



NEW EVIDENCE OF CIVIL UNREST IN SAUDI ARABIA
BBC documentary gains rare access to Saudi Arabia's troubled Eastern Province and anti-government activists engaged in three years of protests.

May 30th 2014. The BBC has gained unprecedented access to anti-government activists in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province as the Kingdom strives to crackdown on civil unrest.

In one of the most secretive countries in the world, frequent protests by the Shia minority have gone largely unreported. But for the first co-production between *BBC Our World*, *BBC Arabic* and *BBC Persian*, reporter Safa Al Ahmad travels into her native Saudi Arabia to investigate how three years of protests have continued in spite of a violent government crackdown.

It's nearly impossible for foreign journalists to operate in the Eastern Province, but Safa grew up in the area and was able to travel in and meet activists under the radar, without alerting the authorities. Filming over the course of a year (2013-14), Safa gained access to leading figures in the protest movement – many of whom are on a government most-wanted list. She was also given exclusive access to dozens of hours of activists' footage captured in Qatif - the epicentre of the uprising which sits on top of the world's largest oil fields.

The protesters have been fighting against what they claim are years of oppression and they are demanding a more equitable distribution of Saudi Arabia's vast oil wealth. Some of the demonstrations have descended into violence with activists firing on the security forces.

Safa also discovered evidence that the activists did use weapons against the security forces in the early days of the protests, something they denied but the Saudi Authorities have always maintained.

Now with the recent deaths of two policemen, the Government has stated it considers all violent protestors as terrorists.

As part of her investigation Safa met dozens of activists including two on the list of most wanted, Fathil Al Safwani and Morsi Al Ribh.

Speaking to Safa after a raid on their family homes in February 2013 Fathil said:

"It's clear they mean to kill. You are now standing on top of oil fields that feed the whole world. But we see nothing of it. Poverty, hunger, no honour, no political freedom, we have nothing. What is left? And after all this, they attack us and try to kill us."

Morsi added: "How do I feel? Thank God I am ok. God is with us and we are walking the right path. We are demanding our rights. We are not rioters as they claim."

Four months after Safa filmed the raid on his home, Morsi was shot dead by police.

Safa met dozens of activists, like 'Hassan', who would only speak on condition of anonymity. "There's no doubt his [Morsi] martyrdom is a great loss to the uprising. But this makes it stronger and his friends more determined."

'Hassan' supplied dozens of hours of footage to the BBC which was shot by protesters over the last three years.

He told Safa: "Of course if the Saudi security forces attacked any home we find it acceptable to use any form of self-defence...even weapons."

Many people are afraid to speak out, scared of retaliation from both the Government and the activists. But Safa hears from one female resident who, under promise of anonymity, said:

"I'm speaking as a mother from Awamiya. I live nearby the police station. The station is protected. The soldiers outside in armoured vehicles are protected. We aren't protected. So why are the activists shooting at us? Who benefits... then the security forces respond even more violently and we are in the middle."

The stories Safa gathered combined with the footage gives a disturbing account of the descent into violence of the once peaceful protests leading to loss of lives on both sides.

Safa said: "This uprising is unprecedented in modern Saudi history. Foreign journalists rarely get access to Qatif these days and even in Saudi Arabia the protests are hardly ever reported. So why are people risking their lives to demonstrate? This is a really important story and it has never really been fully told until now."

The BBC repeatedly contacted the Saudi Government for a response to this investigation but none was forthcoming.

Our World: Saudi's Secret Uprising with Safa Al Ahmad will be broadcast on BBC World News, Saturday May 31st at 09.30 and 21.30 and Monday June 2nd at 08.30 AEST

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