
Interview: Saad al-Faqih and Muhammad A.S. al-Massari

Committee for Defense of Legal Rights in Saudi Arabia is set up in London

by Dean Andromidas

On June 30, EIR interviewed Dr. Saad al-Faqih and Dr. Muhammad A.S. al-Massari of the Committee for the Defense of Legal Rights in Saudi Arabia. Having fled Saudi Arabia to avoid persecution of its activities, the committee has established offices in London. Dr. Saad al-Faqih is director of the London office and an assistant professor of surgery at King Saud University and a consulting surgeon at King Khalid Hospital in Riyadh. Dr. al-Massari is the organization's official spokesman and professor of theoretical physics at King Saud University in Riyadh as well. Both are now seeking political asylum in Great Britain.

EIR: Can you tell us about the Committee for the Defense of Legal Rights (CDLR) in Saudi Arabia?

al-Faqih: The committee was founded last year in May 1993 when it released its first communiqué. There were six founding members, among them scholars and lawyers, and their first communiqué declared they were taking a public stand, of their own volition, to defend human rights in Saudi Arabia. This first communiqué, because of current conditions in Saudi Arabia, was worded very carefully in accordance with the culture and conditions prevailing in Saudi Arabia. The committee published this communiqué last year through an international news agency and reports were carried in all the media, including BBC. The people in Saudi Arabia were surprised to hear that somebody would break the ice in this very closed country with absolutely no freedom of expression and organization. I mean zero freedom of expression and zero freedom of organization. That was a surprise to the people as well as a surprise to the rulers, to the royal family.

So after a shock where the rulers did not know what to do, they pressured the official clergy to produce an official statement against the human rights group. Such a statement was produced by the official clergy, who were, in reality, talking on behalf of the government rather than talking on behalf of Islam. Through this statement, they thought they had the legitimacy to crush the group. They raided Dr. al-Massari's house, the speaker of the group, took him to the jail in a very stormy way. They then jailed two or three other

members of the committee within a few days. Later on they discovered there had been quite a few people behind the whole act. There were some 12 university scholars, including assistant, associate, and full university professors. They were all arrested at that time. This clampdown took about three months.

During this period there was very good coverage in the media about the committee's report and also the government's response. Through a small organization in London called Liberty, the existence of the committee was presented throughout the world, and it published all the news and reports of CDLR. One of these reports, on human rights in Saudi Arabia, was read at the meeting in Vienna around June the same year.

It was read in both English and Arabic to representatives of at least 80 countries and 1,000 organizations.

After this clampdown inside the country, the government felt it had regained control of the situation and therefore released most of the prisoners, including Dr. Muhammad al-Massari, who was kept in jail for a full six months. After this the committee had come to the conclusion that any open expression in defense of human rights was not possible from inside of Saudi Arabia, and therefore it was seen as necessary to establish our work outside of the country. So we very secretly worked on that, and we were able to establish ourselves in London in May of this year. We then issued our third communiqué. Our first communiqué was the founding of the committee, the second communiqué came around three weeks after the first when we were still in Saudi Arabia before the full clampdown, and the third communiqué came as a resumption of the activities of CDLR here in London.

Now there have been a number of arrests and some other events like the Hajj tragedy,¹ the Saudi intervention in Yemen, and lastly the American silence over the American

1. This refers to the stampede last May at the site of the "Stoning of the Devils" which is part of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. According to press reports the official death toll from this stampede and other incidents such as heart attacks was 859, but the CDLR claims that that over 2,000 died.

citizen who had been arrested about which we issued communiqués. In addition, we issued a weekly circular in Arabic and English reporting on the most important news about human rights in Saudi Arabia, and about the corruption in the Saudi state. Now we have issued a small constitution which contains our aims and objectives and justifications for our outlooks and policy. I assume you have a copy of that. You can quote this. Basically we understand human rights as a comprehensive term, not simply individual rights, but we understand the rights of the person in the context of the rights of the whole nation, as proper living, as proper respect of the state.

EIR: How is your organization supported?

al-Faqih: We have a unique structure in the kingdom. Because of the very difficult situation there, where political organizations are forbidden, we have a natural structure of political and religious leaders who have their own following. They are not a formal organization but they are a sort of group. The general trend in Saudi Arabia for the last 10-15 years is a very strong Islamic trend. Not Islamic in the sense as the western media try to call it orthodox. No, it is Islamic in the meaning of the comprehensive meaning of Islam, as a comprehensive way of life. We have our own view about politics, we believe in freedom of expression and freedom of organization, and also accountability of the government and rulers as well as political power-sharing. Those groups which are widespread throughout the country, with their religious leaders, are very, very sympathetic with us. Some of them have individual relations, that is, secret relations while representing their group or their tribe or just their friends. They do not represent an organization as such. There are some secret organizations there. We know about them but we believe their political influence is very weak. So we deal with religious leaders, university scholars, the elite and popular leaders.

EIR: Saudi Arabia appears to be in a financial crisis and under International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank pressure. How do you see this situation?

al-Faqih: We believe the economic situation is very gloomy and the prospects for the future are very dangerous. We believe the reason for this very weak economic situation is the squandering of the nation's resources, very bad economic planning, and corruption. It is not simply the expenses of the Gulf war. We have enough resources to cover five or ten times the cost of that war. If you go through the figures for the last 10-15 years and the amount of oil produced and the amount of money which has been produced equal to that amount of oil, and you dissect how much money was spent on the country itself, [then] the real expenditure for the country's benefit and the people is hardly 20 or 30% of the true expenditures. We have evidence and we are working on a comprehensive report with figures which we hope to publish, that dem-

onstrates how most of the money has been spent through the corruption and squandering of the royal family. They still have very high assets in money, buildings, and shares all over the world. In addition to that, there is the problem of bad government planning and the bad distribution of the resources and expenditures. Because of all this the future condition of the economy will continue to be very gloomy and very dangerous. Nonetheless the Saudi government is trying to convince the world that the economy is stable and strong by every possible means. Unfortunately this attempt has failed and the Bank of Japan as well as the Bank of England decided not to back any loans to Saudi Arabia. Only the trade bank in the United States has agreed to cover some loans. That's what's going on now. Unfortunately the government is not aware that things are not going right.

Now people have started to feel this problem. For example, the simple worker has not had wages for at least six or seven months. Those who work for private companies that are contracted to the government have not been paid in one or two or even three years. Unless the company is headed by a prince, or a very influential figure, it will not have been paid in the last two to three years. So now we have tens of thousands of workers, Saudis and foreign workers, who have not taken their wages in the last six or seven months. We have reports of a few small demonstrations now of these workers, sometimes in front of the house of the emirate, or local governor.

Now another example: The maintenance of services, power stations, water systems, and telephone systems is almost nil. Power stations are working at only 50% capacity and it is said that there is not enough electricity for new housing. Large factories have been ordered to close in the middle of the day in the summer to avoid the total failure of the electricity system. Why? Because of very poor maintenance. At the same time they are still making very expensive contracts with especially the Americans. They concluded a \$6 billion contract for civilian airplanes, \$4 billion with AT&T, and yesterday I heard they did another contract for \$1.5 billion for helicopters and airplanes. I give a very funny example. They do not have money to make maintenance for simple schools but they want to make contracts for 100 million ryal, which is around \$30 million, for the maintenance of King Fahd Stadium.

So we believe people have started suffering now and when it comes to the suffering of the people, we will have a so-called bread revolution.

EIR: We are entering a period of financial crisis. To what extent are Saudi financial resources tied up in this speculation, particularly derivatives? A speculation, I would assume, which is benefitting some very powerful financial interests in New York and London, probably more than the Saudi princes.

al-Faqih: This is not contradictory, both are correct. First

we have a portion of the money controlled by the princes, and secondly we have the rest of the money, which is supposed to be invested for the good of the country. It is that part which we were not talking about. That is why we are seeing this strange behavior of the Americans to take the risk to invest in the Saudi monarchy.

Now on the other hand most of the princes have in their pockets amounts of money which are many times greater than that of a small country. They are investing their money in the same way you are talking about. They have companies with partners from America and Europe and finally all the money goes into the small companies, small in size but very big in debt. That does not contradict what you have said. The princes play with the money.

EIR: Dr. al-Massari, in your newsletter you point to and are highly critical of the Saudi role in the Yemen crisis. Could you explain this further?

al-Massari: It is enormous. We know, without having seen the checks, that before Ramadan (Ramadan was in March), Ali Beidh came to Saudi Arabia after the signing of the so-called agreement of covenant in Jordan, which turned out to be neither covenant nor agreement. He was welcomed like a head of state and he received a check for \$600 million from King Fahd and another \$400 million from Kuwait, so he had a billion. There was also some money before that. So they knew he was going to succeed and they put all their power behind him and promised him weapons and full political support. So when things grew more and more complicated after Ramadan, in April before the war erupted, I had met some Yemeni friends and they pointed out that there was one crisis after another all over Yemen produced by the Socialist Party, especially through the ministries which were in their [the Socialists'] hands. For example in the oil and gasoline sector there were long queues at filling stations, despite the fact that the refinery in Aden was working at capacity and imported oil should have been sufficient for all needs. The minister of oil, who was a Socialist, was doing his best to produce an artificial crisis. Opposite to this, the minister for supply, who was not a Socialist, who is responsible for food supplies, [said] there was plenty in the market at very cheap prices. This indicates strongly that this was a game. There was no real shortage. The one is easing imports, removing all handicaps, and so on, and the other is trying to delay deliveries, complicate things, and create a crisis.

Another example. Yemen is going through a process of privatization both in the north and the south; both had socialist systems, although it was much stronger in the south. In the north there were shortages of clothing, consumer goods, and things like that, and they were expensive because of the low exchange rate. In the south, surprisingly, which has had a much stronger socialist background, they were very cheaply available. It was found that many ships belonging to Saudi business people of South Yemeni origin were directed

by royal order, by force—because these merchants did not like the government there; most Saudis of Yemeni origin ran away from the communists and the British before them, and they don't want to support the south—quite a number of them were forced to unload their ships in Mukalla and Aden, to ease the general supply situation, especially in luxury goods, so that the common man in Aden would think our local government is doing fine, that this government in Sanaa is stupid, and we have seen nothing good since we joined this unity. It was aimed to increase public aversion against unity.

So this was ongoing and peaked in March-April. Then the problem started at the military base north of Sanaa, where southern units were stationed. Fighting soon spread but the southern forces in the north collapsed quickly, there were bases neutralized, and many surrendered. The fighting then shifted quickly to the south, quicker than expected. Then Saudi Arabia moved in very quickly and delivered hardware, including about 600 armored personnel carriers and a few hundred tanks to the south. They then mobilized tribes that fled south many years ago when the communists took over and had been living in Saudi Arabia. They established brigades called Units of Peace, Liberation Group of Shabwa, etc. They were waiting for the day they could liberate their country from the communists. These now were sent to support the Socialists. So some of them obeyed and were sent. One strong group numbering in the thousands, together with 200 tanks, was passing through Saudi Arabia toward Hadramaut and they fell into an ambush by a tribe from North Yemen with some support from some previous fighters from Afghanistan. They were taken totally by surprise in a pass called Abar and, without very much loss of life, the 200 tanks were taken as spoils of war and the soldiers were taken as prisoners of war. This was a blow to the Saudi policy.

Another example were these so-called Units of Peace. A thousand men. These were South Yemeni units, not Saudis. Saudi Arabia will not fight with its own forces for many reasons. First of all this army is completely designed to fight, if necessary, against the people and against the National Guard of Prince Abdallah.² It is not designed to fight a

2. Prince Abdallah is the Crown Prince. He happens to be older than his half-brother King Fahd. Abdallah is also commander of the National Guard since the founding of that organization over 40 years ago. It is comprised of brigades drawn from the most important tribes, each commanded by a tribal chief. It is historically developed from the "Ikwan," the army of King Ibn Saud. It is equipped with small arms and armored personnel carriers. By contrast, the Army is commanded by Prince Sultan, a full brother of King Fahd. Fahd and Sultan are members of the "Sudieri 7," all brothers from the same mother, who come from the Sudieri tribe. They dominate the government. The most important are King Fahd; Prince Najeb, interior minister; Prince Sultan, defense minister; and Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh. Prince Bandar is the son of Sultan. The Army is non-tribal; its soldiers are drawn from the urban population and the peasant population of the western highlands, as well as from foreigners. Sultan has been its commander for 30 years. If Sultan attempts to prevent Abdallah from becoming king or the latter attempts to overthrow Fahd, fighting would take place between the National Guard and the Army:

national enemy: Have you heard some of the stories of what happened during the Gulf war? One of the stories is about a maneuver that was planned about three months before the war started. It was supposed to be a huge one with almost 1,000 planes participating; it was supposed to be a general war game before the attack against Iraq. And about 100-plus Saudi planes were supposed to participate. So in a preliminary evaluation of all sides to see how good their performance was, they found that from this 100-150 Saudi pilots only four are ready to go right away into the maneuvers. Only four, and about 30 needed about two months' training, to be able to participate in the game, and the rest needed a couple of years, so they were out. Can you imagine that? So Prince Sultan knows that if he sends his soldiers they will run away or get killed. They are very inefficient and poorly trained.

Besides, Saudi Arabia is very afraid because they try to insist that they are following the Islamic creed all the time. "Our creed, our creed," they are lying, an obvious fraud, Khalid, Faisal and the others always insisted that they didn't interfere in anybody's affairs, and "we don't want anyone to interfere in our affairs." So participating without any clear international mandate like Somalia or in the Gulf war, they are not able to do that.

Most likely Yemen will be the major issue now, because Saudi Arabia is so desperate to save its face in South Yemen, to weaken Yemen so there will be no strong force on their southern border because of the [Saudi regime's] own internal instability and weakness.

Look at the military: In just the year 1991, it declared new hardware was \$35 billion. At the same time Israel, which is a superpower locally, spent only \$5 billion. Where is the difference? The Saudi Army doesn't even compare to a tenth of the Israeli Army, which is a powerful army, with striking power and efficiency.

This system is so weak, it fears any power at its side, not for fear of invasion or war but just in giving an example. Yemen was taking steps toward democracy, toward public participation, toward pluralism, and so on—real steps forward. Despite the attacks on the country I am confident that the structure of Yemen, with its tribes and with its different factions, and so on, would have never become a dictatorship. Now with war, because as you know war creates a situation where governments must create unity, this experiment might be endangered. But it was a unique experiment for an Arab country. If that experiment had been successful, Saudi Arabia would have collapsed immediately. The people would have said, "Hey look, Yemen is backward economically, its citizens are not as educated as in Saudi Arabia, and it is able to survive on such a reasonable democracy and pluralism." Why do you try to claim that democracy or pluralism is bad for a developing country (that's what the government usually says)? It would have been shown to be highly integrating and improving the general conditions of the people and their

ability to take their destiny in their hands and also to improve their conditions.

EIR: How do you see the situation in Iraq and the lifting of the embargo?

al-Massari: There is no question about the fact that this is a criminal embargo. But let us go back a little bit. The whole struggle in the region, especially the war around Iraq, is regarded by many as a struggle to establish leadership and power between America and Britain. There is a strong suspicion in the region that Saddam Hussein, prior to the invasion of Kuwait, was very strongly supported by Britain and France, as well as circles in Germany, which had been selling Iraq military technology, as we have seen in the German Iraqgate scandals.

In that scheme it is understandable why the United States did its best to crush Iraq, to weaken its internal structures. They seem to be slowly but surely moving to divide Iraq into three states—these protection zones in the north and south. Actually the Saudis are stupid, because they are so completely enslaved to the official American policy. I don't know which faction in America has that policy now. They went along with these protection zones especially in southern Iraq but this is an extreme stupidity because that tool could be used against them very easily. For example, if anyone wants any problem with Saudi Arabia, he needs only to move the Shiites in the eastern region which are a neglected sect, to make a few demonstrations; then the National Guard, which is responsible for controlling the Shiites, would step in; a small bloodbath is enough for the powers to come in, and declare the area as a no-fly protection zone. Exactly what has happened in Iraq. You cannot imagine how low is the royal family's understanding of life, and history, or even current events in the world—extremely backward.

Despite Saddam Hussein, I agree that the industrialization of Iraq was a great step forward, it is a great gain for the people.

As far as Kuwait itself, it is not able to exist, it is like a disease, it is like a cancer, you have to remove it, or it will cause you pain all the time. It may sound nasty, but sometimes with certain creatures their mere existence is a problem. It has no basis for a self-supporting existence, it has no justification neither in language nor religion. If you go to Kuwait and just step over the border to Basra you have the same dialect, the same people, the same mix of human beings, everything.

When we were in Saudi Arabia one year ago, we were planning for a communiqué on the embargo, but we had to flee the country before we were able to release one. We are waiting for an opportunity to publish a release on lifting the embargo from London but we have to do it in a way where it is not seen as a political activity. You know here in Great Britain we have a status as a non-political organization which is only supposed to deal with human rights.