

US sells arms to Bahraini dictatorship as repression continues

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Even as it pontificates about the “Arab Spring” and its “humanitarian” war against Libya, the United States government has signed a new arms contract with the dictatorial regime of King Hamad Al-Khalifa of Bahrain.

The US Defense Department has agreed to provide the government of the tiny Persian Gulf monarchy with an additional \$53 million of weapons.

Bahrain’s security forces killed at least 30 people during the weeks of mass demonstrations earlier this year, when hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital, Manama, to demand political and social rights.

The much larger neighboring kingdom of Saudi Arabia, also armed to the teeth with the latest US-made weaponry, aided the March crackdown in Manama, sending over 1,500 troops as well as police, armored personnel carriers and tanks across the causeway to Bahrain.

There have been frequent reports in the subsequent months of opponents of the al-Khalifa regime being abducted or assassinated. Over 1,000 people have been arrested for taking part in the protests, with many held incommunicado and tortured. Thousands of public sector workers have been fired for allegedly taking to the streets against the government.

The new US-Bahraini arms deal will provide 44 armored vehicles—of the type used to crush the demonstrations—as well as missiles and night-vision technology.

In a statement on the proposed sale, which is still to be approved by Congress, the Pentagon noted that Bahrain “has been, and continues to be, an important force for political stability in the Middle East.”

An anonymous State Department official commented to the *Washington Post* that the US government viewed

the proposed sale as “one that would help Bahrain’s defense force develop its capabilities against external threats and would ensure interoperability with our forces.”

The US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, is based in Bahrain. In 2010, the US sold over \$200 million worth of weapons to Bahrain, up from \$88 million in 2009.

Brian Dooley, director of the Washington-based charity Human Rights First, condemned the arms sale as a “reward” for the Bahraini dictatorship. The Bahraini army has “committed many human rights abuses,” Dooley said, including the torture of detainees.

The arms sale to the despotic Bahraini regime comes amidst a continuation of the brutal crackdown against all signs of opposition.

Last week, a military tribunal in Manama sentenced 20 medical doctors to prison terms of up to 15 years. The doctors faced a variety of outlandish charges, including stockpiling weapons in hospitals, “occupying a hospital,” and attempting to overthrow the monarchy.

No credible evidence against the medics has been presented in the kangaroo court, while the accused have been subjected to abuse in prison and denied full access to legal counsel.

“I lost my sense of time because of the torture,” one of the convicted doctors told Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper. “Immediately after I was taken [there began] the beating, the cursing, the kicking, the spitting; I was even electrocuted there at that unknown place.”

“We were forced to confess on TV,” the doctor added. “We were kept together in one hall and threatened with rape. They threatened our families.”

While the ink was still wet on the arms deal signed by Washington and the Bahraini government, the US State

Department issued a perfunctory statement that it was “deeply disturbed” by the doctors’ trial—a posture that will have absolutely no bearing on the arms sale or the deep military and strategic ties between the two countries.

The real “crimes” that the doctors are guilty of, as far as the US-backed Bahraini government is concerned, are treating the protesters who flooded into Manama’s medical centers as a result of assaults by the security forces and speaking about the extent of casualties to the international media.

During the mass protests in February and March, the media and human rights organizations reported that hundreds of demonstrators were admitted to hospital suffering from gunshot wounds, tear gas inhalation and police baton beatings.

Bahraini police and army personnel repeatedly stormed hospitals and clinics during the spring uprising, rampaging through wards to arrest and intimidate patients and staff. International doctors’ groups Medecins Sans Frontiers and Physicians for Human Rights have condemned the regime in Bahrain for its abuses, saying that hospitals in the country had been made “places to be feared.”

“We were shocked by the verdicts because we were expecting the doctors would be proved innocent of the crime of occupying the Salmaniya medical complex,” said one of the defense lawyers, Mohsen al-Alawi.

Amnesty International also condemned the verdict: “The government clearly wants to send a message that anybody perceived as advocating political reforms will be dealt with severely.”

The medics have issued an appeal to Bahrain’s high court, and have asked the United Nations Human Rights Office to investigate their treatment. One of those sentenced to 15 years in prison, Dr. Nada Daiif, expressed little hope in the appeal. “We will go for it,” she said. “But we know very well that they are using our case as a political card against the opposition.”

In a separate trial, the military court sentenced a man to death for killing a police officer during a protest in February. No police, army or government personnel have been held legally accountable for the killing and repression in Bahrain.

There is still massive hostility to the al-Khalifa regime. There are frequent small protests in the working class suburbs of Manama, and sham elections

held Sunday to fill 18 seats in the 40-seat legislative council—the lower house of a rubber-stamp parliament stacked with appointees of the monarch—were largely boycotted.

Only 17 percent of voters turned out for the elections to fill seats vacated in protest by the main opposition group, al-Wefaq, a Shiite-based party that has been persecuted by the Sunni monarchy.

Dozens of people were beaten and arrested during the election campaign. Riot police attacked a demonstration of tens of thousands of people that had gathered in the predominantly Shiite suburb of Sanabis on the day of first-round of voting, September 24. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, which had planned to march to the center of Manama to protest the ongoing government repression.



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