

Britain Intervenes in Saudi Arabia’s “Internal Affairs”

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Last month, the British government opened an inquiry to re-examine relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in the aftermath of last years’ Arab Spring protests. The UK Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) will examine Britain’s multiple trade, defence, security, counter-terrorism and human rights interests in the two countries, and one of the most important questions examined will be, “how the UK can encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, including its power to effect improvements”.

To repeat, the inquiry will ask how the UK can “encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Saudi Arabia”.

Prompted in part by complaints from Bahrain’s Shi’ia opposition activists, the inquiry results are to be published next year. Concurrently, the Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Associations (BFEA)—which represents half of the population of 600,000 ex-pats—made a statement charging the opposition of systemic abuses against their community, property, schools, places of worship and security forces. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report last year indeed found evidence in Bahrain of abuses, and King Hamed bin Isa al-Khalifa immediately promised reforms and an end to any such injustices.

The image of security forces travelling into Bahrain in armoured vehicles became, in Western parlance, ‘soldiers in tanks’—not the requested security units per rules of co-operation and protection between the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council member states.

Saudi Arabia led the convoy with 1,000 men on March 13th 2011 in response to the unrest, and the United Arab Emirates dispatched 500 police to Bahrain’s streets to quell the crowds. The situation was unique in the Arab Spring uprisings in that Bahrain was the only Gulf State to experience significant protests, the other GCC members (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia) having witnessed no uprisings and barely a protest.

The issue at the heart of the British inquiry is simple: How can the UK support democratic change in the region but not risk the multi-billion pound bilateral defence and trade partnership contracts? Can the UK afford upsetting one of her largest defence importers—the world’s largest oil producer and traditional ally—whilst at the same time criticise Saudi Arabia for protection of Bahrain, home to the US Navy’s 5th Fleet?

There is a bigger problem, however. It is a matter of what is already legally established, rules of diplomacy in foreign relations not tossed aside arbitrarily.

Interference in another states’ domestic policies is prohibited and is expressly codified in

diplomatic law, and the reciprocity of this moral obligation is fully expected. Such interference has led the US, Britain and others to increasingly persuade states in the Middle East and North Africa to sign agreements with one hand whilst extracting conditions on the other.

Professor G.R. Berridge, a leading authority on contemporary diplomatic practice, explained, "Non-intervention in 'domestic affairs' is perhaps the most basic rule of a system of states because it is the other side of the coin of 'sovereignty'." Article 2(7) of the United Nations Charter states the rule "baldly", with the 1961 Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations taking non-interference in the matters of other states as an action diplomatically assumed, he said.

Complexities become more acute in relation to human rights but nevertheless "the rule has been weakened by the Western campaign for such rights" and has been thus subject to notorious difficulties. Although there are certain circumstances where interference can occur from an outside state, it must be authorised by the UN Security Council, should be deemed "the only means of ending massive and sustained abuse of human rights", or is considered so essential to self-defence that it would "pre-empt imminent and devastating aggression," Dr. Berridge stated. As he wrote in his book 'Diplomacy: Theory and Practice', intervention from outside risks being viewed "with the immediate intention either of influencing some aspect of its domestic policy or of changing its regime".

On October 15th, Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the UK Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf al-Saud said the Kingdom would "not tolerate or accept any foreign interference in the workings" of the GCC, and "Saudi Arabia's relations with the GCC is an internal matter". Saudi officials said that the Kingdom is now "re-evaluating their country's historic relations with Britain" and that "all options will be looked at".

Separate to whether or not Bahrain insufficiently meets democratic standards, one wonders what, precisely, Britain hopes to achieve with this inquiry.

British intervention in matters involving Saudi Arabia and Bahrain do not meet the diplomatic criteria surrounding interference: the reason behind the inquiry appears a cost-benefit analysis between human rights at the expense of trade.

More specifically, the element of contractual coercion is outlined in UN Resolution 2526 (Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation Among States): "No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights and to secure from it advantages of any kind."

The West has for decades routinely accused Saudi Arabia and other nations of all forms of human rights' abuses whilst brushing its own under the carpet. By contrast, Saudi Arabia issues no such reports in condemnation of abuses in America, Britain or Europe, despite the high domestic homicide rates, rapes, drug use, and international human trafficking or hate crimes. The Kingdom issued no formal declarations of complaint when the Irish Republican Army bombed, killed, terrorised and maimed British subjects in London in the 1970s and 80s. Saudi Arabia did not attempt to intervene when Civil Rights protestors were brutalised, burnt and beaten by US forces in Alabama in the 60s. The Kingdom adheres to the non-interference policy as set forth in the Vienna Conventions: 'hands off other states' domestic

affairs’.

Having left a terrible legacy of betrayal in the region post World War I in partnership with France and the United States, Britain risks reverting to Imperial-type in the desire for change in the Middle East. As we witness the 21st century carnage in the region and the lessons failed to be learnt, this inquiry—despite honest intentions in human rights—might reconsider the rule of diplomatic law established half a century ago.

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