

The Baqee Protest: A Way to Shock the Prince and His Billionaire Admirers

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Saudi prince Salman dazzled Wall Street and the glitterati in his three-week U.S. tour this past March. The captains of finance (Stephen Schwartzman, Peter Thiel), tech (Gates, Bezos), politics (Trump, Clinton), and Hollywood (Disney's Bob Iger, director James Cameron, Morgan Freeman) all met with him. "60 Minutes" did a fawning piece, as did NPR and the *Atlantic*. The *New York Times* printed two rapturous articles by Thomas Friedman. Finally, they had a marketable Saudi royal. Mohammad bin Salman was not the usual doddering nonagenarian, but a vigorous take-charge guy, who ... get this... is going to let women drive!

The war in Yemen continued on, but that didn't bother the elites. Weddings and funerals were bombed, ten thousand children died from lack of water and medicine, a million inflicted with cholera, but Yemen was one of the "off-limits" topics at the Hollywood dinner.

Just weeks before the magic month of June with drivers' licenses ready on the printers, the leading Saudi feminists were arrested. These were people who had campaigned and even suffered prison for calling for giving women #Right2Drive. The Gulf Centre for Human Rights says around ten were imprisoned and their whereabouts are unknown. The Guardian (UK) reports the Saudi interior ministry as saying they're accused of serious charges, like communicating with foreign entities, working to recruit government officials in sensitive positions, and send money to foreign circles to destabilize the country. Big Saudi media have denounced those arrested as "traitors." If you don't know, treason is one of the many grounds for the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. The arrests have not stopped. Mayya al-Zahrani was arrested June 9 after posting online about how sad she felt about the arrest of Nouf Abdulazi.

On May 22 a well-reasoned and documented open letter was sent to the executives and celebrities who had me with Salman. Created by the Center for Constitutional Rights, Human Rights Clinic (Columbia Law School), and the Yemeni group the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights and signed by a number of professors and national organizations it criticized those feting Salman, "By meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince but failing to raise concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights violations in Yemen, you allowed yourself to be instrumentalized in a public relations effort to whitewash Saudi Arabia's abuses in the war in Yemen." It asked them to "show some concern" in public for the actions of Saudi Arabia in Yemen. As of this writing none of the thirty or so men and women has shown a milliliter of concern, not even Oprah.

I'm hazarding a wild guess that the 1% of the 1% are blown over by Salman's money. One could start and end with his Aramco company. This fossil fuel monolith is Saudi state owned, but the lines between government property and dynasty property in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are murky at best. After watching Salman arrest hundreds of super-rich Saudi businessmen and forcing them to "settle" by paying up around \$100 billion, it's pretty clear no one can challenge him from using Aramco resources any way he wants. The company is valued at \$2 trillion. Arguably this makes Salman the richest man in the world. Salman dangles the prospect of selling 5% of the company to foreign investors. Which capitalists would miss such a chance to "wet their beaks"?

In March there were small protests in most of the U.S. cities where activists found out that Salman would be arriving. There were five in New York City alone including a march to the New York Stock Exchange. After his visit to MIT, the Cambridge City Council passed a resolution entitled "In opposition to the oppressive policies of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and Saudi Arabia". He was met with protestors in front of Bill Gates' home in Seattle and a large demonstration in Trinity Park, Houston.

A big protest is planned on Friday afternoon, June 22 in front of the Saudi embassy in Washington DC. Thousands are expected to attend. It's part of the annual Bagee protest. Jannat-ul-Bagee is a graveyard in Medina, Saudi Arabia. In it are the graves of many of Islam's earliest and most prominent figures. At one time it was filled with cupolas, domes and mausoleums. In 1924-5 as Ibn al-Saud conquered Medina from the Ottomans Bagee was razed. The reason was the Saudi /Wahhabi dogma that structures around graves necessarily give rise to worship of saints and idols and are thus an impermissible break with monotheism (tawhid). The Bagee graveyard is now brown earth and unmarked stones.

Bagee protests have been going on in front of the Saudi embassy since 2007. Originally speeches were only in Arabic and focused almost totally on Saudi destruction of monuments and ancient buildings. In the last few years other Saudi abuses have been condemned, from regime support of terrorism, to mistreatment of women, to the savaging of Yemen. CODE PINK's Medea Benjamin spoke several years ago and will speak again this year.

This is an interview with Ali Moosvi, a cardiologist from New Jersey, who is active in the Bagee movement and the Coalition to End the U.S.-Saudi Alliance (disclosure, I'm active in the coalition, too.)

Around how many took part last year in the Washington, D.C. demonstration?

Over 1,000 last year. This year we have buses coming in from Chicago, New York and New Jersey and from metro DC.

Why do you feel so strongly about what happened to the Bagee graveyard?

Bagee was a resting place for Prophet Mohammad's family, but Wahhabis do not allow any tombs or engraved stones to exist in a graveyard. They've destroyed about 90% of the Saudi heritage. If this continues they'll destroy our holy sites in Mecca and Medina in the future.

Is your movement calling for the Bagee tombs to be rebuilt?

Yes, and more. They don't allow women inside the grounds of the cemetery and beat up visitors to discourage them from coming. Just building tombs but having the same discrimination against pilgrims and women would be a hollow victory. We also ask for the Christian and Jewish heritage sites destroyed by the Wahhabis to be restored. To accomplish

all this we need replacement of the Saudi regime with a democracy.

What do you say to those who claim that the Bagee protests are merely disguised Shia conflicts with Sunnis?

The graveyard has many personalities revered by Sunnis, too. Sunnis are distancing themselves from the Saudi royal family because the family's ways do not represent Sunni Islam either.

Are non-Muslims welcome at the protest on the 22nd?

Absolutely. By the way the Wahhabis have destroyed a lot of non-Muslim heritage, too. They've demolished the statue of Buddha in Afghanistan and Jonah's Tomb in Mosul, Iraq, etc.

Could women and feminist supporters march together as a contingent?

Absolutely. There will be female speakers addressing the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia where the situation is horrendous.

What about Yemenis angry at Saudi attacks in Yemen? Should they attend?

Yes, Yemen will be addressed. Yemenis should surely participate. The same country that demolished Bagee has created a humanitarian crisis in Yemen with its bombings and food blockades.

Describe what will happen the afternoon of the protest.

We will assemble at the Saudi embassy at 3 p.m. and have chanting and speeches. Then we'll march to the White House in a permitted march. We'll be at Lafayette Park and end at 6:30. For more details see www.Bagee.org

What's the street address of the embassy?

601 New Hampshire Avenue, NW

All indications are that this year's protest will take place during a Saudi coalition bloodbath. UAE troops and some Yemeni forces have launched a full-scale attack on Hodeida, the country's western port. The city and surrounding countryside are not only inhabited by 600,000 people (think the size of Boston), but it's also the entry port of most humanitarian goods into the country. The UN has a "worst case" estimate of 250,000 deaths in a major battle and many more fatalities from loss of aid. Not only is the number ghastly in itself, it's probably ten times the number that have already died from warfare in Yemen since the first Saudi/U.S. bomb in 2015.

Don't worry about the theology. The Bagee rally and march is a natural place for people to demonstrate to Salman, to Trump, and to the Democratic leadership that growing numbers are fed up with the Saudi royals and their blank-check U.S. support. If the protest this year include a large number of non-Muslim human rights and anti-war activists, it will give the Saudi monarchy and its wealth-worshipping enablers a much-needed jolt.

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