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Biden to take a tougher line on Saudi Sharia Law executing minors

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Saudis vowed to stop executing minors, rights groups say

Several groups fear that loopholes in Saudi law will allow judges to impose the death sentence on juvenile offenders nonetheless under the interpretation of sharia, the Islamic law since Saudi Arabia has no civil penal code

Reuters| Updated: 01.18.21 , 14:30

Five people who committed crimes in Saudi Arabia as minors have yet to have their death sentences revoked, according to two rights groups, nine months after the kingdom's Human Rights Commission (HRC) announced an end to capital punishment for juvenile offenders.

The state-backed HRC in April cited a March royal decree by King Salman stipulating that individuals sentenced to death for crimes committed while minors will no longer face execution and would instead serve prison terms of up to 10 years in juvenile detention centers.

The statement did not specify a timeline, but in October, in response to a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), it said the decree had come into force immediately upon announcement.

The decree was never carried on state media nor published in the official gazette as would be normal practice.

In December, state news agency SPA published a list of prominent "events" of 2020 featuring several royal decrees, but the death penalty order was not included.

Organizations including anti-death penalty group Reprieve, HRW and the European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) as well as a group of U.S. lawmakers have raised concerns that loopholes in Saudi law could still allow judges to impose the death sentence on juvenile offenders.

One of the five has appealed and eight face charges that could result in execution, said the groups, who follow the cases closely.

Reuters established the status of three of the five individuals through HRC statements but could not independently verify the other two.

The government's Center for International Communications (CIC) dismissed the concerns, telling Reuters that the royal decree would be applied retroactively to all cases where an individual was sentenced to death for offenses committed under the age of 18.

"The Royal Order issued in March 2020 was put into effect immediately upon its issuance and was circulated to the relevant authorities for instant implementation," the CIC said in an emailed statement.

The HRC declined to comment.

Saudi Arabia, whose human rights record came under global scrutiny after the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents, is one of the world's top executioners after Iran and China, rights groups say.

Its de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known internationally as MbS, enjoyed strong support from U.S. President Donald Trump.

But President-elect Joe Biden, who takes over in the White House later this week, has described the kingdom as a "pariah" for its rights record and said he would take a tougher line.

Six U.S. senators wrote to the Saudi embassy in the United States in October urging the kingdom to review all ongoing death penalty cases to identify individuals convicted for crimes committed when they were children, according to a copy of the letter seen by Reuters.

One of the signatories, Democratic Rep. Tom Malinowski, told Reuters in December that if the kingdom were to follow through on the execution of juvenile offenders, "it would make it even harder for Saudi Arabia to return to the kind of relationships that it wants with the United States."

He added that Biden would be looking at the kingdom's human rights policies "very differently to Trump".

Biden officials declined to comment for this article, but referred Reuters to an earlier statement saying the new administration would reassess U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia.

Ali al-Nimr and Dawood al-Marhoun were 17 when they were detained in 2012 on charges related to participating in widespread protests in the Shi'ite-majority Eastern Province. Abdullah al-Zaher was 15 when he was arrested.

The three, who are among the five juvenile offenders whose death penalties have yet to be revoked, were sentenced to death by the Specialized Criminal Court and faced

beheading, although the public prosecutor ordered a review of their sentences in August.

The CIC said the royal decree would be applied to their cases.

Their lawyers could not immediately be reached for comment.

In 2018, after assuming his post in a palace coup that ousted the previous crown prince, MbS pledged to minimise the use of the death penalty as part of sweeping social reforms. But in 2019, a record number of about 185 people were executed, according to the rights groups.

Reuters could not independently confirm the figures. The CIC did not comment when asked whether this figure was accurate.

In an article published last April, state-linked newspaper Okaz confirmed the existence of the royal decree, but said that the abolishment only applied to a lesser category of offence under Islamic law known as "ta'zeer".

These crimes are not clearly defined in the Koran or accompanying Hadiths and so punishments are left to judges' discretion, and can amount to death.

Saudi Arabia has no civil penal code that sets out sentencing rules, and no system of judicial precedent that would make the outcome of cases more predictable based on past practice.

Judges could still sentence child offenders to death under the other two categories, according to Saudi Arabia's interpretation of sharia: "houdoud", or serious crimes which carry a prescribed punishment, including terrorism, and "qisas", or retribution, usually for murder, two lawyers and the rights groups said.

Asked why the royal decree was never published and whether it only applies to the "ta'zeer" category of offense, the CIC declined to comment.

Some defendants in protest cases have been prosecuted on terror charges.

In a case watched closely by the rights groups, 18-year-old Mohammad al-Faraj was facing the death penalty even though he was 15 at the time of his arrest in 2017 for charges including participating in protests and attending related funerals, one when he was aged nine.

Ahead of his next hearing scheduled for Jan. 18, a source close to one of the defendants in Faraj's case said the demand for a "houdoud" death sentence had recently been withdrawn and prosecutors were instead seeking the harshest punishment under "ta'zeer". The CIC said the royal decree would apply retroactively to Faraj's case. ESOHR expressed concern that without a published decree, the risk of capital punishment cannot be ruled out.

ESOHR said Faraj was only granted a state-appointed lawyer in October, was not brought to court and was tortured in detention, allegations the CIC denied.

Since the start of the pandemic, Faraj has been allowed one weekly 15-minute call to his parents, with in-person visits cancelled, a source close to the family said.

Reuters was unable to independently confirm the specifics of his case.

01.18.21

PA fired two rockets at Ashdod for Israel failing to ease blockade or create jobs

01.18.21

Israeli jets hit Hamas targets in Gaza after rockets fired toward Ashdod

IDF says it's currently investigating whether the launch directed at the sea near the southern city, was carried out by Hamas or by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Hamas accuses Israel of failing to honor its truce obligations

Associated Press, Ynet | Published: 01.18.21 , 08:55

Israeli military aircraft struck targets in the Gaza Strip early on Monday in response to two rockets fired from the Palestinian territory toward the city of Ashdod, the military said.

In a statement, the military said fighter jets hit Hamas military targets, including sites for digging underground tunnels, some of which stretch into Israel. There were no immediate reports of injuries from the airstrikes.

The rockets were launched from the town of Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip toward the sea close to the southern city, with no reports of damage or injury from the rockets launched.

While the IDF is currently investigating whether the launch was carried out by the Hamas terrorist organization, who maintains control on the Strip, or by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad - Israel's policy is to hold Hamas responsible for any fire emanating from Gaza. "The IDF takes very seriously any terrorist activity against Israel and is prepared and ready to act as resolutely as necessary against attempts to harm Israeli citizens and their sovereignty," the IDF stated. "The terrorist organization Hamas bears responsibility for what is happening in and out of the Gaza Strip, and it will bear the consequences for the terrorist acts against the citizens of Israel."

Hamas, meanwhile, accuses Israel of failing to honor its truce obligations, which include easing a crippling blockade on the Palestinian enclave, and allowing for large-scale infrastructure and job-creation projects.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since the Islamic militant group seized power of the coastal enclave in 2007. While no major confrontation has occurred since 2014, there are often cross-border skirmishes and flare-ups between the sides.

While militant rocket attacks and Israeli retaliatory artillery and aerial strikes are frequent, they have largely been subdued in recent months due to the coronavirus outbreaks in both territories.

01.18.21

Woman tries to sell Pelosi's office presentation PC to Russia, ex tips FBI

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Woman tries to sell Pelosi's PC to Russians, ex tips FBI

According to affidavit, Riley June Williams accused of unlawfully breaching the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, intended to send the device to a friend in Russia, who then planned to sell it to SVR, the country's foreign intelligence service
Reuters| Published: 01.18.21 , 23:32

U.S. law enforcement is investigating whether a woman took a laptop computer or hard drive from U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office during the Jan. 6 siege of the Capitol and tried to sell the device to Russian intelligence, according to a court filing.

An FBI agent disclosed the detail in an affidavit released on Sunday night that outlined a criminal case against Riley June Williams, a Pennsylvania woman accused of unlawfully breaching the Capitol building and directing people to Pelosi's office.

The theft of electronic devices from congressional offices has been a persistent worry following the siege by supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump. Acting U.S. Attorney Michael Sherwin said after the attack that some of the thefts might have potentially jeopardized what he described as "national security equities." According to the affidavit filed with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, the FBI received a tip from someone who stated they were a former romantic partner of Williams.

The tipster said Williams "intended to send the computer device to a friend in Russia, who then planned to sell the device to SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service," the affidavit stated.

According to the tipster, "the transfer of the computer device to Russia fell through for unknown reasons and Williams still has the computer device or destroyed it," the affidavit stated. The investigation remains open.

Williams could not be reached for comment.

According to the FBI, it appears Williams has fled an address near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, that she shared with her mother, deactivated her phone number, and took down social media accounts.

A Pelosi spokesman, Drew Hammill, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Two days after the Capitol siege, Hammill said a laptop used for presentations was stolen from a conference room in Pelosi's office. It was unclear whether that device was the one Williams was accused of taking.

01.18.21

FBI vetting DC National Guard troops for any indication of extremist views

01.18.21

Fearing insider threat, FBI vetting National Guard troops for Biden inauguration

Move underscores fears that some in 25,000-strong force assigned to protect D.C. in coming days could present threat to the incoming president, other VIPs in attendance; two National Guard members already arrested over Capitol assault
Associated Press| Published: 01.18.21 , 11:40

U.S. defense officials say they are worried about an insider attack or other threat from service members involved in securing President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, prompting the FBI to vet all of the 25,000 National Guard troops coming into Washington for the event.

The massive undertaking reflects the extraordinary security concerns that have gripped Washington following the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol by pro-Trump rioters.

It also underscores fears that some of the very people assigned to protect the city over the next several days could present a threat to the incoming president and other VIPs in attendance.

U.S. Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy told The Associated Press on Sunday that officials are conscious of the potential threat, and he warned commanders to be on the lookout for any problems within their ranks as the inauguration approaches.

So far, however, he and other leaders say they have seen no evidence of any threats, and officials said the vetting hadn't flagged any issues that they were aware of.

"We're continually going through the process, and taking second, third looks at every one of the individuals assigned to this operation," McCarthy said in an interview after he and other military leaders went through an exhaustive, three-hour security drill in preparation for Wednesday's inauguration.

He said National Guard members are also getting training on how to identify potential insider threats.

About 25,000 members of the National Guard are streaming into Washington from across the country -- at least two and a half times the number for previous inaugurations.

And while the military routinely reviews service members for extremist connections, the FBI screening is in addition to any previous monitoring.

Multiple officials said the process began as the first Guard troops began deploying to D.C. more than a week ago. And they said it is slated to be complete by Wednesday.

Several officials discussed military planning on condition of anonymity.

"The question is, is that all of them? Are there others?" said McCarthy. "We need to be conscious of it and we need to put all of the mechanisms in place to thoroughly vet these men and women who would support any operations like this."

In a situation like this one, FBI vetting would involve running peoples' names through databases and watchlists maintained by the bureau to see if anything alarming comes up. That could include involvement in prior investigations or terrorism-related concerns, said David Gomez, a former FBI national security supervisor in Seattle.

Insider threats have been a persistent law enforcement priority in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. But in most cases, the threats are from homegrown insurgents radicalized by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State group or similar groups.

In contrast, the threats against Biden's inauguration have been fueled by supporters of President Donald Trump, far-right militants, white supremacists and other radical groups.

Many believe Trump's baseless accusations that the election was stolen from him, a claim that has been refuted by many courts, the Justice Department and Republican officials in key battleground states.

The insurrection at the Capitol began after Trump made incendiary remarks at the Jan. 6 rally. According to McCarthy, service members from across the military were at that rally, but it's not clear how many were there or who may have participated in the breach at the Capitol.

So far only a couple of current active-duty or National Guard members have been arrested in connection with the Capitol assault, which left five people dead. The dead included a Capitol Police officer and a woman shot by police as she climbed through a window in a door near the House chamber.

Gen. Daniel R. Hokanson, chief of the National Guard Bureau, has been meeting with Guard troops as they arrive in D.C. and as they gather downtown. He said he believes there are good processes in place to identify any potential threats.

"If there's any indication that any of our soldiers or airmen are expressing things that are extremist views, it's either handed over to law enforcement or dealt with the chain of command immediately," he said.

The insider threat, however, was just one of the security concerns voiced by officials on Sunday, as dozens of military, National Guard, law enforcement and Washington, D.C., officials and commanders went through a security rehearsal in northern Virginia.

As many as three dozen leaders lined tables that ringed a massive color-coded map of D.C. reflected onto the floor. Behind them were dozens more National Guard officers and staff, with their eyes trained on additional maps and charts displayed on the wall.

The Secret Service is in charge of event security, but there is a wide variety of military and law enforcement personnel involved, ranging from the National Guard and the FBI to Washington's Metropolitan Police Department, U.S. Capitol Police and U.S. Park Police. Commanders went over every aspect of the city's complicated security lockdown, with McCarthy and others peppering them with questions about how the troops will respond in any scenario and how well they can communicate with the other enforcement agencies scattered around the city.

Hokanson said he believes his troops have been adequately equipped and prepared, and that they are rehearsing as much as they can to be prepared for any contingency.

The major security concern is an attack by armed groups of individuals, as well as planted explosives and other devices. McCarthy said intelligence reports suggest that groups are organizing armed rallies leading up to Inauguration Day, and possibly after that.

The bulk of the **Guard members will be armed**. And McCarthy said units are going through repeated drills to practice when and how to use force and how to work quickly with law enforcement partners. Law enforcement officers would make any arrests.

He said Guard units are going through "constant mental repetitions of looking at the map and **talking through scenarios** with leaders so they understand their task and purpose, they know their routes, they know where they're friendly, adjacent units are, they have the appropriate frequencies to communicate with their law enforcement partners."

The key goal, he said, is for America's **transfer of power** to happen without incident.

"This is a national priority. We have to be successful as an institution," said McCarthy.

"We want to send the message to everyone in the United States and for the rest of the world that we can do this safely and peacefully."