

Bahraini Rulers Play Sectarian Card in Bid to Trump Pro-democracy Movement

By [Finian Cunningham](#)

Global Research, April 19, 2011

19 April 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

Increasing attacks on Shia mosques in the Bahraini state's withering crackdown against the pro-democracy movement is a deliberate attempt to isolate the political opposition and amounts to a campaign of "sectarian cleansing", say human rights groups.

Over the past four weeks since the Saudi-led Gulf Peninsula Shield military intervention in Bahrain, there appears to be a concerted drive by pro-state Sunni forces to target repression at the Shia population and in particular Shia mosques and other religious sites, such as cemeteries and meeting places known as Mattams.

Some mosques have been vandalized, with their doors, windows and the PA systems used in the call to prayer having been smashed. More recently, other mosques, such as the 800-year-old Al Shaboor, near the capital, Manama, have in the past week been razed to the ground with bulldozers. A similar fate was met by five mosques in Hamad Town, about 15km south of Manama.

The pro-democracy uprising that began on February 14 rocked the US-backed Sunni rulers for almost a month before the other Gulf states sent in heavily armed contingencies to quell the protests. But the nature of the military intervention has evidently gone beyond its initial avowed remit of restoring "security and stability". Over 34 unarmed civilians have been killed, two-thirds of whom since the Saudi-led forces arrived. The latest victim is a 24-year-old woman, Azeeza Ahmed, who was shot dead when army and police raided her home in the village of Belad Al Qadeem on April 16. Up to 600 people, including medics, lawyers and academics, have been unlawfully detained, their whereabouts unknown. At least four people have died while in custody, their released bodies showing signs of torture. Some 1,000 workers have been sacked from jobs in major state-owned industries, accused of participating in anti-regime protests. And the vast majority of these victims of repression are Shia.

Nabeel Rajab, of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, describes the ongoing repression by the Sunni rulers as a "campaign of sectarian cleansing" against the Shia population. The upsurge in seemingly wanton attacks on Shia mosques and religious sites is clearly demonstrative of this, he says. Such attacks, as with the previously mentioned violations, Rajab points out, constitute crimes against humanity - crimes that the governments of the six Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, are in effect party to.

The pro-democracy movement in Bahrain was seen as a largely, but not exclusively, Shia-led movement. This reflects the fact that the Shia represent 70 per cent of the indigenous

Bahrain population of less than 600,000, and that this group has historically suffered the most political and economic marginalization under the ruling Al Khalifa family who have held power since the oil-rich shikhdom was granted independence from Britain in 1971. However, the calls for replacement of the monarchy and for greater democratic freedoms galvanized Shia and sections of the minority Sunni population as well as labour unions and other secular groups. “Not Sunni, Not Shia, Just Bahraini,” was a common rallying slogan during the heyday of the uprising that saw hundreds of thousands take to the streets of the capital.

Some of the government opposition spokesmen that have been detained, such as Mohammed Abu Flasa and Ebrahim Al Sharif, leader of the National Democratic Action Society, are from Sunni backgrounds.

But, having said that, the repression that has unfolded since the Saudi-led Peninsula Shield entered the country has been directed with disproportionate force at the Shia population.

Pro-democracy sources and human rights groups say that the Bahraini government is now using a policy of divide and rule to isolate the opposition as a “sectarian problem” and in particular a “Shia problem”.

One source, who did want to be named, said: “The targeting of the Shia is a tactic by the regime to distort the pro-democracy movement from a nationalist one into a sectarian one. It is also a way of undermining international support for the pro-democracy movement by trying to present it as an internal problem of the state dealing with ‘troublesome Shia’. In this way, the Bahraini uprising is being made to appear as something different from the uprisings for democracy that have swept the region.”

Nabeel Rajab, who describes himself as secular with both Sunni and Shia family relatives, said: “The government is attempting to incite divisive sectarian tensions, to intimidate Sunni people into not supporting the pro-democracy movement because it is being presented as a Shia movement. The destruction of Shia mosques is a clear sign of this sectarian policy and in my view reflects a wider campaign of sectarian cleansing across Bahrain.”

Saudi troops have used bulldozers to demolish dozens of Shia mosques in Manama and in other locations such as Sitra, in the north east, at Al Barbaghi, Karzakhan, A’ali and in Hamad Town. The latter is particularly significant and could explain why five mosques in that one place alone have demolished. Hamad is one of the newbuild towns in Bahrain with a mixed community of Shia and Sunni. The ruthless targeting of one section of the community is being seen as an attempt to drive a wedge of fear and distrust between them.

Pro-democracy activists point to the government’s announcement last week that all buildings, including places of worship, are liable for demolition if they are found to not have a licence from the Municipal and Urban Planning Affairs Ministry. This, they say, is just a way of legalizing the targeting and destruction of Shia mosques.

Since that announcement, the number of Shia mosque demolitions seems to have increased rapidly.

Another pro-democracy source pointed to a more sinister motive. “The regime wants to start a sectarian war between Shia and Sunni. They are humiliating the Shia trying to make them take revenge on Sunnis.”

Nabeel Rajab says that despite the provocation by pro-state forces, an all-out sectarian war is unlikely.

“Bahrain is not a tribal society. Shia and Sunni communities have lived side by side peacefully here for centuries, even before the Khalifa family arrived some 220 years ago,” said Rajab.

“So I don’t think these communities will start fighting because there is too much common ancestry between them. However, there is a danger of conflict between the Shia and the tens of thousands of new Sunni nationals that the regime has brought in from neighbouring Arab countries over the past 20 years to fill the ranks of the army and police forces.

“The regime would like to see a sectarian conflict blow up because that would distract from the common struggle for democracy against the rulers. It would also serve to justify the state of emergency that the regime has imposed, the brutal crackdown on human rights, and the involvement of other Gulf armies in Bahrain.”

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are designated as key allies by Washington and London, and are important export markets for American and British weapons manufacturers. The US recently signed off on a \$60 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, and its Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, which is seen as a bulwark against Iran’s growing influence in the region. Despite the escalation of violence against civilians in Bahrain by Saudi and Bahraini state forces, Washington and London have remained tightlipped. Both Western governments have pointedly refused to condemn the actions of their Gulf allies.

The unprecedented bulldozing of mosques by Arab military forces has disturbing echoes of similar violations by Israeli troops in Palestinian territories. The development in Bahrain comes in the wake of diplomatic cables disclosed earlier this month by the whistle-blowing website, Wikileaks, in which Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa boasted in 2005 to the then US ambassador, William Monroe, of the kingdom’s close ties with the Israeli state and its intelligence agency Mossad.

News update:

Since being interviewed by Global Research, Bahraini human rights activist Nabeel Rajab and his family were attacked in their home in the early hours of April 18. Rajab and his family, including his elderly mother, are suffering from the effects of asphyxiation after unknown assailants threw three teargas canisters into his home in Budaiya while the family was sleeping. Rajab, who is president of the Bahrain Human Rights Centre and is also on the board of directors for Human Rights Watch’s middle east section, has been a fearless critic of the Bahraini regime over its maltreatment of detainees. The internationally acclaimed rights activist is facing a summons from the state military prosecutor and possible detention after he published photographs showing signs of torture on the body of Bahraini man Ali Issa Sager (31) who died while in state custody last week. [1]

Notes:

[1]

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Nabeel-Rajab/194515507249804#!/media/set/fbx/?set=a.203298013038220.49480.194515507249804>

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Finian Cunningham](#)**

About the author:

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.

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca