

OPPOSE OPENING OF BRITISH BASE IN BAHRAIN!

Britain within the Global Torture Regime

The long delayed and severely redacted version of the US Senate Intelligence Committee enquiry into torture and related CIA practices

[<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/study2014/sscistudy1.pdf>], released late 2014, deserves critical welcome. The starkly visible handiwork of the censor notwithstanding, it confirms and on some issues extends core findings of earlier reports

[<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/globalizing-torture-cia-secret-detention-and-extraordinary-rendition>] on the conduct of American and allied forces in the course of the "War on Terror".

However, the Senate report, as published, is silent on the role of British personnel in the events that it documents. Concealment of involvement of a core ally was widely noted by news media and on 11th December the British *Daily Telegraph*

[<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11288239/Downing-Street-British-spies-discussed-redactions-in-CIA-torture-report.html>] observed: "Key passages...were censored at the request of British spies, Downing Street admitted tonight, raising fears that the UK's hand in the post-9/11 interrogation programme was covered up."

New British Plans for Bahrain

Renewed attention to the UK role in global torture occurs just as it is announced that the British state is to re-establish a permanent military presence in Bahrain. The two developments, in fact, are closely related. Both historically and in our own times Britain has played an unrivalled role sustaining, arming and seeking to justify absolute monarchy in Bahrain. Today's monarchy reciprocates with frequent denunciation of domestic critics as terrorists and/or Iranian agents. By doing so it routinely endorses key geopolitical components of the War on Terror, which is, of course, the overarching strategic framework within which state torture has been operationalised and legitimised in recent years.

Regarding Britain's new plans for Bahrain, BBC online reported [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30355953>] on 6th December 2014:

"Britain is to establish its first permanent military base in the Middle East since it formally withdrew from the region in 1971. The base, at the Mina Salman Port in Bahrain, will host ships including destroyers and aircraft carriers."

This development, the present paper will argue, is of great significance to the labour movement and should be countered by a sustained campaign of opposition in Britain and internationally.

Continuity in British Policy

The presence of British military force in Bahrain is far from a new phenomenon. Indeed Bahraini history, including the experience of the labour movement within the struggle for democratisation, has been largely shaped by the global strategic priorities of the British state. Both in the period of formal empire and subsequently, that influence has persistently assumed aggressive forms.

Blogging on the BBC website

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/posts/if_you_take_my_advice_-_id_rep], Adam Curtis identifies key moments of intervention in Bahrain by British military forces after the Second World War. By the 1950's, he points out, British "advisor" to Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Charles Belgrave, was effective ruler of the island. Further, Belgrave's unremittingly reactionary activities in Bahrain had made him the focus of widespread public outrage. In response to sectarian religious confrontations, very possibly inflamed by regime provocateurs, the joint Shia-Sunni, reform oriented Higher Executive Committee (HEC), Curtis notes, "*...called for Belgrave to go. He was helping ferment religious hatred and imprisoning innocent people, they said, in order to keep Bahrain as a tribally controlled regime. They demanded instead democracy and a new code of law.*"

Alongside the HEC, renamed National Union Committee (NUC) in 1954, specifically labour movement organisations were central to mid-1950's struggles against British rule. The rapid emergence of the General Trade Union as a mass workers' alliance, closely associated with the integrated Sunni-Shia political leadership of the NUC, was at the centre of huge rallies. These called for adoption of a *common platform* as a step toward independence and democratic reform. The demands of the *platform*, importantly, included trade union legality.

Moreover, in addition to addressing specifically Bahrain-centred issues, the NUC and GTU were responding to broader international political developments, above all the 1956 attack on Egypt by British and other neo-colonial powers. Bahraini sociologist 'Abd al-Hadi Khalaf summarises [<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer132/labor-movements-bahrain>] London's predictable reply to such widening of the concerns of the reform movement:

"Following mass demonstrations in support of Nasser during the 1956 Suez war, the British cracked down on the NUC and the GTU, imprisoning or deporting its leaders and eventually banning all its activities. Underground cells grew rapidly as the only expression of a politically and economically discontented populace."

The swell of proto-revolt, increasingly intersecting with the activities of expanding Communist and Arab Nationalist organisations, resurfaced in the Spring of 1965. Then, Curtis observes:

"...another popular uprising began. It began in the oilfields but quickly spread to general strikes. Again the British sent in troops to crush the revolt - and many of the leaders were yet again

deported."

In general terms, then, Bahraini workers were subjected to the standard colonial cocktail of ranked violence and mass constraint. And as if to remind us that more widely known British rearguard atrocities in Malaya [http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=polsci_pubs] and Kenya

[<http://www.extension.harvard.edu/hub/spotlight/mau-mau-rebellion-caroline-elkins-abuse-colonial-kenya>] were less anomalous within the late colonial process than is sometimes assumed, Marc Owen Jones [<https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/marc-owen-jones/history-of-british-involvement-in-bahrain-internal-security>] adds the following detail:

"In 1965, a Royal Navy helicopter was even used to drop tear gas on protesters who had joined a strike over layoffs at the Bahrain Petroleum Company."

The anti-democratic and ferociously anti-working class influence of the British state in Bahrain continued beyond formal independence in 1971. Notwithstanding early ostensible concessions from the new ruler, Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, replacement British advisor Ian Henderson proposed a draconian State Security Law. The planned legislation was framed to permit extensive rights of arrest and detention without trial or even charge. Events then moved rapidly in a manner strongly suggestive of Anglo-Khalifa micro-synchronisation. The elected parliament unambiguously rejected Henderson's bill in June 1975. Bahrain's ruler, in response, moved to suspend key elements of the constitution. Indeed parliament itself was closed down. Once again in Curtis' words:

"And for the next twenty five years Henderson ran a ruthless system of repression that kept the al Khalifa family in power and stopped any movement towards democracy."

"Duty of Loyalty"

Today the tradition of British advisors continues

[<https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/john-horne-john-lubbock/policing-bahrain-long-arm-of-british>]. So too does the legacy of state ruthlessness, as displayed in the public butchery at Pearl Roundabout in February 2011. Most importantly, the Saudi and Emirates-assisted assault which took place there was no isolated event. Rather, it was inseparable from simultaneous attacks on trade unionists, including the leadership of the now suppressed Bahrain Teachers Association. More than four years on, the repression continues.

Bahrain: Citizenship Rights Stripped Away [<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/21/bahrain-citizenship-rights-stripped-away>], published last summer by Human Rights Watch (HRW), underscores the importance of extending and deepening international trade union support for Bahraini workers and rights activists. The report outlines recent regime moves to enlarge provisions for denaturalisation, or withdrawal of citizenship. Specifically, amendments to the Citizenship Law of 1963 were published on 24th July 2014. This is how HRW summarises one key change:

"Article 10 now permits the Interior Ministry, with cabinet approval, to strip the citizenship of a person who 'aids or is involved in the service of a hostile state' or who 'causes harm to the interests of the Kingdom or acts in a way that contravenes his duty of loyalty to it.'"

HRW notes that "duty of loyalty" here denotes "a vaguely worded provision that could be used against government critics". In addition, the rights group interprets the amendments as "further legal pretext for the arbitrary stripping of citizenship, in clear violation of international law."

Consistent with Amnesty's more recent analysis *Behind the Rhetoric*

[http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/bahrain_report_behind_the_rhetoric_eng_final.pdf], HRW confirms mounting state lawlessness within the largely British created and sustained Bahraini *status quo*.

Palatial Paranoia

As if to surreally endorse the draconian picture painted in the HRW text, on the day before its publication the *Bahrain News Agency* (BNA) reported the contribution of the Prime Minister, Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, to an official session on security issues. BNA's account is especially revealing, coming from an openly pro-regime source, and can be presumed to be non-satirical:

"HRH Premier directed...(the "work meeting")... to monitor local affairs closely in order to maintain the security and stability enjoyed by the kingdom and prevent any attempt to disrupt them through disseminating false information to spark sedition and incite the public opinion, calling for the need to apply the law strictly against violators.

He warned against instigatory discourse and attempts to sow division among the citizens of the same people for the aim of paving the way for those seeking to exploit the security development in the region to subvert security and stability and achieve their evil goals through misusing media platforms, social networks and the freedom and democracy prevailing in Bahrain."

[<http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/629658>]

BNA's report dutifully captures the pervasiveness of insinuated threats and dangers to "security and stability" within the narrative of tyranny. Enemies are everywhere, that is, nowhere in particular. Hence the generalised vigilance against *a non-specific but omnipresent menace*. Hence the proclaimed need for *comprehensive surveillance* of such social and political forms as are tolerated. Through its inadvertently revealing reportage, the BNA adds compelling weight to the case made by regime critics and does much to authenticate the core of their charges.

Enforcing "Stability" Through the Barrel of a Gun

Recent intensification of repression, of course, has a context. Middle East scholar Christopher Davidson identifies

[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/after_the_sheikhs_an_interview_with_christopher_davidson] declining oil and gas revenues, along with demographic and

cultural trends undermining social compliance, as driving the "approaching demise" of the Gulf monarchies, including Bahrain. In parallel with other academic analysts, he locates the current scale of state authoritarianism within that conjuncture of decline, decomposition and social opposition.

The impending British military base, reinforcing the US 5th fleet, is contrived to deflect any such "demise". In particular its logic is to consolidate the Bahraini regime. UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond has described the new development as "just one example of our growing partnership with Gulf partners to tackle shared strategic and regional threats"

[<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30355953>]. Both for the Bahraini monarchy and as viewed by the British state, those "threats" centrally include democratisation and - inseparable from that - the right of workers to organise freely and effectively. Through ruling class eyes, whether in Manama or in London, the "stability" invoked by Hammond as a rationale for developing the Mina Salman Port base blatantly revolves around Khalifa regime security enhancement. A permanent British base would signify commitment to assist, by deeds or through intimidatory presence, ongoing suppression of the democratisation struggles that last peaked in 2011.

International Labour Solidarity against Capitalist Parasitism and Militarism

Recent developments in Bahrain, as outlined by Davidson, have occurred within a globalising move since the late twentieth century toward deregulated, short-termist, tendentially abstract and parasitic *finance capital*, frequently theorised as neoliberalism. Toby Matthiesen [<http://merip.org/mero/mero021314>] evokes local dimensions of that shift, and the intensification of inequality which accompanies it, to account for the "Arab Spring" revolts of 2011, including that in Bahrain:

"Real estate speculation, land reclamation and the need of multinational companies for local middlemen strengthened a crony capitalist class made up of the ruling family and a small group of Sunni and Shi'i business families. The wealth of the few visibly contrasted with the circumstances of most Bahrainis, who increasingly came to feel that they were being left behind."

Matthiesen's observations highlight some ways in which the problems confronting the working class in Bahrain are as international as the capitalist relationships which reproduce them. But equally, trade unions and labour movement activists outside Bahrain can help challenge sectarian regime tactics disguised as ways forward. International solidarity actions, opposing those of the ruling classes of imperial states in alliance with the various Gulf regimes, are urgently needed. Their logic is to facilitate transition towards a world society centred on human needs. However limited initially, such steps anticipate and promote development of a situation where our unions begin to collectively act as instruments of a unified class, to the benefit and for the liberation of the exploited and oppressed everywhere.

Small Measures, Giant Steps

~ Oppose the planned British base as a further line of defence for the anti-worker and anti-democratic Bahraini regime.

~ Reject unconditionally the brazen historical insult to all victims of empire conveyed by Philip Hammond's menacing invocation of a "long term" British military presence "East of Suez". Notwithstanding the great diminishment of colonial looting and domineering since its heyday, a toxic residue remains and is an ongoing component of nostalgic reaction among British ruling circles. Like all such regressive musings, Hammond's implicit *apologia* for empire is at odds with the need for reform in Bahrain - and for a tenable human life everywhere.

~ An initial minimal step is to sign the *Stop the War* anti-base petition [<http://act.stopwar.org.uk/petition/1>]. But while doubtless a useful tactic for raising broader public awareness of the planned base, in and of itself this is a limited and largely atomised response. The deeper need is for a growth in collective, active confidence that our class can act to bring about change, including moves toward staying the bloodied hands of our rulers.

~ To facilitate that development, build support in your union branch, and in other labour movement contexts, for solidarity motions, policies and activities against what is yet another neo-colonial threat to both Bahraini workers and those of the region as a whole.

~ Parliamentary measures opposing British plans for Mina Salman Port, such as 2014-15 *early day motion 609* [<http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2014-15/609>], should be supported. Quite reasonably, the motion states that the inter-governmental agreement to open the base "...will serve to send a message that the UK Government is not interested in justice, rule of law and reconciliation in Bahrain". As with the *Stop the War* petition, such motions can contribute to necessary public consciousness of the British role, especially in the early phase of opposition.

~ However, every indication is that the British ruling class and *their state are not and never have been* "interested in justice, rule of law and reconciliation in Bahrain". Rather than encourage confidence in the outcomes of their diplomacy, which is contrived to dignify repression, raise the call for a *union-led international investigation of Bahraini state repression and abuse of rights, including those of trade unionists*. To be meaningful, such an investigation would need to consider the central role of the British state in constructing and sustaining the nightmare *status quo*.

~ Alongside opposing the base, it is vital that trade unionists support independent unions and democratisation movements in Bahrain itself [<http://menasolidaritynetwork.com/2014/05/21/bahrain-background-briefing-and-model-motion-for-union-activists/>]. Without such social forms, organically linked to a renewed global struggle for a society organised around *free association*, there is little prospect for effective opposition to the regime and the religious sectarianism which it routinely promotes.

~ Education unions should develop a range of ways to publicly oppose the British facilitated state smashing of the Bahrain Teachers Association [http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/r/t/davidbinns_bahrainopenletter_sep13.pdf] As a matter of urgency, educational work on the issue as well as solidarity commitments at all union levels

are appropriate to the situation.

An injury to one is an injury to all.

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