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Why Obama Supports Tyranny Over Democracy in Bahrain

John Glaser

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"America is a close friend of Bahrain," President Obama said in a 2011 speech at the United Nations just seven months after the Bahraini dictatorship responded to peaceful democratic uprisings by ordering security forces to shoot live rounds into crowds of protesters.

After promising to call on the Bahraini regime "to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings peaceful change," Obama said he believes "the patriotism that binds Bahrainis together must be more powerful than the sectarian forces that would tear them apart."

Everybody listening knew there was a high level of deception in what Obama was saying since he was calling for peace while continuing to send money and weapons to the regime as it crushed peaceful demonstrations with ghastly force. But Obama even went so far as to recite the Bahraini regime's own propaganda by framing the unrest in sectarian terms as opposed to a movement for democracy.

As it turns out, this is how the Bahraini regime has wanted it framed all along. According to Reza Aslan at Foreign Affairs:

the much-lauded Al Bandar Report, a 240-page document produced in 2006 by the Gulf Center for Democratic Development and written by one of the government's own advisers, documents

the Bahraini government's plans to foment sectarianism in the kingdom by encouraging Shia conversions to Sunni Islam, rigging elections in favor of Sunni candidates, and creating a secret intelligence apparatus to spy on Shia citizens -- all to marginalize the majority Shia community.

Stoking sectarian tensions not only helps to marginalize the majority Shia population if they happen to protest their oppression, but it also feeds into the Bahraini government's lie "that the uprising in Bahrain is nothing more than an Iranian-inspired Shia revolt against a besieged Sunni regime." That lie helps Bahrain's Arab and American allies justify continued support without making it seem like they're helping crush democracy.

Aslan tells the story of what happened to a prominent Sunni who joined the mostly Shiite opposition in calling for freedom (a scenario that gets in the way of Bahraini propaganda). After speaking at a rally, "Mohamed al-Buflasa was approached by a young protester who invited him to share a cup of tea."

He followed the man to the edge of the roundabout. As he waited for his host to pour the tea, a truck packed with plain-clothed policemen pulled up. The men threw a sack over al-Buflasa's head and began punching and kicking him. Before anyone in the crowd could react, he was thrown into the back of the truck and hauled away, becoming the first political prisoner of the Bahrain uprising.

For the next three weeks, al-Buflasa was secretly held in isolation in a tiny prison cell. He was routinely beaten, tortured, and humiliated by his prison guards, although, bizarrely, no one bothered to interrogate him. At one point, the police told his 13-year-old daughter that her father had been bewitched and put under a magic spell. They promised to take him to a hospital for treatment, but only if she told the public prosecutor that he had molested her. When she refused, the police arrested her, too.

Although al-Buflasa was ultimately cleared of the charges against him, he would spend a total of seven months in prison. When he was finally released, he had lost his job, his friends, and his livelihood.

The case of al-Buflasa, and surely other Sunnis who have stood up against the regime, pokes holes in the propaganda the regime and its prized ally in Washington want everyone to believe.

The Bahraini regime's repression has not let up. Human rights groups have documented killings, beatings, torture, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, harassment, the destruction of more than 40 Shia mosques... on and on.

U.S. support has kept up throughout. And it isn't because the Obama administration actually buys into the lie about this being a sectarian conflict. Instead, Bahrain provides the U.S. with one of the most important elements of "power projection" in the world.

Stationed in Bahrain is the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which gives Washington control over the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf, through which over 40 percent of the world's seaborne oil

transits. This represents American Empire writ large, and it is afforded to Washington because it bribes the despotic regime in Bahrain with money and weapons -- a deal that could change if the people have more of a say in their government's policies.

The massive U.S. naval presence in the Gulf also allows the Obama administration to taunt and intimidate Iran, something they're not about to give up on. When Obama accelerated the deployment of warships to the Gulf in 2010, the *New York Times* described it as "part of a coordinated administration strategy to increase pressure on Iran" and also "intended to counter the impression that Iran is fast becoming the most powerful military force in the Middle East."

Onboard the USS Abraham Lincoln in the Gulf's Strait of Hormuz last February, BBC reporter Jonathan Beale explained, "This carrier and these [fighter] jets are more than just a show of force, they're here to send a clear message to Iran as to who really controls these waters."

Alas, the U.S. is continuing to support tyranny in Bahrain for the traditional reasons: to maintain utmost control of the flow of oil and to threaten Iran, the only major state in the region that doesn't obey Washington's demands. If Obama were at all the honest broker his supporters make him out to be, he would admit this to the American people.