



[Saudi Arabia Draws International Criticism for Its Mass Execution of 81 People in One Day](#)

Saudi authorities have fallen under fresh scrutiny over the past week following the mass execution of 81 people in a single day on Saturday, March 12th. Rights activists around the world have condemned the troubling escalation in Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty. Detainees in Saudi prisons are often subjected to torture, unfair trials, false confessions, and other grave human rights violations, and advocacy groups contend that some of those who were executed had been political dissidents who were charged with false or trumped-up offenses. Many were also from the country's Shi'a minority, which has long been oppressed by the Saudi government. Adding to the criticism is the fact that Saudi Arabia's legal system has been accused of a lack of transparency, especially when pertaining to death penalty cases. Those recently executed included individuals convicted on questionable "terrorism-related crimes," and others who were problematically charged with "disrupting the social fabric and national cohesion" or participating in sit-ins and protests.

This mass execution flies in the face of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's pledge that the country was going to reform its justice system and limit the use of the death penalty. In their condemnation, rights organizations have also accused the Saudi government of using torture to secure fabricated confessions. Many of these "confessions" were extracted specifically through torture and prisoner mistreatment. One of the people executed, Mohammad al-Shakhouri, was sentenced to death in 2021 for alleged violent offenses related to his participation in an anti-government protest. During his trial, he told the court that he had been tortured, suffering multiple visible injuries including the loss of many of his teeth. Al-Shakhouri withdrew his confession because it was extracted through torture. He had no access to legal representation while incarcerated and interrogated, and his family was not allowed to visit him 8 months after his arrest. Despite all of this, the judge still sentenced him to death, with relatives not being notified of his execution and instead only learning about it because of a local media report. Another one of the men executed, As'ad Ali, was sentenced for similar offenses in 2021. He told the court that he had suffered emotional and physical torture during his confinement, and that his "confession" was also extracted via this method. In addition to being subjected to repeated torture, both men were denied medical treatment for their injuries.

On the whole, mass execution is not a new practice in Saudi Arabia. 37 people were executed in one day back in 2019, a majority of whom were Shi'a Muslims. Another such occurrence took place in 2016, when 47 people were executed including a prominent Shi'a cleric. Members of the Shi'a religious minority group often make up a large portion of those killed in these mass executions, raising legitimate concerns that the threat of execution is being used in an attempt to continue to suppress them. Unease has also been levied regarding people convicted as minors being executed – a violation of international law. Saudi officials have refused any investigation efforts by international organizations and human rights groups, saying that this is an "internal matter."

Saudi Arabia currently has no formal penal code, instead using a system based on Sharia law. Some regulations have been passed down by the government, but they are very broad and vague. This allows for judges and prosecutors to convict people under a wide range of "offenses," including "breaking allegiance with the rule" and "trying to distort the reputation of the kingdom." This is troublesome because it gives authorities arbitrary power to adjudicate, resulting in many miscarriages of justice.