

COMMENTARY

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Bahrain's Bulldozers and other Shots in the Foot

Hayat Alvi

US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island

For months now the news has been inundated about the protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa, and brutal crackdowns by various regimes. In the process, many regimes are consistently committing crimes against humanity by shooting unarmed protesters, rolling tanks into residential areas, attacking, beating, torturing people (including medical staff), raping, targeting journalists, and, in the case of Libya, Qaddafi's forces have laid down landmines and used outlawed cluster bombs against civilians. However, it is Bahrain's monarchy that is truly playing with sectarian fire, which can have serious regional ramifications.

Within the past couple of weeks, Bahrain's minority Sunni regime has ordered bulldozing of Shiite shrines and mosques. That's right, bulldozed. What image does that conjure in the minds of many Middle Easterners? Israel, right? But, in this case it is an Arab Sunni Muslim regime that decided to destroy Shiite historical heritage sites and places of worship. This is going to backfire on the Sunni governments in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab emirates. The ripples of this sectarianism are even reaching South Asia, with Pakistan's newspaper *Dawn* publishing an article about the destruction of Shiite shrines in Bahrain. This will fan the flames of sectarian rivalry even further.

Bahrain's decision to destroy these Shiite religious sites comprises a broader appallingly brutal crackdown against civilian protesters, mostly Shiites, who are demanding greater freedom and rights and political representation. The *Christian Science Monitor* describes Bahrain's crackdown as 'an assault on human rights that is breathtaking in its expansiveness.' In an article published on 11 May, the *Monitor* reports:

Authorities have held secret trials where protesters have been sentenced to death, arrested prominent mainstream opposition politicians, jailed nurses and doctors who treated

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injured protesters, seized the health care system that had been run primarily by Shiites, fired 1000 Shiite professionals and cancelled their pensions, detained students and teachers who took part in the protests, beat and arrested journalists, and forced the closure of the only opposition newspaper.

Al Jazeera reports that the Shiite opposition Al Wefaq party alleges that ‘police have raided up to 15 mainly girls’ schools, detaining, beating and threatening to rape girls as young as 12. A Bahrain human rights group says at least 70 teachers have also been detained.’ In addition, nearly fifty medical personnel, including doctors and nurses, reportedly have been detained, beaten, tortured, and, some say dragged from their homes by masked men with guns. Many more medical workers are under investigation. All of this intimidation and thug-like behaviour towards medical personnel were meant to punish them for helping wounded protesters.

In mid-March, Bahrain’s regime asked the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for help in crushing the protest movement. Saudi forces and tanks, along with 500 of UAE police personnel, moved in and helped Bahraini security forces ‘cleanse’ the protest movement. They not only dispersed the protesters camped out in Pearl Square, but they also demolished the Pearl Monument in the centre of the square. A *Huffington Post* article describes the reaction in the region:

Shiite anger rose sharply around the Mideast [on Friday] as large crowds in Iran and Iraq cursed Bahrain's Sunni monarchy and its Saudi backers over the violent crackdown on protesters demanding more rights.

Amateur video footage of security forces shooting and beating protesters has spread across the internet and fuelled fury in predominantly Shiite Iraq and in Iran, where a senior cleric on Friday urged Bahraini protesters to keep going until victory or death.

The intent of the protest movement in Bahrain is to demand basic freedom and rights as a nationalist movement, without wanting to sharpen the sectarian divide. However, the demographics of the tiny country and the sectarian politics that infuse every move that either side makes couch practically everything in sectarian terms and meanings. This is especially true of the powerbrokers, that is, the Sunni minority that rules the kingdom. They will always interpret a human rights-based protest movement by a Shiite majority as a threat to their seats of power and motivated by sectarian agendas.

The Fifth Fleet of the United States is stationed in Bahrain. The Western powers are conspicuously silent about Bahrain’s crimes against humanity mainly because they fear Iran’s opportunities to manipulate the crisis by supporting the Shiites. If the Western powers really feared Shiite empowerment, then they should not have invaded Iraq. Doing so tipped the political scales wholly in favour of the majority Shiites in that country, and served it on a silver platter to Iran!

Bulldozing Shiite mosques and shrines is the monarchy’s ultimate attempt, albeit a poorly designed one, to literally sweep Shiite remnants under the metaphoric rug. The repulsive acts of the Bahraini security forces have triggered Shiite protests in Lebanon and Iraq. Why? Because despite the media blackouts the region’s governments have yet to realize that in this modern information age, nothing can remain hidden. Cell phones, the Internet, social media, Twitter, and

YouTube are serving as indispensable instruments for getting the words and images out to the global community about the crimes being committed by numerous regional governments. Not to mention, bulldozing mosques and shrines is all too hard to hide. The Western coalition forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have made sincere efforts to prevent destruction of Muslim places of worship. We cannot say the same for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. They both have deliberately demolished sacred structures. Muslims worldwide should be appalled and Bahrain's monarchy is shooting itself in the foot. To quote a Bahraini citizen, 'We never expected they would stoop so low.'

Dr. Hayat Alvi is an Associate Professor at the US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island and the views expressed are her own. Email: hayat@hayatalvi.com.

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