

Journalist Robert Fisk faces libel action for pointing out Bahrain-Saudi alliance

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On June 14, Bahrain, the tiny island kingdom in the Persian Gulf off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, announced that it is to sue the *Independent* newspaper for libel over an article written by its veteran Middle East correspondent, Robert Fisk.

Bahrain, ruled by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, accused the newspaper of deliberately “orchestrating a defamatory and premeditated media campaign” and “failing to abide by professional impartiality and credibility in its one-sided news-coverage and reports”.

Fisk accused Bahrain’s ruling family of starting “an utterly fraudulent trial” of the surgeons, doctors, paramedics and nurses treating those injured four months ago when security forces opened fire on protesters. He said that the Saudis were running the country, writing, “They never received an invitation to send their own soldiers to support the Bahraini ‘security forces’ from the Bahraini Crown Prince, who is a decent man. They simply invaded and received a post-dated invitation.

“The subsequent destruction of ancient Shia mosques in Bahrain was a Saudi project, entirely in line with the kingdom’s Taliban-style hatred of all things Shia. Could the Bahraini prime minister be elected, I asked a member of the royal court last February? ‘The Saudis would not permit this,’ he replied. Of course not. Because they now control Bahrain. Hence the Saudi-style doctors’ trial”.

Fisk concluded, “Bahrain is no longer the kingdom of the Khalifas. It has become a Saudi palatinate, a confederated province of Saudi Arabia, a pocket-size weasel state from which all journalists should in future use the dateline: Manama, Occupied Bahrain”.

The threatened libel suit is a major attack on press freedom. But despite this, there has been an almost complete blackout of the announcement by the rest of the media. The nominally liberal *Guardian* merely reported the announcement without comment.

The legal action takes advantage of Britain’s notorious libel laws, which provide a powerful weapon for those with unlimited cash to silence their critics. It will, at the very least, tie up the *Independent*’s resources for months. At worst, it could bankrupt it, forcing its closure, as similar law suits closed ITV’s flagship current affairs programme *World in Action* more

than a decade ago.

Whether or not the action goes ahead, its purpose is to intimidate the media and stifle any discussion of the Bahrain-Saudi link and Saudi Arabia’s broader role in the Middle East, as well as any criticism of the imperialist powers’ support for the oil-rich Gulf monarchies.

The US and Western governments, acutely conscious of the danger that political upheaval in Bahrain represents to their geopolitical interests, have given the green light to repression.

Just a few days ago, the British government admitted that it had trained the Saudi forces used in Bahrain. It confirmed that Britain has been providing training for the Saudi national guard to improve their “internal security and counter-terrorism” capabilities since 1964. Last year, Britain exported arms and weaponry worth more £110 million to Saudi Arabia.

Last September, the United States negotiated a \$60 billion arms deal, the largest in US history, with the Saudis, who said that they will increase the size of their armed forces and National Guard. Bahrain is home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, providing a principal platform for the projection of Washington’s military power in the Persian Gulf, through which one-fifth of the world’s oil supplies pass.

Saudi Arabia has long been a strategic ally of US imperialism and, as the world’s largest oil exporter, is the one country capable of boosting production to make up for crises elsewhere and preventing an uncontrolled spiralling of fuel prices.

These interests generally dictate the self-censorship of the mass media, which carry little reporting or analysis of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. But what little has been reported in no way conflicts with Fisk’s analysis. Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in the moves to stifle the Arab Spring, not just in Bahrain, but in Yemen, Libya, Syria and elsewhere.

As one of America’s three major props in the region, along with Israel and Egypt, Washington turns a blind eye to the merciless repression carried out by the Saudi monarchy.

Using its guardianship of two of Islam’s three holy sites to bolster its claim to defend the Muslim faith, the Saudi dynasty vies for regional influence with Iran, portraying this as a religious conflict against “heretical” Shiites, and winning support from the other Gulf monarchies to preserve its eastern front.

For decades, Riyadh has used its enormous oil wealth to cultivate Sunni Islamic clerics and Salafist groups and finance large-scale campaigns of religious education and television programmes broadcast throughout the Middle East and Central Asia as a counterweight to secular opposition, Shia movements and Iran. It is a key investor and trading partner in most countries.

It has not hesitated to play the sectarian card, whipping up hostility to the Shia minorities within the region to divide any domestic dissent, prevent the growth of pro-Iranian Shiite political parties and to counter Iran's influence. It has routinely blamed Iranian "interference" in Bahrain and the Yemen for the unrest there without producing any evidence, as the US has acknowledged.

The Saudi regime, furious that Washington withdrew its support for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, whom it is now sheltering, moved in swiftly to prevent a similar fate befalling Bahrain's al-Khalifa dynasty.

The Sunni al-Khalifas rule over an impoverished Shia majority. Mass protests broke out in February, demanding an end to sectarian discrimination, unity across the religious divide, as well as democratic elections and equitable distribution of the country's oil wealth. The monarchy declared a state of emergency that was only recently lifted.

Unable to suppress the protests with its own forces, the al-Khalifas relied on military reinforcements from the Saudi monarchy, with which they have close family ties, just as they had in 1994 during the last period of mass demonstrations against their autocratic rule. More than 1,200 military and police personnel moved in, ostensibly under the command of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Saudi Arabia-led association of Persian Gulf monarchies, to secure key oil facilities and financial institutions in Bahrain and help suppress the opposition with mass arrests, detentions, military trials of civilians, including medical personnel, and executions.

Riyadh will countenance no compromise with the Shia-based opposition or parliamentary elections that might lead to them gaining power, as happened in Iraq. Its key aim is to prevent the spread of the unrest to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf States, all of which face dissent from their own restive Shia populations who form the majority in the eastern oil producing regions.

The Saudi ruling dynasty faces the additional problem that the 86-year-old King Abdullah is a sick man and his potential successors are no less elderly and infirm. Thus far at least, it has been able to suppress the barely reported demonstrations and buy off unrest within the Kingdom with a \$100 billion package of subsidies, wage increases and welfare concessions.

On its more populous and impoverished southern flank in the Yemen, Saudi Arabia has long pursued a divide and rule policy, supporting one faction against another—with money and arms—to keep Sana'a weak and beholden to Riyadh. After years

of backing President Ali Abdullah Saleh, it switched tack when it became clear that his position was untenable and sought to broker a deal under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council to get Saleh to agree to resign while securing immunity from prosecution. After Saleh refused for a third time, the Saudis demanded that he come to Riyadh for medical treatment after the bomb attack on his palace earlier this month. It is unlikely that he will be allowed to return, but it is far from clear that the Saudis can rely upon any successor, guaranteeing further instability and the threat of military intervention.

Regarding Libya, Riyadh played a key role in the Arab League's March 13 announcement of support for a "no-fly" zone over Libya, which paved the way for the NATO air war to remove Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi from power.

In Lebanon, the Saudis have long backed the pro-Western faction of Saad Hariri—and Rafik Hariri, his father and former prime minister who was assassinated in 2005—as a bulwark against Syrian and Iranian influence. Hezbollah, the Shi'ite party backed by Syria and Iran, has broader popular appeal outside Lebanon for its opposition to Israel. It is to defuse the widespread anger against Israel that the Saudi regime has offered to normalise relations with Jerusalem.

It is only in the last few years that Riyadh mended relations with Syria, as Damascus sought closer relations with Washington. Together the two countries have sought to prevent tensions in Lebanon from degenerating into armed conflict. But while Riyadh originally backed President Bashar al-Assad against the protest movement to maintain stability in the region, some oppositionists now appear to have support from Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh has sought to shore up the beleaguered monarchies of Jordan and Morocco by extending membership of the GCC—and thus its military support—to them.



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