

Transcript

Saudi Arabia Uncovered

VIEW FILM ([HTTP://WWW.PBS.ORG/WGBH/FRONTLINE/FILM/SAUDI-ARABIA-UNCOVERED/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/saudi-arabia-uncovered/))

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YASSER:

[through interpreter] In Saudi, they say "Be careful. The walls have ears. The walls have ears." Fear has taken over the entire population, from the elderly to young children.

The regime wants to keep everything secret. If the truth comes out, it'll be the beginning of the end for them. No one can express themselves freely.

NARRATOR:

Yasser is a young Saudi dissident and activist. He belongs to an underground network that films and publishes videos of life in Saudi Arabia the government doesn't want the world to see.

Now he's come to Istanbul to collect an undercover camera. For the next six months, he and his fellow activists will be filming secretly. If caught, they could face years in prison.

We've disguised Yasser's voice for his safety.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] Yes, there is danger, but the world needs to see how we've been liv-

ing under persecution and slavery for decades. I will do what I need to do and try to show the awful reality to the world, and whatever will be will be.

NARRATOR:

This is the story of the men and women who are trying to force change in Saudi Arabia and the regime that is trying to stop them.

Yasser lands in the capital of Riyadh, a bustling, modern city of more than six million people.

Saudi Arabia is a key U.S. ally in the Middle East and the world's largest oil exporter. Its state oil company is worth an estimated \$10 trillion.

The face of the new king, Salman, looms large over the streets. A single family, the house of Saud, has ruled the country since its founding. They subscribe to a strict form of a Sunni branch of Islam, and the country is run according to Sharia law.

#SaudiArabia

The royal family and their inner circle are among the wealthiest people in the world. Yasser films an avenue of palaces. This is the Saudi Arabia the world usually sees, a country of wealth and luxury shopping malls. But the global crash in oil prices has hit the Saudi economy hard.

BEGGAR WOMAN:

[subtitles] Please help us, whatever you can give. I have three boys and this is a baby girl. What can we do? There's nothing at home, so I have to be on the street.

NARRATOR:

Although the Saudi government has spent billions on social welfare, as much as a quarter of the population is estimated to live in poverty, a reality rarely seen.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] I'm going to show you how people live here.

NARRATOR:

Yasser brings his hidden camera to a slum on the edge of the holy city of Mecca.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] People are living in real misery here, children selling things. Oh, my God. Look at the dump! Look at the sewage.

[through interpreter] The way money is spread, it's kept among the ruling family. It's not spread to the people. Only what's left, the crumbs, are spread to the people. So there's great inequality between the classes.

NARRATOR:

Much of Saudi Arabia's wealth comes from oil fields in the east of the country, home to the Shia Muslim minority. One of Yasser's fellow activists is filming here. The east has not seen the oil riches, like other parts of the kingdom. It is the heartland of opposition to the regime.

It was here, five years ago, that the underground network was born.

PROTESTERS:

[subtitles] We refuse humiliation!

NARRATOR:

As the Arab Spring sparked revolutions in countries across the Middle East, protests erupted in the regional capital, Qatif. A young cameraman, Ali Filfil, began filming the government's response.

PROTESTER:

[subtitles] Up there, those guys, they're snipers!

NARRATOR:

The Shia were protesting discrimination by the Sunni majority and demanding recognition of their rights. Some of the protesters were armed and violent. The government saw them as a threat to national security.

The cameraman, Ali Filfil, came under fire.

PROTESTER:

[subtitles] Someone's hit! Hey, guys!

NARRATOR:

Ali Filfil was shot in the chest. He was one of roughly 20 protesters and several police killed over the months that followed.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] Filfil was just trying to get the message out. He sacrificed his life for that. His death was the spark that lit the fire.

NARRATOR:

After the deaths, the demonstrations escalated, with thousands of Shia hitting the streets. One of them was 17-year-old Ali Nimr. He was outraged at the deaths of the protesters.

ALI NIMR:

[subtitles] Shoot me. Shoot me. I'm here. This is my house, can you see? Shoot, shoot. I'm here.

NARRATOR:

Ali used his cellphone to record himself confronting police near his house.

ALI NIMR:

[subtitles] Shoot. I'm filming. Shoot! Shoot!

NUSRA AL-AHMED, Ali Nimr's Mother:

[through interpreter] Ali is an Arab boy, like any other Arab boy. He dreams of freedom. He dreams of respect, dignity.

NARRATOR:

Despite being warned not to talk to the media, Ali's parents decided to speak about their son.

MOHAMMED NIMR, Ali Nimr's Father:

[through interpreter] Ali went out to protest for human rights. They were meant to be peaceful demonstrations. He was just a 17-year-old asking for social reform.

PROTESTERS:

[subtitles] Punishment for those who shot the bullets! Punishment for those who shot the bullets!

NARRATOR:

But Ali wasn't just an ordinary protester. He was the nephew of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, widely seen as the spiritual leader of the Shia uprising.

SHEIKH NIMR AL-NIMR:

[subtitles] For the past 100 years, we've been subjected to oppression, injustice fear and intimidation! We do not fear death! We long for martyrdom!

NARRATOR:

For the Saudi government, Sheikh Nimr was a dangerous revolutionary with ties to their arch-enemy, Iran, inciting his Shia followers at demonstrations.

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] My brother, Sheikh Nimr, became an icon. That's the reality. He had a big effect on a whole generation of young people. This might not please some people in power in our country, but that is the bitter truth.

NARRATOR:

Sheikh Nimr tapped into resentment among the youth in the east of Saudi Arabia, but now protests began to spring up across the country as discontented Sunnis also took to the streets.

For activists like Yasser, who is Sunni, it felt like the moment they had been waiting for.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] We all really felt that the time had come when we would be done

with the tyranny that has ruled for decades. We felt victory was within our grasp. So it was a big disappointment after all we'd done. It was frustrating, shameful and very sad.

NARRATOR:

In 2012, the Saudi authorities cracked down hard, rounding up protesters. Sheikh Nimr was arrested and charged with treason. So was his nephew, Ali.

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] Ali called from Riyadh prison and he asked me about something that was written in the court papers. He'd been charged with sedition and treason. Ali is a young child. He asked me, "Dad, what does that mean?" Ali asked me, "What is treason, Dad?"

NARRATOR:

A Saudi court convicted him of organizing protests by text message and participating in a terror cell. He was sentenced to death. His family says he was tortured into confessing.

NUSRA AL-AHMED:

[through interpreter] Him being part of a terrorist organization is very far from what Ali believes in. It's very far from that. They are only asking for reform.

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] The sentence really shocked me. I didn't expect the judge would dare sentence a young boy in that way.

NUSRA AL-AHMED:

[through interpreter] The regime has no right to execute them. They are sentenced with this because they want to crush any groups that ask for reform in the country.

Here is my son, Ali, at nursery school with the rest of his class. And these are the last pictures I have of him before he was arrested.

NARRATOR:

Saudi officials publicly defended the arrests, and said Ali's uncle, Sheikh Nimr, was inciting

terror and attempting to overthrow the government.

ADEL AL-JUBEIR, SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTER:

Our response is that he is a terrorist. He is as much a religious scholar as Usama Bin Laden was. He was implicated in inciting people, recruiting people, providing weapons and munitions for people. And he was involved in attacks against security people.

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] Ali was used as an instrument of pressure when it comes to Sheikh Nimr's case. Even if these charges were proved against Ali, they don't deserve an execution. This is, of course, to put pressure on his uncle, Sheikh Nimr Nimr.

NARRATOR:

Ali joined three other teenage protesters on death row.

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] I might find out at any moment, while listening to the radio or television, hear an announcement about his death from the Ministry of Interior. We won't know in any other way. It could happen at any moment.

NARRATOR:

The popular uprising that Ali had been part of was stopped by late 2012. The king at the time, Abdullah, had introduced a program of reforms that was widely seen as a way to appease the population.

WILLIAM PATEY, FORMER BRITISH AMBASSADOR:

From the Saudi point of view, they have seen what happened with the Arab Spring and with other countries, and the government was certainly intent on maintaining stability.

My analysis of why the Saudi government didn't fall is they're a lot more responsive to their people than the Mubarak regime ever was, or Gadhafi or Assad. They don't have a traditional democratic system and they're not very tolerant of dissent, but they do listen. They listen and they respond.

NARRATOR:

King Abdullah introduced welfare hand-outs of more than \$100 billion, some social reform, and employment opportunities for the poor.

At the same time, the regime stepped up its use of strict Sharia law to control the population.

WOMAN:

[subtitles] I didn't do it! I swear to God!

NARRATOR:

In Saudi Arabia, executions can be carried out publicly with one sword blow to the neck.

The underground network tries to distribute videos of public punishments caught on camera. This Burmese woman was convicted of sexually assaulting and killing her step-daughter.

WOMAN:

[subtitles] No, no, I did not kill her! I did not kill her! I swear to God!

NARRATOR:

Headless bodies are sometimes put on display as a warning.

The Saudi government says that only the most serious criminals are executed, and that punishments are carried out according to sharia law.

EMILE NAKHLEH, Fmr. CIA Analyst, Political Islam:

Since the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia, I think, is undergoing an identity crisis. On one the hand, they are talking about a change in the economy of Saudi Arabia and genuine political reform. But Saudi Arabia last year, in 2015, executed more people than ever in recent memory. An the judiciary and the legal system are basically an arm of the regime to institute its policy against dissent.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] The regime basically shuts down the opposition. It imprisons them.

It attacks them. I don't think this is Islam. All the people are angry, but the problem is, they can't speak. Everyone is scared of being imprisoned.

NARRATOR:

When activists campaign publicly for change in Saudi Arabia, they risk arrest as heretics or terrorists.

HALA DOSARI, Saudi Activist:

[subtitles] My family supports this campaign, but they're worried about what could happen if the police react differently.

NARRATOR:

Hala Dosari, who worked for the Ministry of Health, began to post video messages pushing for reform. She has now left Saudi Arabia.

HALA DOSARI:

In Saudi Arabia, criticizing the government, criticizing religious people are considered as acts of terror. And people are reporting on each other, targeting their fellow citizens. So everyone becomes, you know, more religious than ever. Everybody becomes more pro-government than ever. So we're going into a fascist society.

NARRATOR:

Inside one of Saudi Arabia's upscale shopping malls, Yasser films the men who enforce the country's Islamic laws, the Saudi religious police. Dressed in traditional Islamic clothing, they patrol the streets and shopping malls. Their official title is the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

Activists have been filming and sharing videos to expose their practices and to show ordinary Saudis standing up to them.

RELIGIOUS POLICE:

[subtitles] What you're doing is wrong. You're wearing make-up and filming me.

SAUDI WOMAN:

[subtitles] There's no law against make-up. It's none of your business.

NARRATOR:

They force women to cover themselves and drive people out of cafes to go and pray.

These rules are based on a strict form of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism. It is the religion on which Saudi Arabia was founded.

Here the religious police are smashing bottles of alcohol they've confiscated.

RELIGIOUS POLICE:

[subtitles] You should be ashamed of what you're doing. You'll only find happiness in God.

NARRATOR:

The religious police break up groups of young people playing music in public. But Yasser films his friends heading to a park to play the lute.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] They're warning us, telling him if they see him play, there will be trouble. For me, music is my passion. It's a dream for me to play. But to them, it's immoral. It's a vice. It's a disgrace. It doesn't just come from the regime, but now others have started to believe this, too.

NARRATOR:

In recent years, the Saudi government has made efforts to rein in the religious police, but they still have wide authority and act with autonomy.

Yasser and his friends have been here for less than five minutes when the religious police show up. This was the last shot recorded before Yasser and his friend say they were assaulted.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] They broke my finger today. They even smashed the lute.

NARRATOR:

All Saudis are expected to attend mosque every Friday. Yasser secretly films the cleric's sermon.

CLERIC:

[subtitles] The Jews have taken, abused, and corrupted the land! So, oh God, stop them, and spill on them the whip of torture! Don't let their flag fly high, and make an example of them!

NARRATOR:

The state Wahhabi ideology is taught to Saudi children from an early age. Yasser films a 14-year-old boy, who shows him the books they use at his school.

SCHOOLBOY:

[subtitles] The Christians should be punished with death until there are no more left. They should be beheaded. That's what they teach us in school.

NARRATOR:

Saudi Arabia says it has made progress reforming its textbooks, removing the worst examples of prejudice. But opposition activists, especially those from the Shia community, see religious education as another way the regime controls the population.

ALI AL-AHMED, Institute for Gulf Affairs:

The Saudi education system has been intended as an insurance policy, as a security measure to protect the ruling family and to mislead millions of students into hatred of other religions, other cultures, and toward the Saudi ruling family.

SCHOOLBOY:

[subtitles] We learn that the Shia are blasphemers. They should be punished with death. We should fight them in the name of Islam. And we are also taught that we should fight the Jews in the name of God.

NARRATOR:

Despite promises of reform, the Saudi rulers have also tied themselves to the powerful

conservative clerics who are supported by much of the population. In 2012, one secular activist publicly criticized the relationship between the rulers and the clerics.

RAIF BADAWI:

[subtitles] My web site, Liberal Saudis, has outraged the strict conservatives in Saudi Arabia because it exposed their practices, especially the religious police.

NARRATOR:

Raif Badawi wrote a blog on which he promoted liberal values and questioned the role of religion in Saudi life.

RAIF BADAWI:

[subtitles] That's why they are trying to scare me and punish me for the web site, because it provokes Islam.

NARRATOR:

Badawi, a father of three young children, was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for insulting Islam.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] This is the square where they flogged the brother, Raif Badawi.

NARRATOR:

Yasser films the square in the city of Jeddah where Raif was lashed in public in January 2015. The lashing was secretly filmed by an activist.

LOUDSPEAKER:

[subtitles] Filming is prohibited!

YASSER:

[through interpreter] I believe that Raif has been true to himself. I have a lot of respect for him. He didn't carry arms. He didn't kill anyone. He didn't blow anything up. All he did was express an opinion.

NARRATOR:

Raif has spent most of his sentence in one of Saudi Arabia's most notorious prisons, Breiman. The underground network managed to smuggle cameras into Breiman. What they found

NARRATOR:

Here a prisoner is abused by his fellow inmates.

INMATE:

[subtitles] This is a lesson to you. Do you get it or not?

INMATE:

[subtitles] Yes, I get it. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy.

NARRATOR:

Raif Badawi spent almost four years locked up here. His lawyer and dozens of other activists are also serving long jail sentences.

LOUDSPEAKER AT FLOGGING:

[subtitles] Filming is prohibited!

Sherbrooke, Canada**NARRATOR:**

Thousands of miles away, his wife, Ensaf, and three children have received asylum. They escaped Saudi Arabia after receiving death threats. They haven't seen their father for four years.

[subtitles]

INTERVIEWER:

Do you know where Dad is?

CHILD:

Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER:

Yes?

CHILD:

In prison.

INTERVIEWER:

Why?

CHILD:

I don't know why.

INTERVIEWER:

What did he do?

CHILD:

He didn't do anything. Because he wrote something, he went to jail. I wish I could go back in time and tell him not to write it.

INTERVIEWER:

When do you think you'll see your dad again?

CHILD:

I hope he comes today.

INTERVIEWER:

When do you think you'll see him?

CHILD:

I don't know.

NARRATOR:

The family says they have only received rare phone calls from Raif since he's been imprisoned. Ensaf runs a campaign for her husband's release and is trying to keep her children's spirits up.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[subtitles] Come on Myriam, I want to hear what you'll do when Dad comes.

MYRIAM:

[subtitles] I will run and say, Daddy— and then I will cuddle both of you, and I'll show him the new house. Then we'll go to the cinema, and to a restaurant, and then you'll get married to him again. My heart is beating now.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[through interpreter] Although he's in jail, it's as if we're all serving the sentence. The most precious thing in our life is not with us. It's been four years since the children have seen their father. It's very difficult. It's so hard, but we have to carry on.

NARRATOR:

Ensaf says she's counting on Raif's case being reviewed by the Saudi courts.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[through interpreter] Honestly, I am always hopeful. This Christmas, I hope he'll be with us, but I just don't know. I have never received any good news from Saudi Arabia.

NARRATOR:

In January 2015, two weeks after Raif Badawi was lashed in public, the Saudi ruler, King Abdullah, died. His half-brother, 79-year-old Salman, came to the throne. Salman was the sixth son of Saudi Arabia's founder, Ibn Saud, to become king. The world was watching to see if he would continue the reforms begun in the wake of the Arab Spring.

KING SALMAN:

[subtitles] Dear Citizens, I have committed myself to continuing the work on the im-

mutable foundations on which this blessed country has stood since its unification, adherence to Islamic law, Sharia, preservation of the unity, security and stability of this country.

WILLIAM PATEY, Fmr. British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia:

King Salman is probably the last of the sons of al Saud to be king, so you've got a generational succession happening at a time when there are unprecedented challenges both internally and externally.

One of the dilemmas in Saudi Arabia is you have lots of competing views. There's a kind of liberal elite who want the right conditions for business. There's a conservative Islamic tendency, who doesn't want as much engagement with the West as Saudi has. There are women who want more rights. There are conservative women who don't.

So it's part of a very complex situation in Saudi Arabia, but it's not standing still. Saudi Arabia isn't standing still. The argument is about the pace of change.

NARRATOR:

Before he died, King Salman's brother had promised that women would be able to vote and stand in local elections. The new king had to decide whether to follow through on this promise and ease up on the many restrictions women face in their everyday life.

Women are banned from driving and are often prevented from traveling and going to the doctor's without a male guardian. Activists have been sharing videos like this of public violence against women to raise awareness about the issue.

Saudi officials have said they don't condone such violence and take these incidents seriously.

HALA DOSARI, Saudi Activist:

Violence is a symptom of the position of women in a society because it reflects how people view the roles of women. This is a tribal society, and it's being kept this way. The philosophy of the government is to keep the control of the man or the power of the father, basically. So violence is used as a disciplinary way or a controlling way.

NARRATOR:

There have been recent legal advances in protecting the rights of women, but violence

still occurs. In this video, after being whipped in public, the women turn on their attackers. Increasingly, women are fighting back.

Loujain Hathloul is one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent women's activists. She has been campaigning to overturn the ban against women driving. In late 2014, she uploaded a video of herself trying to drive into Saudi Arabia from the neighboring United Arab Emirates.

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

[subtitles] Hello. This is Loujain Hathloul. I am now on the Ghweifat Road. I'm trying to drive across the Saudi border. So let's see what happens.

NARRATOR:

Moments after this was filmed, Loujain was arrested. Her case was referred to a terrorism court and she was imprisoned for 73 days without trial before being released. She's spent months banned from traveling outside Saudi Arabia.

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

I've been threatened since the beginning. My car was broken. I almost got beaten up. Just because of the campaign, people wrote me letters on Facebook and send me all sorts of weapon pictures, saying that if I continue, I would be murdered or my family harmed.

NARRATOR:

Loujain's campaign sparked a debate inside Saudi Arabia. To some women she became a hero, to the more conservative elements, a hate figure.

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

I try to represent their rights. Some of them don't believe that it's their own rights. They refuse it and reject it. But I believe that they're— they're imprisoned in their old ways and their old mindset or they just fear freedom.

NARRATOR:

There is a grass roots movement of women's activists who are trying to pressure the regime. Yasser's network films one of their meetings.

WOMEN'S ACTIVIST:

[subtitles] Today is a historic day. I'm so happy we've finally got here. It's taken us many years.

NARRATOR:

They were discussing King Salman's decision to deliver on his predecessor's promise. Women would now be allowed to take part in upcoming local elections.

WOMEN'S ACTIVIST:

[subtitles] Finally, they've heard our demand to take part in the elections.

NARRATOR:

Loujain says she was forced to sign a pledge saying she would no longer publicly campaign when she was released from prison. But here, she's filming herself registering as a candidate in the elections.

LOUJAIN'S HUSBAND:

[subtitles] Did you do it?

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

[subtitles] It's done!

It's a chance for women to feel the power they can have in making some changes. I know they are minor changes, but it's good to learn about democracy and voting and all this, to be represented next to men equally, to give them that push forward that you actually count. You have the chance to act, now do it.

NARRATOR:

As a high-profile activist, entering the election brings added risks for Loujain.

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

My family supports me. They support the ideas. They support me in pretty much everything I'm doing. But the jail experience was very harsh on them. I try to respect that, but also, I try to respect the fact that I need and we need, actually, to keep on asking and act-

ing push the envelope to actually make some changes.

It's scary. I won't say it's not scary. But I'm continuing. I am not stopping. I'm stepping, shaking while stepping, yes, but I'm not giving up.

NARRATOR:

Three years after the Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi, was imprisoned for insulting Islam, Ensaf, his wife, is in Strasbourg, France, to collect a human rights award from the European Parliament on his behalf. But she's had bad news from Saudi Arabia on Raif's case.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[through interpreter] Raif has been moved to another prison, a prison for people who have been given a final sentence, and they have to serve out the full sentence in that prison. It was very bad news because I'm worried about Raif's health.

NARRATOR:

She's been told Raif has begun a hunger strike.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[through interpreter] I told the kids that he was moved to a new prison, but I couldn't face telling them about the hunger strike. Poor things. My children are tired from all the bad news. They've lost their childhood because of what they've been through. But at least I have the kids. They give me strength to carry on. But Raif has no one. He has been taken away from his children. The sentence against him is so cruel and unjust.

[subtitles] The international community has called upon the Arab world to allow freedom of expression. My husband says that religious leaders are trying to intimidate thinkers because thinkers are cutting the ground from under them and revealing their lies and ignorance to all. Raif would like to thank you all and conclude with the message, We wish life on those who wish us death. *[applause]*

NARRATOR:

Saudi officials would not answer questions or agree to an interview. They have publicly said that the Saudi courts are independent and that the constitution protects human

rights. But activists are growing increasingly impatient with the new king.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] When Salman came to the throne, everyone thought he was going to be a force for change. But what have we seen? More executions, more people being locked up for posting things on line, and more fear.

NARRATOR:

King Salman now faces pressure not just from activists at home but economic forces that threaten Saudi stability.

BEGGAR WOMAN:

[subtitles] Please, can you help with anything? Just 100 riyals—

NARRATOR:

The crash in the price of oil has caused the monarchy to cut subsidies and public spending.

EMILE NAKHLEH, FORMER CIA ANALYST, POLITICAL ISLAM:

When the Arab Spring started, King Abdullah spent \$133 billion in Saudi Arabia to buy off dissent, giving free mortgages, free housing in order to silence the opposition. They don't have that type of money to silence the opposition anymore.

NARRATOR:

On top of the oil crash, Saudi Arabia has become involved in unprecedented and costly foreign wars in Syria and Yemen. The International Monetary Fund has said that at this rate, the Saudis will have spent all their financial reserves within five years.

HALA DOSARI:

Most of the forecasting of our situation have emphasized that we will go bankrupt in a few years. And this is really serious. Faced with the removal of the subsidies, taxation, all those issues would create a stress on people that they themselves would rise to that challenge and really demand better governance. So if the ruling family does not act in a rea-

sonable way, I don't know what might happen next.

WILLIAM PATEY:

Saudi Arabia is facing some of the biggest challenges it's ever faced. I mean, some of these threats and some of these challenges have been around for some time. What is true today is that they're all coming at once. The oil price is low, you unemployment and regional instability, you've got a resurgent Iran, you've got conflicts in Syria, Yemen. You could almost argue the possibility of a perfect storm.

NARRATOR:

In January 2016, King Salman asserted his authority.

NEWSCASTER:

Forty-seven people in Saudi Arabia have been executed.

NEWSCASTER:

—the biggest mass execution—

NEWSCASTER:

—the largest mass execution in three-and-a-half decades.

NARRATOR:

He ordered the execution of 47 men. Many were convicted al Qaeda terrorists, but among them was the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr.

MOHAMMED NIMR, Sheikh Nimr's Brother:

[through interpreter] On the 2nd of January, 2016, at 10:30 AM, we heard it on Saudi TV.

NEWSCASTER:

Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shi'ite cleric—

NEWSCASTER:

The charismatic religious leader was held by his followers as a peaceful reformist—

MOHAMMED NIMR:

[through interpreter] We were shocked. The whole Saudi community was shocked, even the rest of the world. It's known that the king himself sanctioned this personally.

NEWSCASTER:

Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr al Nimr has inflamed a centuries-old conflict—

NARRATOR:

The executions caused alarm about the consequences for the region.

NEWSCASTER:

—crisis unfolding in the Middle East—

NEWSCASTER:

—the ripple effect of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia—

NEWSCASTER:

—says it's worried the execution of Nimr al-Nimr will exacerbate religious tensions—

NEWSCASTER:

Iran used their state-run news to condemn Nimr's death—

WILLIAM PATEY:

From a Saudi point of view, they saw him as someone who incited violence.

SAUDI COMMENTATOR:

They are saving the whole world from terrorism!

WILLIAM PATEY:

I think it's probably fair to say that Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was not a terrorist, but he had advocated what the Saudis would regard as extreme positions.

NEWSCASTER:

Protests are spreading around the globe.

WILLIAM PATEY:

I think the Saudis took the view that they could live with any reaction from Iran.

NEWSCASTER:

News of the cleric's death has sparked a wave of protests around the region.

NARRATOR:

Iran saw it as a provocation and an overtly hostile act towards Shia Muslims.

NEWSCASTER:

In neighboring Bahrain, protests turned violent as police—

NARRATOR:

For Saudi dissidents, it was a sign that the regime would continue its suppression of opposition.

NEWSCASTER:

The European Union warned Nimr's death could have dangerous consequences.

ALI AL-AHMED, Institute for Gulf Affairs:

The execution of Sheikh Nimr— this is going to change things in terms of how people perceive the government and perceive politics—

NEWSCASTER:

Saudi officials defended them as an objective and legal way to ensure justice—

ALI AL-AHMED:

—the fact that the state cannot tolerate peaceful opposition. I think this execution made Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr into an icon, into a martyr.

January 2016

NARRATOR:

This new footage smuggled out by the activists' network shows how the Sheikh's execution sparked the first major protests in the east of Saudi Arabia since the Arab Spring.

The sheikh's son told us that his father's execution will only incite more opposition to the regime.

MOHAMMAD NIMR, Sheikh Nimr's Son:

It was a big shock for me. Basically, I couldn't, like, believe the Saudi government would do that. Even though he knew, and he said that many time— like, I remember one time he said that our blood is a cheap price for our values.

SHEIK NIMR AL-NIMR:

[subtitles] Our blood is a cheap price for our values!

MOHAMMAD NIMR:

He basically said that if they want to kill us, let them kill us. If they want to put us in prison, let them put us in prison. But we won't be silent.

PROTESTERS:

[subtitles] Death to the Saudi regime!

MOHAMMAD NIMR:

By executing my father, they have accelerated the change that will come to this country.

NARRATOR:

Sheikh Nimr's nephew, Ali, was spared, but he remains on death row.

MOHAMMED NIMR, Ali's Father:

[through interpreter] I feel that the sword is against his neck. They say there will be repercussions. They expect that there will be chaos in the streets. So what do you think will happen, God forbid, if they execute him? The situation might become something bigger than just protests. We do not want that to happen.

EMILE NAKHLEH, Fmr. CIA Analyst, Political Islam:

I mean, the execution of Sheikh Nimr is a signal that the Saudis were sending not to the Shia only, but to all dissidents, secular and Islamic, they will not tolerate any dissent because they are viscerally opposed to sharing power.

NARRATOR:

The executions have had an effect on Yasser and his fellow activists. After six months, he says that it is too dangerous to keep filming for us.

YASSER:

[through interpreter] I can't continue. All my friends have been arrested, and if they find my camera, they'll say I'm a terrorist. People aren't happy at all. We now know the true face of the king.

NARRATOR:

As for Loujain Hathloul, although 21 women were elected in 2015, she says she was barred from participating in the elections.

LOUJAIN HATHLOUL:

Yes, because I'm a troublemaker for them. That's why they don't really want me. Or actually, I think it's a case of me being a very vocal person about human rights or women rights.

HALA DOSARI, Saudi Activist:

Unfortunately, the religious establishment is not really aligned with any of the economic, social or best interests of the 30 million people living in Saudi Arabia. Their needs and best interests and voices should be heard. And it will continue to be an issue for the people and for the political system until it's resolved. It's not going to go away because people are being imprisoned, or even executed.

February 2016, Eastern Saudi Arabia**NARRATOR:**

Last month, Saudi security forces returned to the Shia city of Qatif in pursuit of a terror suspect. Armed clashes resumed. According to residents, 2 people were killed and 26 injured.

Despite the risks, Yasser and the underground network are continuing to try to expose what's going on in Saudi Arabia.

Raif Badawi has now ended his hunger strike, but he remains in prison, serving his 10-year sentence.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[subtitles] His health isn't good. His morale isn't good. But I hope we're going to see him soon.

NARRATOR:

Ensaf says she hasn't heard from him since the mass execution.

ENSAF BADAWI:

[through interpreter] The kids have been asking why we haven't heard anything. I have no answer. I tell them I don't know because I really don't know. Of course, I hear the news from Saudi all the time, but I shut it out so that my head doesn't get mixed up. I convince myself everything else that happens is separate from Raif's case.

[The U.S. government has called on Saudi Arabia to review Raif Badawi's case and cancel his "brutal punishment." He is due to be released in 2022.]

[Loujain Hathloul recently had her travel ban lifted. She continues to seek reforms for women and says she plans to run in the next elections.]

[Earlier this month, Saudi media reported that more executions were imminent. British officials say they were recently assured by Saudi Arabia that Ali Nimr will not be executed.]

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