

Witnessing Human Rights Violations in Bahrain

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Global Research, February 20, 2012

[Waging Nonviolence](#) 18 February 2012

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

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)



A cloud of tear gas disperses a peaceful march to the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrain, on February 13. Photo by Wafa A.S. Alnoimi.

On the long flight to the Gulf Kingdom of Bahrain on February 10, I had been studying the Lonely Planet guide to the region in order to be able to explain at the airport, if needed, that I had come as a tourist. As it happened, while most passengers on our plane sailed through passport control, my travel companion Linda Sartor and I were pulled from the line and subjected to a closer examination. My sketchy knowledge of the historic and cultural sights that I had come to see was good enough to satisfy official scrutiny. We were granted tourist visas and sent on our way.

That we had come as tourists was true. We had intentionally neglected to mention, though, that we had been invited to Bahrain along with a few other international activists to monitor the government's response to demonstrations marking the one year anniversary of Bahrain's "Arab Spring" pro-democracy uprising on February 14. This demand for basic rights was brutally suppressed by Bahrain's police and military backed by the army of Saudi Arabia.

We certainly would have been barred entry to the country had our full intent been told—but,

as Daniel Berrigan once mused, “How much truth do we owe them?” In fact, our invitation from Nabeel Rajav, president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, came because the government had made it known that observers from established human rights organizations would not be granted visas until the next month and that access to the country by the international media was to be severely limited during that period. The regime’s resolve that there be no witnesses to the events surrounding the anniversary made our presence for those days all the more crucial.

The morning after our arrival, we met with local activists and the small group of U.S. citizens who had come before us. Before long we were in the streets of Manama, the capital city, accompanying a march to the Pearl Roundabout, the focal point of last year’s demonstration. This peaceful march of men, women and children was quickly set upon by police in full riot gear and dispersed with tear gas and percussion grenades. Our first encounter with the Bahraini police appeared to be vicious, but our local friends assured us that our presence was a restraining factor. Two of the Americans we had just met, Huwaida Arraf and Radhika Sainath, were taken into custody at this march and later that evening deported, the government said, for activities not consistent with their status as tourists.

Our small group, called [Witness Bahrain](#), grew over the next days, even as several friends who traveled to join us were turned away at the airport by a regime made even more hyper-vigilant after deporting Huwaida and Radhika. While being careful to remain at large at least until the events of the 14th, we toured Manama and the villages over the next couple of days, hearing testimony of government abuses and accompanying demonstrations and marches.



An armored car patrols the streets of Manama. Photo by the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

On February 13, Tighe Barry and Medea Benjamin of the peace group Code Pink joined us, and our Bahraini guide Wafa took some of us on a tour of the zoo and the National Museum. In the afternoon we witnessed a march of tens of thousands through the main thoroughfares of Manama. This march was tolerated by the authorities until a large group split off to walk

to the Pearl Roundabout. The police response was immediate and appalling. Tear gas in Bahrain is not used as a means of crowd control so much as collective punishment—crowds dispersed by gas are not allowed to escape but are pursued, cornered and gassed again. Many are injured by direct hits from gas canisters and percussion grenades. We witnessed beatings and heard reports of injuries by birdshot and rubber bullets.

On the actual anniversary, the police had the country locked down. Patrols of armored cars sped through the streets of Manama and the roads out of the villages were blocked by tanks. Many hundreds still made it to the streets, many were injured, many arrested. Six more of us were taken by the authorities.

In my case, finally getting pinched by the Bahraini police was anticlimactic. Four of us Americans with a Bahraini friend were taking a back way along a quiet street to catch up with others to attempt reaching the roundabout when a passing police patrol stopped us and asked for identification. One more time, we explained that we were there as tourists. “If you are tourists,” we were asked, “why do you have gas masks?”

A few hours later we were in a police station where we met two more from our group who had been captured under more dramatic circumstances. One by one, we were summoned to talk with representatives from the Ministry of Information and were told that we would be put on a flight to London at 2 a.m. as our visas had been cancelled. Our claim to be tourists was regarded as a deception by the authorities. My protestations to the contrary were to no avail.

Bahrain is a tiny island kingdom that is home to about a million people—half of whom are not citizens—that is visited by 8 million tourists a year. Many of these, we were told, are Saudis drawn there by the night life and legal alcohol. Others visit the museums and beaches. In the brochures produced by the government, tourists are encouraged to meet the friendly people of Bahrain. This is what we did and it was for this that we were deported.

We were privileged to tour this beautiful and afflicted country and to live the reality of its people, if only for a little while. Not content with having our photos taken with camels, we spoke with emergency room doctors who, after treating victims of last year’s crackdown, were themselves tortured and charged with sedition. We met with mothers mourning their children who were killed or imprisoned, and workers barred from practicing their professions for being in favor of freedom.

We were in Bahrain as tourists, not of the malls and golf courses and museums but of the streets and villages where real people live and struggle. Anyone who visits Bahrain and never gets a whiff of tear gas is a poor tourist, indeed. To the police who arrested us, a tourist with a gas mask is a hopeless contradiction and proof of culpability. For the tourist who wants to learn the present reality of Bahrain, a gas mask is more indispensable than sunscreen.

The faithfulness and solidarity of the people of Bahrain will prevail over the perfidy and cruelty of its backward and crude monarchy, supported as it is only by the brute force of its sponsors, the governments of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. “Sumoud,” meaning be strong, hold fast, is the Arabic word by which the resisters in Bahrain greet and encourage one another. Their peaceful strength is a challenge and an inspiration as we continue our common struggle on the far ends of the globe. *Sumoud*.

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