

US ally Bahrain orders bloody crackdown on protesters

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While the US prepares to launch military strikes against Libya under cover of the claim that it is intervening to protect the population, its ally Bahrain has intensified its brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in the oil-rich Persian Gulf state.

On Wednesday, Bahraini security forces launched a military operation to clear hundreds of demonstrators from Pearl Square in Manama, the day after 2,000 soldiers and police from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) entered the country to back the feudal regime. At least three demonstrators were killed in the operation, and hundreds more sustained injuries severe enough to require medical treatment at hospitals and clinics.

Security forces also attacked hospitals they allege to be havens of opposition activity—a clear violation of internationally recognized rules of engagement that prohibit military action against hospitals and health care workers. Naim Hospital and Jidhafs Maternity Hospital were closed on orders of the interior ministry. Salmaniya Hospital was seized and placed under the control of the military, and doctors say that wounded protesters were then denied treatment. Police fired on the privately held International Hospital of Bahrain. Five doctors who attempted to reach a health care clinic after the assault on Pearl Square say that they were removed from their cars and severely beaten by officers.

The United Nations issued a statement calling the hospital takeovers “shocking” and “a blatant violation of international law.”

On Thursday the regime ordered the arrest of at least a dozen opposition leaders for supposedly having “communicated with foreign countries,” clearly a coded reference to Iran. It was a baldly hypocritical statement from a regime that had only two days earlier

invited foreign armies to the small island nation.

The government order to clear Pearl Square on Wednesday was effectively a declaration of war on the populace, whose 70 percent majority Shiite population is protesting in large numbers against social inequality and the abuses of the largely Sunni ruling elite. Helicopters, tanks and machine guns were deployed in the assault, which began at 6:30 a.m. on Wednesday. Prior to the operation the regime suspended Internet and telephone communications.

“They broke everything, they shot at kids, there was no humanity, no respect,” Hassan Ali Ibrahim, 35, was quoted as saying by the *New York Times*. “When we saw the tanks and the cars, about a hundred of us went towards them, and started chanting, ‘Peacefully! Peacefully!’ This is when they started shooting, from the ground and from the bridge, from everywhere.”

“This was not an attack aimed at just dispersing the people in the square, it was meant to hurt us, and the way they were advancing, with the helicopters above them, and the tanks, and the machine guns—it really felt like a war, not a police operation,” said demonstrator Hussein Ali Eid, 32.

The repression has so far failed to end the protests. Peaceful demonstrations in the primarily Shiite neighborhoods and cities of Sanabis, Jidhafs and Daih took place Thursday. Security forces attacked the village of Al Musala on Thursday night. Predominantly Shiite neighborhoods and suburbs of Manama remained under police lock-down on Thursday, with heavily armed soldiers and tanks stationed at key intersections.

Among those arrested in Thursday’s political crackdown were Ibrahim Sharif, the head of a secular party that is largely Sunni, Shiite activists Abdul Wahad Hussein and Hassan Hadad, and Hassan Muschaima and Abduljalil al-Singace of the Shiite

Islamist Haq Movement. The wheelchair-bound al-Singace had been released on February from a long jail sentence as part of efforts by the monarchy, now abandoned, to mollify protesters.

The men were reportedly seized in the middle of the night by masked gunmen. "I saw men in black pointing a machine gun at my husband saying just one thing: 'We are from the state security,'" said Sharif's wife Farida Guhlam according to the Associated Press.

Sharif's arrest is a signal of the regime's intentions, as he had presented himself and his Waad Party as interlocutors to work out a compromise with the Shiite opposition leaders.

In response to the assault on Pearl Square and the hospitals, the Bahraini minister of health, a Shiite, submitted his resignation. He was followed by 12 judges from Bahrain's Sharia Court. The Shiite minister of housing said he would "boycott" the government.

The crackdown has been extended to foreign journalists. The Al Khalifa monarchy this week arrested *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Alex Delmar-Morgan. CNN's Mohammed Jamjoom was deported to Abu Dhabi.

The savage measures expose the shameless hypocrisy of the US. As it prepares to bombard Libya, it has tacitly encouraged the violence of its ally Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, a critical component of the American military posture against Iran. On Tuesday, Obama reportedly called the Bahraini king to ask that his forces exercise "maximum restraint," while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has absurdly claimed that the invasion of the Saudi military might foster "dialogue."

Calls by the White House for the regime in Manama to "respect rights" are utterly hollow, as Washington views the Al Khalifa monarchy and the repression of social unrest as critical to US geostrategic interests in the region. The claim that Bahrain refused advice to exercise restraint from the Obama administration, a theory advanced by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, is simply not credible. Less credible still is the Obama administration's assertion that it had no advance knowledge of the entry of hundreds of Saudi tanks, armored personnel carriers, and trucks into Bahrain.

Bahrain and the other Gulf states are ultimately

dependent upon US imperialism. Behind the scenes Washington is banking, as it did in Egypt and Tunisia, on savage repression not only in Bahrain, but in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Arabian Peninsula is by far the world's largest producer of oil, and it sits astride what are among the most important sea lanes in the world.

The crackdown has drawn protests from the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government, which fears US backing for the Bahraini regime will incite unrest in Iraq. Large protests against the attack on Pearl Square have taken place in Karbala and Baghdad. In a rare public statement, Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, demanded the Bahraini government "stop using violence against unarmed citizens."

On Wednesday, protests against the Saudi military entry in Bahrain took place in majority-Shiite cities in Saudi Arabia, including Qatif, Seehat, Tarut, Safwa and Awamiya.

Wednesday's massive attack on peaceful protesters in Pearl Square was the second in a month; on February 17, the regime killed at least four demonstrators in a midnight assault.

On Thursday, Amnesty International released a report, based on an American doctor's on-the-spot analysis of the February 17 massacre. It confirmed that police used live ammunition in the attack. According to the report, the doctor "examined wounded individuals and interviewed hospital and mortuary staff and eyewitnesses in Bahrain and found 'disturbing, even damning, evidence' of excessive force by police and soldiers against protesters and medical workers trying to treat the wounded."

"In addition, Amnesty International identified American ammunition collected in the aftermath of the raid on Feb. 17, including US-made tear gas canisters and 37 mm rubber multi-baton rounds, in addition to French-made tear gas grenades, and French-made rubber 'dispersion' grenades," the report notes.

Such is imperialism's concern for "protecting civilians."



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