

Bahrain: Crushing Pro-Democracy Protests. American and British Police Chiefs Step Up State Repression

Top Western appointments allegedly aimed at improving human rights...

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Two former police chiefs from the US and Britain have brought discernible Western “expertise” to the Bahraini force only weeks following their appointments – a surge in repression and state terrorism.

Former Miami police chief John Timoney and his British counterpart, John Yates, formerly commander at London’s Scotland Yard, were assigned last month by Bahrain’s royal rulers to “oversee reform” of the Persian Gulf kingdom’s security forces. Officially, the appointment of the American and Briton was to bring Western professional policing to the Bahraini force and specifically to upgrade the human rights record of Bahrain’s ministry of interior and National Security Agency.

The assignments were announced by King Hamad Al Khalifa following a report by an international commission of inquiry into widespread human rights violations in the US-backed oil kingdom since pro-democracy protests erupted there last February.

As reported earlier by Global Research, the inquiry report and the subsequent appointment of the US and British police chiefs appeared to be a public relations exercise to burnish the tarnished image of this key Persian Gulf ally of Washington and London [1].

However, only weeks into their jobs, the Western commanders appear to have been given a remit that goes well beyond public relations, namely, to sharpen the repression against the pro-democracy movement.

Human rights activists and several political sources say that state forces have dramatically stepped up violence towards protesters and targeting of the Shia community generally. The diminutive island state of less than 600,000 nationals is comprised mainly of Shia muslims (70 per cent) who are ruled over by a Sunni elite installed by Britain when the kingdom gained nominal independence in 1971. American and British government support for the unelected Al Khalifa monarchy is viewed by the majority of Bahrainis as being at odds with their claims for democratic rights.

Over the past year, Bahraini state forces have killed some 50 people; thousands have been maimed, wounded and detained, many of the latter tortured. Proportionate to its population, such state violence is comparable to what Washington and London have loudly denounced

the Libyan and Syrian regimes for – indeed mounting a military invasion of the former and threatening to do so in the latter – under the guise of “protecting human rights”. By contrast, there is hardly a word of denunciation from Washington or London towards the Bahraini regime, which hosts the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet.

“The violence is worse than ever,” said one Bahraini pro-democracy activist. “The state security forces are operating with new tactics and this change coincides with the arrival of the American and British police chiefs. But this is no coincidence. We believe that the Bahraini police are using more repression and terror under the orders of these police chiefs.”

Since the appointment of the American and British commanders, at least five more civilians have been killed at the hands of police, including a 15-year-old boy Sayed Hashim who was shot in the face with a teargas canister on New Year’s Eve, and a 27-year-old woman who was bludgeoned with an iron bar.

Not only has state violence on the streets been escalated, but so too has harassment and house raids in Shia villages and neighbourhoods. People detained at police checkpoints are reporting systematic abuses. The police ranks are predominantly made up of Sunni muslim expatriates from Yemen, Jordan, Syria and Pakistan. Bahraini police are also backed up by Saudi and Emirati forces – again Sunni – ever since those neighbouring Gulf monarchs sent in troops last March to suppress the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain. People detained at checkpoints are being humiliated with profanities against their Shia faith, as well as being robbed of money, mobile phones and other possessions by police officers.

There has also been a leap in the number of house raids by police in Shia villages, especially in the early hours. The house raids have targeted towns and villages, such as Sitra and Nuwaidrat, which are deemed to be strongly supportive of the pro-democracy movement.

“We feel that the American and British cops have been brought into crush the pro-democracy movement with systematic tactics of repression and state terror,” said one activist. “The first anniversary of our uprising is coming up in February. The regime has so far failed to crush the uprising but with the anniversary approaching we think that the American and British police chiefs are pushing to do that.”

The past careers of Timoney and Yates indicate that they were a rather bizarre choice by the Bahraini regime – if the latter was genuinely aiming to reform the human rights record and ethical standards of its forces. Timoney was previously accused of deploying brutality against American street protests while commander of the Miami police; while Yates was forced to resign in ignominy over corruption involving phone tapping scams carried out by London’s Metropolitan Police in league with Murdoch’s gutter tabloid press.

It is also pretty certain that these appointments would not have been made without the sanction and, most probably, the suggestion of the US and British governments. That Washington and London would be overseeing a deliberate intensification of state terror in Bahrain should not be any surprise. The Bahraini regime has for decades earned an international reputation for police brutality and torture. The US State Department is well aware of this, according to its own reports, yet Washington continues to reward the Bahraini regime with the presence of its Fifth Fleet and, more recently, with a proposed arms deal worth \$53 million, including weapons of repression, such as armoured cars and teargas.

Britain is also a major seller of weapons of repression to Bahrain. Historically, it also has played a crucial role in shaping the repressive apparatus of the Bahraini ministry of interior. The head of the notorious National Security Agency between 1968-1998 was British Colonel Ian Henderson who continues to act as an advisor to King Hamad. Several former British police officers work in Bahrain's ministry of interior, including the newly appointed John Yates.

However, the signs are that the efforts to crush the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain are rebounding badly for Washington and London.

For a start the increased repression is serving to embolden the pro-democracy even more, with more and bigger street protests taking place. On 14 February, a demonstration is planned to make a major stand in the capital, Manama, to mark the first anniversary of the uprising.

Also, more worryingly for Washington and London, there is a growing contempt among protesters towards the American and British governments. Up until recently, protests have mainly focused on the Al Khalifa monarchy and the closely aligned House of Saud. But now Bahraini pro-democracy activists appear to be quickly learning that the higher sources of their grievances are in Washington and London. A new sight at protests across Bahrain recently is the burning of American flags.

If Bahrain's uprising succeeds in replacing the unelected and venal Sunni elite with a democratic government that is mainly Shia, the US and British governments will no longer be welcome owing to their increasingly apparent nefarious misdeeds. The recent appointment of police chiefs Timoney and Yates with their malicious expertise is but one of many misdeeds that will be recalled by the people of Bahrain.

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NOTES

[1] Bahrain: Car Bomb in Capital Following Appointment of American and British Police Chiefs to Lead 'Reforms'

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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