

Popular uprisings spread across Middle East despite brutal crackdowns

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Mass demonstrations and pitched battles with the military and police continued across the Middle East and North Africa yesterday, despite brutal massacres of protesters by autocratic Western-backed regimes. As well as Bahrain, Libya and Yemen—where there was fierce street fighting and many deaths—anti-government protests and strikes spread to other US client states in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan.

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have triggered protests across the region, from Algeria to Iraq, causing consternation in the Obama administration and among the major European powers, which have long relied upon the regional dictatorships to suppress their respective populations and maintain order throughout a strategically crucial, oil-rich part of the world.

For the fifth day in a row, there were bloody clashes in the tiny island monarchy of Bahrain, where the US Navy's Fifth Fleet is based. At least three people were killed when the army opened fire on demonstrators. Some 25,000 people, a huge crowd for a country of less than a million adults, had turned out for a funeral march for protesters killed the day before.

It was the first protest in the centre of the capital, Manama, since the police stormed the Pearl Roundabout before dawn on Thursday, killing four people and wounding around 200.

A Salmaniya hospital doctor told Al Jazeera that the hospital was full of severely injured people: "We need help! Our staff is entirely overwhelmed. They are shooting at people's heads. Not at the legs. People are having their brains blown out!"

A protester told the news agency: "They had machine guns, not rifles or hand weapons, and they shot people who ran away." Another demonstrator, Hussein Ali, said: "They started firing from the bridge without any warning, then they started firing from their cars ... It was terrifying, a nightmare. Small children and women were falling over."

Bahrain's monarchy, no doubt acting in close collaboration with Washington, is trying to stabilise itself. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa appealed for a "national dialogue" once order was restored. Any such "dialogue" would be aimed at salvaging the regime—even if in a slightly modified form, with the help of officially-tolerated opposition groups, as the Egyptian military has tried to do since the fall of Hosni

Mubarak a week ago.

Bahrain, located in the Persian Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is also home to the US Naval Forces Central Command. It is of vital importance to Washington because some 40 percent of the world's oil passes through the Gulf. The US has been an ardent supporter of the wealthy royal family and elite that controls the state.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday made statements of "deep concern" about the violence in Bahrain, as well as Libya and Yemen. "The United States condemns the use of violence by governments against peaceful protesters in those countries and wherever else it may occur," Obama said.

Just last December, however, Clinton visited Bahrain, praising it as a "model partner" in the region. "I see the glass as half full," she said when asked about the arrests of prominent opposition politicians and reports of torture. She said she was "impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on".

The responsibility of the US and its allies for the repression in Bahrain was underscored by reports that the security forces used UK-supplied weapons against demonstrators. A British government business department report, cited by the *Independent* newspaper, said London had given approval for British arms manufacturers to sell "CS hand grenades, demolition charges, smoke canisters and thunderflashes" to Bahrain.

Not least of "concern" to Washington are the implications for the neighbouring monarchy in Saudi Arabia, the third largest recipient of US military aid for the past three decades after the Israeli and Egyptian governments. A former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas Freeman, told Al Jazeera that the "Saudis will not tolerate excessive unrest" in Bahrain because of its proximity to their main oilfields in eastern Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, the global oil companies are closely following the possible collapse of their local crowned heads. Platts, an industry site, reported: "Saudi Arabia, the oil Goliath which holds in its hands the only significant spare production capacity that can meet any potential global supply disruption, has been

besieged by bloody riots in neighboring Bahrain and a growing anti-government protest south of its border in Yemen.”

Libya

Intense battles raged across Libya for the fifth day yesterday as protestors demanded the removal of the 41-year-old regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who has also become a close ally of the West and the oil giants in recent years. Media access to Libya is tightly controlled, but reports from various sources described insurrectionary scenes in the wake of Thursday’s “day of rage” in which at least 25 protestors were killed.

Security forces were deployed around the eastern city of Al-Baida, a source close to the authorities told AFP, following a Reuters report that anti-regime protesters had seized control of the city with the aid of local police.

YouTube videos showed demonstrators marching through the streets of Benghazi, the country’s second largest city, chanting anti-government slogans. Protesters had set fire to the headquarters of a local radio station in Benghazi, after the building’s guards withdrew, witnesses and a security source told AFP. Residents also reported that police there had been replaced with military troops. Mohamed el-Berqawy, an engineer in Benghazi, told Al Jazeera a “massacre” was occurring in the city.

According to a toll compiled by AFP from different local sources, at least 41 people have lost their lives since demonstrations first erupted on Tuesday. Libyan authorities claimed that the west of the country was quiet. But demonstrations were reported in other cities, including the capital, Tripoli.

Yemen

Yemen, another US ally, also resorted to lethal force yesterday against mounting protests, bringing the death toll since the unrest erupted on Sunday to 10. Anti-regime protesters in the volatile city of Tuez were blasted in a hand grenade attack on Friday, leaving two dead, as fierce clashes in several areas of the southern city of Aden killed four and wounded at least 27. Clashes also broke out in the capital Sana’a in which four anti-regime demonstrators were injured, according to witnesses and journalists, who were also beaten.

The grenade attack came as hundreds of protesters took to central Tuez after the weekly Muslim prayers to demand President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s ouster. A local official told AFP the grenade was lobbed at protesters from a speeding car with government number plates.

In Sana’a, several journalists were severely beaten by supporters of the ruling General Peoples Congress (GPC) who attacked the demonstration using batons and axes, an AFP correspondent reported. Thousands of demonstrators, mostly students, had gathered following the weekly Muslim prayers. “People want to overthrow the regime,” they chanted.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan

Significantly, unrest has spread to both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and re-emerged in another key US-backed state,

Jordan. In Saudi Arabia, foreign construction workers went on strike at the King Abdullah Financial District and the King Saud University in the capital Riyadh. The *Arab News* reported that workers had stopped work either because their salaries or overtime pay were not paid.

In Kuwait, at least 1,000 stateless Arabs demonstrated in Jahra, northwest of Kuwait City, demanding citizenship, leading to dozens being arrested by police. Ambulances rushed an unspecified number of wounded protesters and security forces away from the scene. Security forces dispersed the demonstration, using smoke bombs and water cannon. The government insists that Kuwait’s roughly 100,000 stateless Arabs are not entitled to nationality.

In Jordan, thugs wielding batons turned on anti-government marchers in the capital Amman. Protesters claimed they were attacked as they started to disperse after a march calling for an elected government and an end to official corruption. Demonstrators have been calling for economic and political reform since mid-January. King Abdullah II sacked his entire cabinet last month, in an effort to head off the protests, but many were dismayed by his appointment of Marouf Bakhit, one of the king’s henchmen, as the new premier. Bakhit, a retired army major-general, served as Jordan’s prime minister from 2005 until he was forced to resign in 2007 after blatantly rigged elections.

The situation in Jordan exemplifies the intractable social crisis driving the protests. It has a high unemployment rate among its population of six million, the majority of whom are under 25, and is suffering from the rising world prices of food and fuel. None of the region’s regimes, all of which preside over ever-more glaring inequality—as do governments around the world—in any way seek to address the economic and social needs of their populations.



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