

# “Thwarted Arab Spring”: Bahrain’s Courageous Doctors

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Doctors and nurses in the Middle East have a long and proud tradition of treating the ill, regardless of the situation. In ninth-century Baghdad, for example, Hunayn ibn Ishaq was the Caliph’s physician. The Caliph asked this physician to prepare a poison to kill his enemies. The physician refused, risking his life, and was eventually jailed for one year. After serving his sentence, the Caliph inquired as to why he refused. The physician replied, “My profession is instituted for the benefit of humanity and limited to their relief and cure.”

So the doctors and other healthcare providers in Bahrain who treated the injured demonstrators were acting not only in the noblest tradition of the Hippocratic Oath but also in keeping with centuries-old Arab tradition. Medical ethics requires all physicians to be medically neutral toward those they treat. Last February, Bahrain’s citizens joined the Arab Spring by holding massive demonstrations against the country’s corrupt, minority royal government. Bahrain’s security forces, assisted by Saudi-led troops sent by the Gulf Cooperation Council, brutally suppressed the peaceful demonstrations by force, resulting in the deaths of around 30 people, as well as hundreds of others wounded and arrested. At least 1,200 people were dismissed from their jobs. Opposition leaders were arrested, quickly tried, and sent to jail. Many detainees were tortured, and some women were sexually abused.

The government of Bahrain soon turned its attention to doctors and other healthcare providers, arresting, jailing, and torturing those accused of treating protesters. One female doctor told NPR that she was tortured and threatened with rape. In the same story, a man claimed that he was beaten unconscious. The authorities threatened the arrested individuals, saying that the security forces would arrest and torture members of their families if they didn’t sign a confession.

The doctors and nurses in Bahrain have called for support from the international community, especially from the United States. But the U.S. State Department has been muted in its

comments about Bahrain's abuse of hospital staff. This has led some medical professionals and other observers to lament that if such abuses had occurred in Syria or Iran, the United States would have condemned them vocally and emphatically.

U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring has been two-faced and unprincipled since its outbreak. When a hostile regime – in Syria or Iran, for example – has abused human rights, the administration has taken the moral high ground. However, in the case of friendly regimes – like those in Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – the administration has toned down its criticism or remained silent altogether. In the case of Bahrain, the United States still maintains a naval base there with 15,000 personnel.

The British Medical Association (BMA) issued a statement strongly condemning Bahrain's behavior, stating, "BMA is shocked that these doctors are being persecuted for acting in accordance with their code of ethics." The World Medical Association issued a similar statement. However, the American Medical Association merely invited physicians, if they wish, to write directly to Bahrain's rulers to voice their opinion. The U.S. bioethics associations are silent.

Over the course of history, humanity has carved out zones of ethical conduct, whether in the conduct of war or the treatment of the sick and wounded. Medical ethics has a long and honorable history that U.S. officials and medical professionals must uphold for the doctors and nurses in Bahrain. Otherwise, the Arab Spring won't bloom for long.

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