Trick or Treating for UNICEF: "Scary Good" or Just Plain Scary?

October 27, 2017

Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America

UNICEF [claims](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=93762913cb&e=48376128a7) that it “works in 190 countries and territories to protect the rights of every child. UNICEF has spent 70 years working to improve the lives of children and their families. Defending children's rights throughout their lives requires a global presence, aiming to produce results and understand their effects.” It also says that it believes that “all children have a right to survive, thrive and fulfill their potential – to the benefit of a better world.” These are lofty and, to be sure, very worthy goals. A look at who is responsible for implementing them, however, raises many questions.

Saudi Arabia sits on UNICEF’s Executive Board. In 2016 Saudi Arabia gave UNICEF [$19 million](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=6accb0adb7&e=48376128a7), making the Kingdom the 16th largest donor country. Yet, child marriage remains a major issue in Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia, there is no legal [minimum age](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=8566c3a95e&e=48376128a7) for marriage. Although UNICEF’s [own](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=c43f5a04ea&e=48376128a7) [statistics](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=8e04c3d6dd&e=48376128a7) [do not](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=f2367f0012&e=48376128a7) list child marriage as a problem, a few reports suggest that it is quite a large one. As noted above, in one reported case from 2008, a court refused to annul the marriage of a girl of [eight](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=6b900bc00a&e=48376128a7). Often the girls are married to much, much older men, and in that case, the girl's "husband" was 58 years old.

In a 2009 report, MEMRI [wrote](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=8fd4c1a4d1&e=48376128a7) that:

The Saudi press has lately been discussing the custom of child bride marriage, especially cases of middle-aged or elderly men taking prepubescent girls for their wives. …

Recent press reports on child bride marriage in Saudi Arabia sparked a wave of criticism among columnists and social activists, who called for abolishing the custom and for setting a minimum age for marriage in Saudi law. In response, on November 24, 2008, the Saudi Shura Council passed a resolution setting the legal age of majority at 18. However, the council refrained from explicitly defining this as the minimum age for marriage, reflecting the difficulty it faces in confronting this well-entrenched practice.

In addition, in 2011, in an opinion [piece](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=7aa99b4cb0&e=48376128a7) in the *Guardian*, activist Ali Al-Ahmed claimed that, “Saudi Arabia has probably the highest number of child marriages in the Middle East and yet there has been almost no international outrage or objection directed at the practice.”

The same 2009 report by MEMRI detailed significant opposition to child marriage from women’s groups and the press. Their efforts at reform were detailed further in 2013 in a [report](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=70a6e2f2cc&e=48376128a7) on CNN’s website by Suad Abu-Dayyeh, the Middle East and North Africa consultant for the NGO Equality Now. Efforts at enacting a minimum age for marriage, however, seem to have suffered a [fatal blow](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=8b3ea438b1&e=48376128a7) in December of 2014 when Shaikh Abdul Aziz Al Shaikh, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, was [quoted](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=268965a662&e=48376128a7) saying simply, “there is currently no intention to discuss the issue.”

Al-Ahmed wrote in his 2011 piece in the *Guardian* that “I have personally sent two letters to Ann Veneman, the director of United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), regarding the Saudi practice and asking her to make her views on the issue public. … Instead, Unicef lauded Saudi efforts to protect child rights and even honoured Prince Naif, whose interior ministry is one of the departments overseeing child marriages.” In [response](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=5ab1528349&e=48376128a7) to Al-Ahmed’s column, UNICEF communicated to the *Guardian* that “a statement was issued in 2009 by Ann Veneman, then its executive director, expressing deep concern about child marriage in Saudi Arabia.”

Yet, an August 2017 [statement](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=b9169245a3&e=48376128a7) about the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage reports that “the programme targets adolescent girls (ages 10-19) at risk of child marriage or already in union, in 12 selected countries: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Yemen and Zambia.” Saudi Arabia is not included.

Saudi Arabia has also been criticized for disregarding the rights of children during wartime. According to a [draft report](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=4cf4639f5f&e=48376128a7) by U.N. Secretary General António Guterres, air attacks by a Saudi-led coalition against Houthi forces in Yemen in 2016 caused the deaths of at least 349 children, with another 333 children injured. The Saudi-led coalition also reportedly destroyed 28 schools. When the report was [finalized](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=51f6865f99&e=48376128a7) earlier this month, however, Saudi Arabia called it "inaccurate and misleading."

[Iran](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=3c48435061&e=48376128a7) also holds a seat on UNICEF’s Executive Board. In August of 2016, Iran executed a [teenager](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=362a7e0ae2&e=48376128a7), Hassan Afshar. Although his alleged crime was rape, the *Independent* reported “LGBT activists have suggested Mr Afshar was convicted and punished for being gay.” That paper further reported that Afshar was only 17 when his alleged crime occurred, and that he received no legal representation at his trial. Human Rights Watch has [reported](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=00c6fb9a83&e=48376128a7) that, “at least 49 inmates on death row [in Iran in 2016] were convicted of crimes committed when they were under 18 years old.”

Iranian children of the Baha’i faith – along with their parents and all other Baha’i – have been branded “deviants,” and “enemies of God.” The Baha’i in Iran face [systematic discrimination](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=1d06c13bca&e=48376128a7), including denial of the right to higher education.

Human Rights Watch’s [2017 Report](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=a6916e2c36&e=48376128a7) on Iran stated that:

The UN Children’s Rights Committee reported in March that the age of marriage for girls is 13, that sexual intercourse with girls as young as nine lunar years was not criminalized, and that judges had discretion to release some perpetrators of so-called honor killings without any punishment. Child marriage—though not the norm—continues, as the law allows girls to marry at 13 and boys at age 15, as well as at younger ages if authorized by a judge.

UNICEF’s own [statistics](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=834f140c96&e=48376128a7) report that 17 percent of girls in Iran are married before the age of 18.

Moreover, Iran has been providing [military support](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=80eacc8a4f&e=48376128a7) to the Assad regime since 2012, including sending members of its Revolutionary Guard forces into Syria. In January, the Syrian Network for Human Rights said that Assad’s forces dropped nearly 13,000 barrel bombs in 2016, [killing 166 children](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=ccdf9ee4fd&e=48376128a7). [Gas attacks](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=214b053920&e=48376128a7) suspected to have been perpetrated by the Assad regime have killed children as well.

Iran also supplies training, arms and financial support to the [Houthis](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=6aaeeacb69&e=48376128a7), Saudi Arabia’s adversaries in Yemen. Over 1,100 [children](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=824058a54d&e=48376128a7) have been killed in Yemen, by both sides, since the beginning of the conflict.

Putting Iran and Saudi Arabia on the Executive Board of an agency whose mission is to protect children’s rights and well-being certainly raises questions. Is this an organization for which you want your children and grandchildren to solicit?

Of course, this fox-guarding-the-henhouse strategy is nothing out of the ordinary for UN agencies. Earlier this month, Pakistan, a country that just days before had sentenced three members of the minority Ahmadi religious group to [death for blasphemy](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=549a59e68e&e=48376128a7), and where [Asia Bibi](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=499bbbfd3a&e=48376128a7) and [other Christians](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=ab28123bbd&e=48376128a7) still sit on death row, was elected to the UN Human Rights Commission. Also elected to the UN HRC was [Qatar](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=e8c8bfeb3c&e=48376128a7), a country in which [egregious abuses](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=9c658ea442&e=48376128a7) of foreign workers, including forced labor, abound. And yet, each time the UN Human Rights Council meets, it discusses permanent [Agenda Item Seven](https://camera.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8b7948e93d155a16f6202c669&id=23a013bc6c&e=48376128a7), through which the council routinely condemns Israel.