

WEAK STATE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE TO BAHRAIN BAN ON PROTESTS SHOWS OIL HIGHER PRIORITY THAN LIVES

On Tuesday, Bahrain banned all public protests in its continued effort to clamp down on a protest movement that began in February of last year. The State Department issued a weak condemnation of this move on Wednesday, although it is not clear just how the condemnation was delivered to Bahraini authorities. Remarkably, Retired Vice Admiral Douglas Katz, who is a previous commander of the Navy's Fifth Fleet (which is based in Bahrain) penned an Op-Ed in The Hill on Monday, in which he made a miserable attempt to put a positive spin on US support for the repressive regime in Bahrain. In a rare moment of honesty, Katz did at least admit that the US must put up with Bahrain in order to assure the continued flow of oil from the Middle East.

The New York Times brought us word of the crackdown on protests:

Citing recent episodes of violence, the government of Bahrain on Tuesday banned all public rallies and demonstrations, a move that drew swift condemnation from human rights groups and opposition activists who said it was intended solely to stifle criticism of the ruling monarchy in the tiny Persian Gulf nation.

The Times article provides some context for the current development:

Since the beginning of the Arab

uprisings almost two years ago, Bahrain's government has struggled to contain the protests, which are focused on the ruling Sunni monarchy's chokehold on political power and fed by persistent complaints by the island nation's majority Shiite population of systematic, apartheidlike discrimination.

Backed by powerful allies, including Saudi Arabia and the United States, Bahrain's government, its critics charge, has faced little pressure to change. The Fifth Fleet of the United States Navy is anchored in Bahrain.

The first few months of the protests saw an incredibly harsh response from Bahraini forces. The State Department's May 24, 2012 Human Rights Report on Bahrain contains a summary of the information from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), which was commissioned in June of 2011 and issued its report the following November:

There were a number of reports that government security forces committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The BICI report attributed 19 civilian deaths in the spring to security forces; of these it attributed 14 to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), three to the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF), one to the Bahrain National Security Agency (BNSA), and one to an unnamed security agency. Thirteen of these deaths were due to the use of firearms, five to torture in custody, and one to physical injuries as the result of beating. Of the 14 deaths attributable to the MOI, the BICI concluded that nine resulted from excessive use of force and three from mistreatment in custody; there was not enough evidence to determine cause of death in the other two cases. Of the five persons whose deaths resulted from

torture, three died in MOI custody, one four days after being released from MOI custody, and one at the BDF Hospital after being transferred from BNSA custody (see section 1.c., Prison and Detention Center Conditions). The BICI report also discussed 11 deaths that took place beyond the February-March period covered by its report, for which it did not assign responsibility. It noted, however, that the deaths may have been the result of incidents related to protest activity or excessive use of force by security forces (see also section 2.b., Freedom of Assembly). Local human rights organizations maintained that six additional deaths were linked indirectly to clashes between protesters and security forces, particularly due to exposure to tear gas.

Among the moves to “reform” Bahrain’s security apparatus after the initial violent repression of the protests, Bahrain brought in former New York, Philadelphia and Miami Police Chief John Timoney. The Guardian covered the announcement:

A controversial US police chief has been hired by the government of Bahrain to train and reform the nation’s security forces.

John Timoney spent nearly three decades with the New York City police department before serving as head of police in Philadelphia and Miami. He’s been hired – along with former assistant commissioner of Britain’s Metropolitan Police, John Yates – to reform Bahrain’s security forces. The two were brought on after a report was published detailing the torture and death of prisoners held by Bahraini authorities.

Timoney’s supporters view him as a tough, smart cop with a record for

turning failing police departments around and controlling mass demonstrations. In effect, they argue, he's the perfect candidate to improve Bahrain's security forces, which have been linked to the killing, torture and flagrant suppression of dissident protesters.

The chief's critics, however, say Timoney's handling of protests and gatherings in each of the cities he's served in are wrought with examples of police abuse, illegal infiltration tactics, fear-mongering and a blatant disregard for freedom of expression.

Imagine that. Bahrain hires a US cop known for "a blatant disregard for freedom of expression" and in just a few months all protests are banned. I'm sure that's just a coincidence.

In yesterday's press briefing at the State Department, Bahrain was first on the agenda:

Just at the top, I do want to note that the United States is deeply concerned by the Bahraini Government's decision to ban all public gatherings. Freedoms of assembly, association, and expression are universal human rights. We urge the Government of Bahrain to uphold its international commitments and ensure that its citizens are able to exercise — are able to assemble peacefully and to express their views without fear of arrest or detention. We urge the Government of Bahrain to work with responsible protest leaders to find a way for peaceful and orderly demonstrations to take place. The decision to curb these rights is contrary to Bahrain's professed commitment to reform, and it will not help advance the national reconciliation nor build trust among all parties.

We also urge the opposition to refrain from provocations and violence. Violence undermines efforts to reduce tensions, rebuild trust, and pursue meaningful reconciliation in Bahrain. Recent violent attacks, including fatal attacks, on security force personnel are a deeply troubling development. So we urge the Government of Bahrain to take steps to build confidence across Bahraini society and to begin a meaningful national dialogue with the political opposition.

With that, I'll take your questions.

Remarkably, the press followed up on the statement delivered by deputy spokesman Mark Toner. Toner was unable to confirm just how and to whom this weak condemnation of the protest ban was delivered to Bahrain:

QUESTION: Just on that –

MR. TONER: Yeah, sure.

QUESTION: – before we move onto Syria. This has been made – this position, your views have been made clear to the Government of Bahrain directly? Is that correct?

MR. TONER: Matt, I'm not sure at what level we've communicated these to the Government of Bahrain.

QUESTION: They're not just hearing this from you right now?

MR. TONER: They're not just hearing this from me, no. But I'm not sure at what level – I'm not sure whether through our –

QUESTION: Well, was it there, here?

MR. TONER: – embassy or bilaterally. I'll have to check on that.

Contrast the weak words from the State Department with this condemnation from Amnesty International:

The Bahrain government's ban on all rallies and gatherings in the country violates the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and must be lifted immediately, said Amnesty International.

Instead of asking Bahrain and the protesters to work together to find a way for peaceful protests to take place, Amnesty states simply that the ban must end. Note also that the State Department dwells quite a bit on the "violence" of the protests and yet the large number of protesters killed by Bahraini forces last year is not mentioned now that there is a grand total of two security forces that have been killed during protests. (Surely this new level of violence by the protesters is unrelated to the presence of Timoney, who has a reputation for sending in infiltrators who may incite peaceful protesters into violence.) Amnesty does a better job of putting the deaths of the security personnel into perspective:

Police have also been attacked during recent gatherings. On 19 October the authorities reported that a policeman had died and another had been seriously injured by an explosion in al-Eker village when their patrol was attacked by rioters. A week later, a second policeman died in hospital after having been injured in protests earlier in the year.

"Even in the event of sporadic or isolated violence once an assembly is underway, the authorities cannot simply declare a blanket prohibition on all protests. Such a sweeping measure amounts to nothing less than nullifying the rights to freedom of association, expression and assembly," said Hassiba

Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Programme Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“Law enforcement officials must act to protect peaceful protesters rather than using the violent acts of a few as a pretext to restrict or impede the rights of all.”

For an understanding of why the US would continue to stand so closely with a regime that has brutally tortured and killed so many of its own citizens who are protesting peacefully, we need only look at Monday’s Op-Ed from retired vice admiral Douglas Katz:

As violence continues to reverberate throughout the Arab world, the presence of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain remains vital to the security of the Arabian Gulf, and to energy delivery and economic stability there.

“Energy delivery” is right up front in our reasons for standing by a repressive regime. Katz returns to that, just in case we missed it:

Regrettably, unrest continues in Bahrain and it raises serious questions. What would happen if the ruling Al Khalifa family is forced to step down? They have ruled the island kingdom since the 19th century. Would chaos result and set off instability throughout the Gulf? Would the Fifth Fleet be forced to leave? And if it were to happen, would any other moderate GCC state be willing to host a long-term American military presence? If the U.S. Navy and other forces were to depart the Gulf, who would be there to ensure the flow of oil and other commodities through the critical choke point of the Strait of Hormuz, where the Gulf meets the Arabian Sea and Indian

Ocean? Would Iran dominate and threaten shipping as well as block energy exports and reserves? These are difficult questions that are hard to answer, but must be addressed; the outcomes have severe global ramifications.

Make no mistake about where US priorities lie in Bahrain. The Bahrain regime can torture and kill all the citizens it wants as long as our Fifth Fleet can continue to operate out of its base there so that the US can “ensure the flow of oil”.