

Teenager Shot Dead in Bahrain Protest Against US-Backed Monarchy

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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Security forces shot to death a 16-year-old boy in Bahrain Thursday, while scores of other people were wounded and arrested in mass protests against the US-backed monarchy.

The teenager, identified as Ali Ahmed Ibrahim al-Jazeera, was killed by a shotgun blast fired at close range in the village of Daih, west of the Bahraini capital of Manama.

Protests took place in Manama and throughout the poor villages home to the country's Shia population—70 percent of Bahrain's citizenry—marking the second anniversary of the February 14, 2011 uprising against the ruling Al Khalifa Sunni dynasty headed by King Hamad.

Inspired by the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, protesters occupied Manama's Pearl Roundabout two years ago, modeling their action on the Egyptian workers and youth who encamped in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Brutally repressed by Bahraini security forces who cleared the roundabout and sent in tanks after three days, the demonstrators returned and continued a peaceful occupation until March 14, 2011, when the so-called Peninsula Shield Force, made up of troops from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, poured across the causeway from Saudi Arabia. The encampment was bulldozed and its tents set on fire, while the iconic monument at the roundabout's center was torn down.

In the course of the protests then and since, at least 80 people have been killed by security forces, while hundreds more were arrested, subjected to torture and military trials and then imprisoned for opposing the regime. The prisoners include doctors and nurses who were punished solely for treating those wounded by the security forces in the crushing of the Pearl Roundabout protests. Many more people were fired from their jobs for supporting the protests.

Last month, Bahrain's high court upheld sentences handed down by military tribunals against 13 leaders of the 2011 movement, some of whom were given life in prison.

While the original protests called for equal rights—in a country where discrimination against the Shia majority has been compared to apartheid—and a constitutional monarchy, increasingly demonstrators taking to the streets are demanding the downfall of the king and the House of Khalifa.

"We are angry," a 17-year-old demonstrator told Agence France-Presse. "We have no jobs and the regime must fall."

Security forces fired tear gas, rubber bullets and shotgun shells at the demonstrators leaving many wounded. The police also arrested three Bahraini photojournalists while they were doing their job in Daih.

The regime's interior ministry issued statements condemning those responsible for "inflammatory invitations to marches, sit-ins and civil disobedience" and reporting that protesters "since yesterday evening committed acts of sabotage, blocked streets, closed major roads and committed acts of violence." It claimed that one incident involved some 300 demonstrators "attacking security forces using iron bars and Molotov cocktails."

More demonstrations have been called for Friday to mark the anniversary of the 2011 uprising. The protests have led to shops and businesses closing down throughout the small Persian Gulf kingdom.

The Khalifah regime has accused the demonstrators of working in league with Iran, Bahrain's predominantly Shia neighbor across the Persian Gulf, though no evidence has ever been produced of such links.

The government has also accused the demonstrators of attempting to interfere with the so-called dialogue that the regime initiated last week with parliamentary parties, including al-Wefaq, the conservative Shia opposition party that resigned from parliament during the 2011 round of protests.

Those who have taken to the streets of Bahrain, however, see the "dialogue" as an irrelevant ploy staged by the monarchy in an attempt to lend it a veneer of reasonableness and reform. This was also the case with a commission of inquiry it appointed, which acknowledged excesses in the 2011 repression and made a series of recommendations that have been ignored. Both of these maneuvers have been staged at the behest of Washington, the regime's principal international backer, in an attempt to improve its international image.

The Wefaq politicians are calling for a "real constitutional monarchy," with an elected prime minister to replace Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, King Hamad's uncle, who has occupied the post since the country was granted independence from Britain 42 years ago. They are also demanding equal access to government jobs and equal representation in a parliament rigged to favor the Sunni minority and dominated by an upper house appointed by the monarchy.

The regime, however, has cast itself as merely a mediator in talks between the different parties, thereby trying to define the issues largely in sectarian terms—Shia versus Sunni—with itself in the middle. This assures that nothing will come out of these meetings, which many believe were called to divert attention from protests the monarchy knew were coming.

"There are many people who think that the regime is not serious about the dialogue. We partly share the same feeling," said Sheikh Ali Salman, Wefaq's clerical leader. He has warned demonstrators against "going to the extreme" of calling for the toppling of the 200-year-old ruling monarchy. This advice has been ignored by those in the streets, whose most popular chant is "Down with Hamad."

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland issued a hypocritical

statement Thursday noting the killing of the teenager in Bahrain and declaring the Obama administration's "regret." She went on to place the principal blame on the protesters themselves, expressing Washington's "concern about continuing incidents of violence" and urging "those demonstrating to do so peacefully."

The US has backed the monarchical dictatorship in Bahrain since the bloody suppression of the protests two years ago. This is because Bahrain hosts the US Fifth Fleet. The naval base there is seen as strategically vital to US preparations for war against Iran.

Last May, Washington resumed arms sales to the Bahraini regime after a brief freeze on a \$53 million weapons package, sending the clearest message that the Obama administration endorsed the repression.

The American support for the two-year-long crackdown by the regime in Manama exposes the pretense that Washington has conducted interventions first in Libya and now Syria out of sympathy for democracy or human rights.

In both its support for bloody repression to keep a sclerotic and corrupt monarchy in power against the manifest will of the majority of the people of Bahrain and in its funding and arming of a sectarian civil war to topple the Assad regime in Syria, US imperialism is pursuing wholly predatory interests at the expense of the peoples of the entire region.

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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