

Saudi Arabia helps crush the democratic uprising in Bahrain

Long-time U.S. reliance on Saudi oil and servility at risk

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As I reported in the April Monitor, the Sunni fundamentalist Saudi dictatorship felt it was threatened by a spreading revolution in Bahrain, prompting it to send troops into that country on March 15. Two thousand troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) entered Bahrain on that day to put down an uprising by the country's Shia majority against Sunni royalist dictator King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa. The GCC is comprised of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), and 1,200 of the troops sent into Bahrain were Saudi.

The Shia majority in Bahrain has long complained about being subjected to discrimination by the Sunni ruling élite. Large-scale public protests against the king broke out in February, inspired by the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The Shia opposition wanted the king to give up his powers to an elected legislature.

Bahrain borders the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which is the kingdom's oil centre. This province also has a Shia majority, and the Saudi royal family fears that the Shia rebellion in Bahrain will spread and that any concessions the Bahraini monarch makes to his Shias will also be demanded by theirs. However, because the GCC countries are Sunni, the invasion creates the possibility of a spreading sectarian conflict if the biggest Shia power in the Middle East, which is Iran, decides to help the Bahraini opposition which is so far unarmed. Iran condemned the invasion, and the Bahraini Shias have called it "a declaration of war."

The Saudi invasion of Bahrain was followed by the imposition of martial law and a brutal crackdown on protesters by a combined GCC-Bahraini force, which killed scores of civilians, injured hundreds, and jailed 1,600 people.

"Instead of rights, every family got a political prisoner," said Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. "After almost three months of military rule, the crisis has deepened because every family suffered when the army was sent in to solve a political problem."

Hundreds of protesters and professionals such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, and even soccer players have been arrested and tried in a special security court. Official use of torture has become widespread. According to Rajab, up to 98% of the people detained by state security forces were abused. "No one was immune," said Rajab. "Very rarely will you find someone who was arrested but not abused."

Particularly reprehensible have been the security forces' attacks on doctors and nurses for

treating protesters injured by the army and security forces. A recent report issued by Human Rights Watch details “attacks on health care providers; denial of medical access to protesters injured by security forces; the siege of hospitals and health centers; and the detention, ill-treatment, torture, and prosecution of medics and patients with protest-related injuries.”

“The attacks on medics and wounded protesters,” says Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, “have been part of an official policy of retribution against Bahrainis who supported pro-democracy protests. Medical personnel who criticized the severe repression were singled out and jailed.”

Twenty-three doctors and 24 nurses who treated protesters were charged with treason. The BBC reported that these medical personnel were tortured into making false confessions, according to their families. On March 16, after the Saudi invasion, security forces occupied Salmaniya, Bahrain’s main public hospital. One ward of the hospital located on the sixth floor was turned into “a makeshift detention facility where security forces subjected patients to incommunicado detention, regular beatings, torture, and other forms of mistreatment,” witnesses informed Human Rights Watch.

The Bahraini government has ended the state of emergency to project an image of normalcy, but, according to Tom Porteous, deputy program director at Human Rights Watch, “the situation remains appalling. The repression is there... this is a major crisis. Obviously, large numbers of people were killed during the protests... Not only since [the lifting of emergency rule] have there been protests, violently suppressed... but also the repression by which the government has quelled the protest movement in the last weeks continues. So large numbers of people are under incommunicado detention, at risk of torture. There are reports of torture continuing.”

Behind the Saudi invasion of Bahrain and the repression there, is the United States government, the main international backer of both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. While Washington has led the attack on Libya, claiming it is necessary to stop Gaddafi from killing his people, and is denouncing and sanctioning President Assad of Syria for doing the same, no such censure is being exercised against Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. These two countries – long-time minions of the U.S. — are instead being aided and encouraged to crush their citizens’ democratic protests with impunity.

Bahrain hosts the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet and has also provided facilities and forces for the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. military sales to Bahrain jumped massively in 2010, to \$200 million from \$88 million in 2009. The 2010 sales included exports of rifles, shotguns, and assault weapons. Since the start of protests in February 2011, Bahraini security forces have been firing live ammunition at demonstrators.

The loss by the U.S. of its two crucial client states of Egypt and Tunisia due to the Middle East Revolution, and popular uprisings against another two clients, Yemen and Bahrain, have made the role of Saudi Arabia all the more crucial for Washington. Apart from Israel, Saudi Arabia is now the leading U.S. vassal in the Middle East, a position formerly occupied by Egypt. Not only is Saudi Arabia the world’s leading oil exporter and the main source of cheap oil for the U.S., but it is now also the principal Arab political and military bulwark for Washington’s interests in the Middle East. However, the kingdom is not well-positioned to fulfill its new role because it, too, like several other U.S. puppet states, is threatened with

rebellion — not just outside but also within its borders—which appears likely to put an end to the era of cheap oil.

As I reported in the April Monitor, Saudi Arabia provides the world economy with about eight million barrels of oil a day, but the country cannot maintain this rate of oil export, partly due to rising domestic demand and partly because it needs to provide domestic employment to avoid social upheaval. Forty percent of Saudi youths are unemployed, and those who do have jobs are paid only \$830 a month, on average, while Saudi royal princes (who number about 7,000) receive up to \$250,000 a month in official stipends.

Much public resentment has been generated by such stark disparity and relative deprivation in a very rich country. As Professor Michael Klare puts it: “Assuming the royal family survives the current round of upheavals, it will undoubtedly have to divert more of its daily oil output to satisfy rising domestic consumption levels and fuel local petrochemical industries that could provide a fast-growing, restive population with better-paying jobs.”

In April 2010, Khalid al-Falih, head of the state oil company Saudi Aramco, stated that by 2028 domestic oil consumption could reach 8.3 million barrels a day, with only a few million barrels available for export. There is no other country in the world that can take Saudi Arabia’s place in terms of oil exports.

The Saudi military is also weak and so of very limited use to the United States. Saudi forces can invade a small state like Bahrain, but are no match for other Middle Eastern armies such as those of Egypt, Syria, and Iran. The Saudi military consists of mercenary soldiers from Pakistan and Jordan, and the regime is dependent on U.S. protection for its survival.

The Saudi royal family rules the country with an iron fist, suppressing all democratic aspirations and even banning women from driving cars. The family belongs to the extreme fundamentalist Wahhabi sect of Islam, which, according to British-Pakistani writer Tariq Ali, combines “religious fanaticism, military ruthlessness, and political villainy.” Wahhabism is hostile to other Muslims (especially Shias), considering them heretics, and wants a return to its vision of an eighth-century Islam which never actually existed.

The Saudi monarchy was set up by the British Empire after World War I so that the U.K. could control the vast oil resources in that country. The imperial plan was to put the maximum amount of oil (which rightfully belongs to the Arab people) in the hands of a few easily controlled puppet families. Britain imposed this regime in the U.A.E. and Iraq, as well as Saudi Arabia. After the Second World War, the U.S. empire took over from the British.

Among many Muslims, the House of Saud is notorious for its hypocritical, degenerate, and shameful behaviour, especially its grovelling servility to U.S. imperialism and its preaching of a puritanical brand of Islam while indulging itself in rampant debauchery, including heavy alcohol consumption, prostitution, and unbridled materialism. Tariq Ali calls Saudi Arabia “the kingdom of corruption.”

As a proxy of Washington, the Saudi regime has spread its extreme Wahhabi doctrine all over the Muslim world by financing mosques and religious schools. The doctrine fuels hateful sectarianism and killings of other Muslims, which serves the U.S. objective of weakening Muslims through divide-and-rule tactics. Fanning such fanaticism also helps the U.S. manufacture Muslim enemies to justify its endless wars and huge military budgets.

The greatest service the Saudi regime has provided to Washington has been its pledge to trade oil in U.S. dollars. During the 1970s, oil became the most important traded resource, and U.S. President Richard Nixon linked the dollar to oil, making a deal with Saudi Arabia (the biggest OPEC oil producer) in 1974 that stipulated that oil could only be bought and sold in U.S. dollars. In return, the U.S. agreed to militarily protect the Saudi royal family. As long as oil was traded in dollars, so would other goods, and the dollar would remain the world's reserve currency. This arrangement gave the U.S. the economic power to continue its dominant imperial role despite its crucial weakness in manufacturing.

With Saudi oil exports now destined for massive reductions, however, this bulwark against a U.S. economic decline is crumbling. Washington's huge trade and budget deficits have already weakened the dollar, and the ongoing Middle East Revolution appears likely to be the final nail in its coffin.

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