all the years of complaints about the content of Saudi textbooks And why, as scholar Juan Cole points out, have the meager projects of ecumenism with Shia under the last king come "undone" under their reign of Prince Salman's father? Why was the Saudi Mufti for the Interpretation of Muslim Law not chastised or dismissed for declaring that Iranian Shiites are not Muslims?

What about the extremism of Saudi Arabia being an absolute monarchy with all state councils being merely advisory to the king? As Mehdi Hasan points out in his fine piece on The Intercept, O'Donnell never raises the question of democracy or elections in Saudi Arabia and appears to be "positively giddy" at the prospect that Salman will rule the country for another 50 years.

As O'Donnell's segment concludes she says, "Just as American society transformed during the 1960's, the Saudis are in the midst of their own cultural revolution." Piffle.

What if O'Donnell had grilled Salman like another "60 Minutes" reporter, Leslie Stahl, did when she interviewed Madeline Albright in 1996 over the Iraqi sanctions or as Stahl did when questioning Betsy DeVos about education just a couple of weeks ago? Could it have swayed more Senators to support Bernie Sanders' bill to shut down U.S. support for the U.S. war on Yemen? That bill was narrowly "tabled" just two days after the "60 Minutes" broadcast. Unfortunately, we'll never know.

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