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Bahrain, a Brutal Ally

By ZAINAB al-KHAWAJA

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EARLIER this month, Aqeel Abdul Mohsen, 19, was shot in the face for protesting against Bahrain's government. He was covered in blood, with the lower side of his face blown open, his jaw shattered, and a broken hand hanging awkwardly from his wrist. It's one of those images that you wish you had never seen, and can never forget.

After more than 10 hours of surgery, and before Mr. Abdul Mohsen regained consciousness, his hospital room was already under guard by the police. Had he been able to speak, he might even have been interrogated before going into surgery. Others have lain bleeding without medical attention while government security agents asked questions like: "Were you participating in a protest? Who else was with you?"

Bahrain, a small island nation off the coast of [Saudi Arabia](#), has been ruled by the Khalifa family for more than 200 years. It is also [home to the headquarters of the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet](#), which patrols regional shipping lanes, assists with missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and monitors Iran as tensions in the region mount.

The oppressed people of Bahrain joined the Arab Spring soon after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. With newfound hope, Bahrainis took to the streets on Feb. 14, 2011. Rich and poor, Shiite and Sunni, liberal and religious, they felt what it was like to speak freely for the first time in the capital, Manama, at a traffic circle with a pearl monument at its center. The Pearl Roundabout came to symbolize the Bahraini revolution.

But this newfound freedom didn't last long. The government's security forces attacked the peaceful protesters, then tore down the Pearl monument. And in March 2011, troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened to suppress our pro-democracy protests.

Going out on the streets, carrying nothing but a flag and calling for democracy could cost you your life here. Chanting "down with the dictator" could lead to your being subjected to electric shocks. Giving a speech about human rights and democracy can lead to life imprisonment. Infants have died after suffocating from toxic gases used by riot police. And teenage protesters have been shot and killed.

It's not unusual in Bahrain to find families with four or five members in prison at the same time. My father, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, was beaten unconscious in my apartment in front of my family, as a report last year by the [Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry](#) documented. He was then taken away with my husband and brother-in-law; they were all tortured.

My husband was released in January, and my brother-in-law was released after a six-month sentence in late 2011; my father was sentenced to life in prison. He staged four hunger strikes; the longest lasted 110 days and almost cost him his life. (He was force-fed at a military hospital.)

But despite all these sacrifices, the struggle for freedom and democracy in Bahrain seems hopeless because Bahrain's rulers have powerful allies, including Saudi Arabia and the United States.

For Bahrainis, there doesn't seem to be much of a difference between the Saudis and the Americans. Both are supporting the Khalifa regime to preserve their own interests, even if the cost is the lives and rights of the people of Bahrain.

The United States speaks about supporting human rights and democracy, but while the Saudis send troops to aid the Khalifa government, America is sending arms. The United States is doing itself a huge disservice by displaying such an obvious double standard toward human rights violations in the Middle East. Washington condemns the violence of the Syrian government but turns a blind eye to blatant human rights abuses committed by its ally Bahrain.

This double standard is costing America its credibility across the region; and the message being understood is that if you are an ally of America, then you can get away with abusing human rights.

If the United States is serious about protecting human rights in the Arab world, it should halt all arms sales to Bahrain, bring Bahrain's abuses to the attention of the United Nations Security Council, support a special session on Bahrain at the United Nations Human Rights Council, and begin a conversation about potential diplomatic and economic sanctions. The Obama administration should also demand that high-level Bahraini officials be held accountable for human rights abuses, and that nongovernmental organizations, United Nations human rights investigators and journalists be allowed to enter the country and investigate abuses.

At present, the Bahraini government believes it has international immunity. It commits widespread human rights violations, and business continues as usual: the government continues

to buy arms and negotiate lucrative deals, without having to face any real consequences. This is why the most prominent Bahraini human-rights defenders are languishing in prison. Until the United States starts to put real pressure on its ally, Bahrain's government has no incentive to change.

No matter the price, Bahrainis will keep demanding the very values — human rights and democracy — that the United States claims to stand for. It is an outrage that America continues to back a regime that tramples them.