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## The lack of tolerance of Saudi's religious police



The National Heritage and Culture Festival, which has for the past 30 years been held in Jenadriyah, is always inaugurated with an operetta held under the auspices of the king and senior official and public figures. The operetta, which millions of people follow on TV, includes folk songs and performances from all over the kingdom.

However, those performances have always been targeted by members of the Commission of the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or the moral police. They stopped students in the Jazan section from performing an operetta under the pretext that it contained music. The prince of Jazan intervened and allowed the performance to take place and it ended at that. But all hell broke loose when security officers stood in the way of a commission member who stormed a performance of the folk dance, called the "kawla," and which was performed by children in the UAE section. He interrupted the performance and headed for the stage. It was then that security officers stopped him and asked him to leave. At first, he refused but he was surrounded by officers who eventually managed force his exit from the area.

### A blurred recollection of events

Fabricated clips of the incident were posted on You Tube to show that the moral police officer was trying to stop an Emirati singer as she was performing amongst the people, and not the children performing the dance. This drove the Saudi Press Agency to issue a statement in which the head of security at Jenadriyah recounted the actual story and denied that an Emirati singer was present during the incident at all. This was followed by a statement, issued by the singer herself, in which she stressed that she did not sing in the UAE section, but just happened to pass by. She asserts that she greeted the audience with a folk song, without music, and only sang for 28 seconds then left before the arrival of the moral police officer who came 10 minutes later when the children were performing. The man also turned out to be an administrative member of the commission and not a field officer.

The posting of the clips on You Tube stirred a lot of controversy, with many arguing that religious people in the country are being restricted and insulted. One of the clerics, who has for 10 years claimed to have abandoned extremism and embraced moderation, wrote on his Twitter account that stopping the commission officer and taking him away from the stage was an “insulting” and “mean” action. He did not, however, talk of the insult to families who came all the way to watch the festival.

The cleric was fast in commenting on the incident because he was seeking praise, the same applies to some officials at the commission who stood by their man rather than the people. A cleric who claims to be moderate, and the commission officials, should have made it that the Habesha danced with their spears in front of Prophet Mohammed in a mosque, the holiest of places, yet he did not stop them, but rather said, “let them be so that the Jews would know how tolerant our religion is.” What would moral police officers do if they see people dancing in the Prophet’s mosque like the Habesha did? Whatever happened to tolerance?

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