

# Major new protests in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Iraq

David Walsh  
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Populations across the Middle East and North Africa continue to express opposition to their respective governments, demanding political rights and pressing for economic gains, in an unprecedented wave of unrest and resistance. The movement, among peoples oppressed by their own ruling elites in alliance with imperialism, has sent shockwaves through Washington, London, Paris and the capitals of all the great powers.

The tiny island nation of Bahrain (population 1.2 million) witnessed a third day of major protests Wednesday, as demonstrators stood their ground against the regime of King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. At least two protesters have been killed by security forces, and the funeral for one, 20-year-old Ali Abdulhadi Mushaima, on Tuesday, attracted some 10,000 people (the equivalent in the US of a protest of three million).

Another memorial procession Wednesday, to honor 31-year-old Fadhel Ali Almatrook, killed when riot police opened fire on the previous day's funeral march, also attracted thousands of protesters to the streets of Manama, Bahrain's capital. The second procession was not attacked by police, as the government—frightened by the mass movement—pulled back its security forces. Many women joined the funeral march February 16.

Bahrain's interior ministry has announced that the policemen alleged to be responsible for the shootings have been arrested pending investigation. This attempt to scapegoat a few individuals, for decisions taken at the highest levels of the government, has not impressed the population.

Anti-government protesters in large numbers have occupied the central Pearl Roundabout in Manama, pledging to make it their version of Cairo's Tahrir Square. They are demanding political rights and the resignation of the king's uncle, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, from the position of prime minister he has held since 1971. In the eyes of many, the prime minister is the embodiment of wealth and corruption. The demonstrators are also calling for the release of political prisoners.

Many Bahrainis are staying off work to join the protests. One protest Facebook page shows two young men holding signs; one reads, "Skipping work until the regime falls," and the other, "No Sunni, No Shiite, all our demands are legitimate. My people want democracy, a constitution and freedom."

The US and other Western powers are extremely concerned by developments in Bahrain. Peter Goodspeed, in Canada's *National Post*, commented candidly February 14: "But if Bahrain were to undergo the kind of democratic transformation that Egypt just experienced, the ramifications for U.S. foreign policy could be severe. Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, allowing the United

States to station 15 warships, including an aircraft battle group, in the very heart of the Persian Gulf.

"The island state off the coast of Saudi Arabia provides Washington with a perfect base from which it can protect the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf, keep an eye on Iran and support pro-Western Gulf monarchies against potential threats."

Demonstrators in Bahrain have been reminded in a practical manner about US support for the reactionary royal family in that country. A photograph taken by the head of foreign relations at Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Maryam Alkhawaja, shows canisters of US-made tear gas used in recent days against protesters. The gas comes from NonLethal Technologies in Homer City, Pennsylvania.

A December 2009 US diplomatic cable, released by WikiLeaks and published in the *Guardian* February 15, boasts about the billions accruing to American corporations from contracts with Bahrain and the "excellent relationship" its government officials enjoy with Washington.

## Yemen

Police shot and killed two protesters in Yemen's major southern city, Aden, and wounded at least four others, as the government stepped up its campaign of violence and intimidation. A 21-year-old, Mohammed Ali Alwani, was shot after police attacked demonstrators, said his father. The other dead man was identified as Yassin Askar. Wednesday marked the sixth day in the new wave of protests in Yemen.

According to Al Jazeera, police in Aden fired shots in the air to break up around 500 protesters; one of the victims was shot in the back. The demonstrators threw stones at the cops, set tires and vehicles on fire and stormed a government building. Associated Press reports that the demonstration, in the Mansoura district, "included students and workers."

The anti-government forces in Aden chanted "The people want to overthrow the regime," and "It's time to leave, Ali," referring to Yemen's US-backed dictator, President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hundreds gathered Wednesday night outside the police headquarters in Mansoura, demanding the release of those detained during the protests earlier in the day. They expressed outrage over the fatal shootings.

In Taiz, in southwestern Yemen, thousands of students continue to do battle with the regime, occupying streets and pledging to remain

there until Saleh leaves office. Police in Taiz have arrested more than 100, and 30 students have been injured in attacks launched by pro-Saleh thugs.

In the capital Sana'a hundreds of students gathered to protest, but came under attack by pro-government forces, armed with batons, stones and wooden daggers. "The thugs and supporters of the ruling party [Saleh's General People's Congress] ... want to massacre the students," declared Radwan Masud, the head of Sana'a University's student union. Masud added that 10 students were injured in the attack.

Also on February 16, some 120 judges spent the second day in a sit-in outside the justice ministry in Sana'a, demanding greater independence for the judiciary and the firing of the entire Supreme Judicial Council, including the justice minister. They are also demanding higher salaries.

Significantly, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reports, "Workers in Sana'a also gathered at several state-owned companies to demand that their managers step down. They too called for higher wages."

In response to the unrest, Saleh canceled a scheduled visit to Washington, where he was to meet his patrons.

The official opposition, the JMP (Joint Meeting Parties, or Common Forum), continues to make conciliatory noises, but the *New York Times* reports that "a rift is emerging between the student organizers, who have called for the president to step down immediately, and the established opposition groups ... who would prefer to move more slowly toward political reform."

Abullah Al-Faqih, professor of political science at Sana'a University, told the *Guardian*: "This is what both Saleh's ruling party and the opposition feared most—loud and violent protests organised by people that have no allegiance to any of the political parties."

## Libya

Protests erupted Tuesday and Wednesday in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, apparently triggered by the arrest of a human rights lawyer, Fathi Terbil. The BBC reports that Terbil "represents families of more than 1,000 prisoners allegedly massacred by security forces in Tripoli's Abu Salim jail in 1996. He was later said to have been freed."

According to media reports, the families of the prison massacre victims began protesting Terbil's incarceration outside police headquarters Tuesday night, when bystanders joined them, started chanting anti-government slogans. The protest, including as many as 2,000 people, lasted all night and resumed Wednesday morning. Police, firing rubber bullets, and pro-government elements violently dispersed the crowd.

Al Jazeera reports that two individuals, Khaled El Naji Khanfar and Ahmad Shoushaniya, were killed by police in protests in the Libyan city of Al Bayda, east of Benghazi, on Wednesday. Hundreds of protesters reportedly torched a police station; some 38 people were injured.

In Zentan, 120 kilometers south of the capital Tripoli, demonstrators marched through the streets and set fire to security headquarters and a police station, writes Al Jazeera.

A "day of rage," organized online, is planned for February 17 in Libya, calling for the end of the regime. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi

has been in power in the oil-rich North African country since 1969.

## Iraq

The wave of protest in Iraq against government corruption, unemployment and wretched public services entered a new stage Wednesday.

A protest by 2,000 people against lack of jobs and electricity in the eastern Iraqi city of Kut, some 160 kilometers south of Baghdad, turned deadly when private guards employed by the provincial government fired directly into the crowd. Reports differed as to the number of fatalities, between one and three; some 50 people were injured. One of the dead was a 16-year-old boy shot in the chest.

After the shooting outside the Wasit provincial government headquarters, the enraged crowd attacked the building, an eyewitness told the *Washington Post*, "as the governor escaped through a back door with his bodyguards ... Footage broadcast on Iraqi television showed black smoke billowing from the headquarters as protesters clambered over walls into the compound. Other members of the provincial council also reportedly escaped, and the Iraqi army was called in to quell the turmoil."

According to Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, "Iraqi security troops reinforcements rushed into the city and blocked the entrances of the city to prevent people of the surrounding suburbs and villages from pouring into the city to support the demonstrators, the source added."

The crowd reportedly set fire to three buildings, the offices of the Wasit provincial council, the governorate's main administration building and the governor's official residence.

The *New York Times* cited the comments of one of the protesters, Ali al-Wasity: "We had a delegation that went up and asked for the governor to step down ... They refused to come out and talk to us." When the security officers opened fired, Wasity continued, "I was feeling that we are not a free country," he said. "We are under a dictatorship system. I tell them one thing: we will not stop going out on protest unless the governor steps down and leaves us."

The *Times* report went on: "We have received many calls from all around the province, and they told us that they will be joining us," Mr. Wasity said. "Now there is a curfew, but we will not stop. We will do it again and again."



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