

Baird's Gold Standard on Saudi Human Rights

As Harper's UN spokesman, John Baird used to say "I refuse to go along to get along", at least when the slightest criticism of Israel was involved. Lately, the previous foreign affairs minister has embraced a newfound flexibility as a paid advisor to Barrick Gold, a Canadian company with mining interests in Saudi Arabia. A well-connected individual like Baird must be aware that Saudi Arabia recently sentenced a female political activist to death by beheading, nevertheless, he scolded Canada.

Baird's recent appearance on Saudi state TV; demanding a Canadian apology to that regime, marked a new low among former Canadian political figures. Baird and the Saudi government were offended by a recent Liberal government *Tweet* requesting the release of human rights activists. Hardly a declaration of war but a possible problem for Baird's current employer.

Barrick is naturally concerned about the possible repercussions of the *Tweet* by current Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland. Under Harper, mining companies were expected to police themselves under a sort of ethical "honor system." The Canadian mining giant is sensitive about human rights, having often been accused of ignoring local worker's welfare as well as environmental concerns in New Guinea, South America and Africa.

Baird may decide that it's safe to address Saudi human rights concerns after Barrick has done its work in the desert. For now, though; protecting investor rights at the expense of Saudi human rights appears to be Baird's ethical gold standard. In this practice, he is hardly alone.

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