
Britain's hypocrisy over Gulf links

Alastair Sloan



MIDDLE EAST MONITOR

The Middle East Monitor is a not-for-profit policy research institute that provides research, information and analyses of primarily the Palestine-Israel conflict. It also provides briefings on other Middle East issues. Its outputs are made available for use by journalists, academics and politicians with an interest in the Middle East and North Africa region.

MEMO aims to influence policy and the public agenda from the perspective of social justice, human rights and international law. This is essential to obtain equality, security and social justice across the region, especially in Palestine.



AUTHOR PROFILE

Alastair Sloan is a freelance journalist, commentator & social entrepreneur. His work appears in several print and digital publications, including The Guardian, The Huffington Post, The Evening Standard, openDemocracy and many more.

Title: *Britain's hypocrisy over Gulf links*

Cover image: *David Cameron, British Prime Minister, with Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan, the President of the United Arab Emirates; May 1, 2013*

First Published: January 2014

Copyright © Middle East Monitor / MEMO Publishers

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

This report is available to download free of charge on the Middle East Monitor Website: www.middleeastmonitor.com



e: info@memopublishers.com
w: www.memopublishers.com

Britain's hypocrisy over Gulf links

Alastair Sloan

Britain's hypocrisy over Gulf links

"Our foreign policy should always have consistent support for human rights... as its irreducible core," claimed Foreign Secretary William Hague when he took office in 2010. Despite the rhetoric, which echoed that of his Labour Party predecessor, Britain enjoys cosy relationships with several dictators, suppressive regimes and states where human rights are largely ignored.

Nowhere is Britain's hypocrisy more apparent than in its relationship with the Gulf States of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates; both regimes are rotten bedfellows for the UK.

"Establishment" organisations such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the British Army, Buckingham Palace and the British Museum are all playing their part in the relationship, while the arms trade to both countries is a key commercial concern for UK plc. Meanwhile, both the UAE and Bahrain are co-ordinating a clumsy PR campaign to sanitise their human rights reputation.

Political dissent in both Bahrain and the UAE has been brutally repressed, loudly on the streets of Bahrain and quietly in the state prisons of the Emirates. Though both states tried to have their own "Arab Spring," the brutal suppression by the ruling monarchies provoked no significant outrage from Britain, despite support for other Arab Spring revolutions in Libya and Tunisia. In both Gulf States a large population of migrant workers are abused routinely.

Complex politics in Bahrain

The popular analysis of the political situation in Bahrain is of a majority Shia population squaring up to a tiny Sunni ruling elite, resulting in continued unrest since the Pearl Roundabout protests in 2011. The narrative is that Saudi Arabia intervened to help the

Sunni monarchy to retain power, while Iran meddles by funding Shia opposition groups.

However, as Ronald E. Neumann, who served as US ambassador to Bahrain between 2001 and 2004, revealed in a lengthy Foreign Policy essay in April 2013, the situation is far more complex. Bahrain's intelligence services have been aware since around 2008 of a significant increase in Sunni popular unrest and opposition to the government, an element of the uprising which has gone largely unreported in the West. One Sunni demonstration attracted between 120,000 and 400,000 supporters. Meanwhile, Shia extremism is not to be under-estimated; a car bombing recently was attributed to a Shia militant group.

Partly as a result of divisions in the opposition, combined with international support for the status quo, political reform in Bahrain is stagnating and the economy is in tailspin.

In fairness, Neumann, as well as officials in the British government, argues that legal reforms won't happen quickly – with judges needing to be trained, for example – and some say that the increasing demands from Shia groups are greedy. It's unrealistic to expect a centuries-old monarchy to implement so much change quickly. Richard Ottaway MP, who heads the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in parliament, told Middle East Monitor (MEMO) that “progress is being made, but it certainly won't happen overnight.”

He objected to the idea of stopping shipments of arms to Bahrain, as well as the UAE, contesting that, “The UK has one of the strictest arms export controls systems in the world.” It would be “hypocrisy”, he claimed, to stop arms sales while Britain continues to use Gulf oil unchecked.

While Bahraini reform bobs in the doldrums, state-sponsored violence against Shia protesters is continuing. The use of teargas has attracted particular criticism from human rights groups, who allege that it has caused 39 civilian deaths during the unrest. There are numerous further reports of maiming and blinding as a result of CS gas, some of which has been manufactured in the UK. Rather than using it to disperse violent protests (in line with international

39 civilians died during the 2008 Bahrain unrest, in which teargas was used

law), police are reportedly entering Shia villages in the middle of the night and firing the canisters indiscriminately.

In October 2013, a leaked document revealed the government had ordered 1.6m teargas canisters, an order outnumbering the resident population of Bahrain. Campaigners were successful in persuading the South Korean government to put a hold on the shipment in January.

Police are also understood to be torturing opposition members, dozens of whom have been sentenced for expressing dissent or organising protests. Even doctors who treated protesters, several from outside Bahrain, have been imprisoned, beaten and tortured.

Sleep deprivation techniques including the use of cold water, physical beatings and loud noises, have been reported. According to the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, torture during the 2011 uprising also involved cigarette burns and electric shocks, inflicted on at least 100 detainees. Some reported having hosepipes and even the ends of rifle barrels pushed into their anuses. Political prisoners were subject to mock executions, stripped naked and then beaten. Some were forced to clean lavatories with their bare hands or, in one reported case, forced to eat their own faeces.

Investigation into torture

Responding to severe criticism in the international media, King Hamad of Bahrain appointed a commission of international legal and human rights experts to investigate the unrest of February and March 2011 to ascertain what had happened.

In November, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) released its report confirming that government personnel had carried out widespread human rights violations, including systematic torture, the demolition of Shia religious structures and politically-motivated mass sackings of employees from government-run and owned institutions.

The UK ambassador to Bahrain says the acceptance of findings by the BICI demonstrated “the [Bahrain] government’s

commitment to implement a wide-ranging reform programme.” An official statement issued by the embassy claimed, “The British government is playing its part in assisting the Bahraini government in the justice, rule of law and human rights sectors, as well as helping with security sector reform.”

Despite the UK government “assisting” with this process, activists say that seventeen of the twenty-five recommendations, which include commitments to investigate police brutality, compensate bereaved families and curb state security powers, have been either actively violated or simply not acted upon. Furthermore, as time passes since the unrest at Pearl Roundabout, the Bahrain government is prepared to be more cavalier with rejecting British assistance.

Pete Weatherby QC, a leading British human rights lawyer who has visited Bahrain in the past, was supposed to attend the trial of an opposition politician as an international observer in December. He had also arranged meetings with government officials to discuss the BICI follow-up report but his visa application was rejected when he landed in Bahrain in December 2013, and he was deported immediately.

Amnesty International claims the incident is indicative of how reforms are not taking place. “We view this incident as a clear indicator that the authorities have something to hide from the international community,” said a spokesperson. Despite criticism, the Bahraini government claims that reforms are taking place.

Political abuses in the UAE

In the UAE, political abuses by the ruling monarchy are less bombastic but no less sinister. Torture occurs routinely in a state prison outside Abu Dhabi and a source within the prison told MEMO that many of the torturers are Nepalese, raising the possibility that torture is being perpetrated by ex-British Army Ghurkhas. According to Rori Donaghy, director of the London-based Emirates Centre for Human Rights, “The authorities like to hire expat non-Muslims for security work; they have also hired Colombian mercenaries to help with internal security.”

*Bahrain ordered
1.6m teargas
canisters from
South Korea - a
number larger
than the resident
population of the
country*

The UAE has been criticised for putting 94 critics of the government on trial, many of whom report having been tortured or forced to sign false confessions. The men were members of a peaceful Islamist group.

“With well over 100 political prisoners and a national population of fewer than 1 million,” said Donaghy, “the UAE now possesses one of the highest per capita rates of political prisoners in the region.”

Ahmed Mansour, a UAE national who led calls for political reform in 2011, told MEMO of his harassment: “I was imprisoned for several months and assaulted twice by unknown people. My car was stolen and the police refuse to provide me with a report for the insurance. My passport has been confiscated. A cheque was stolen from my cheque book for about \$140,000.” Federal Criminal Laboratory experts told him that it was a highly professional theft and that his signature was forged. “I’m going to continue talking about human rights in the UAE, though,” he insisted.

Human Rights Watch condemned Mansour’s trial as “grossly unfair” as well as noting a “public relations campaign” to smear him and his family.

After three Britons were tortured in police custody in Dubai in 2012, David Cameron raised the case with his UAE counterparts. Although the men were eventually pardoned and released, their horror stories of brutal torture have not yet been investigated by the Dubai government. They claimed that they were beaten repeatedly and that police used a cattle-prod to jab them in their genitalia.

“It is disgraceful that Dubai’s authorities have failed to carry out a proper investigation into the 2012 torture of three British tourists, as they are obliged to under international law,” Donald Campbell from the London-based charity Reprieve told MEMO.

3 Britons tortured by the UAE police in 2012, claimed cattle-prods were used to jab them in their genitalia

A subsequent investigation by Reprieve and the Emirates Centre for Human Rights, whose website was banned recently in the UAE, alleged that three-quarters of prisoners in Dubai Central Jail report having been tortured or abused.

Mistreatment of migrant labourers in Bahrain and the UAE

The treatment of migrant construction and domestic workers in Bahrain and the UAE has also provoked ongoing criticism from human rights organisations and the international media. Typically, workers travel from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, as well as the Philippines and Indonesia. In recent years, African states like Uganda, Kenya, Ghana and Ethiopia have been sending more and more workers.

Migrant labour makes up between 75 and 90 per cent of the workforce. David Wearing, an expert in Gulf affairs at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), described the situation thus: "The UAE and Bahrain pretty much import their proletariat."

Impoverished workers head to the Gulf alone, leaving their families behind. Their plan is to send remittances back to support the families, but often these plans backfire. The tactics used by the recruiting companies are fairly sinister; recruiters spend time scouting out villages in economically deprived areas, and when they hear of a bereavement in the family or of a household in financial trouble, they approach with an offer of employment abroad.

On arrival in the UAE or Bahrain, passports are confiscated quickly and visas are tied to their employers under the notorious qafala system; construction workers work six days per week and domestic workers all seven. Often workers have been forced into debt.

The men live in purpose-built (although often shoddy) labour camps. MEMO was told that it is commonplace for eight men

to share a room designed for two. A year ago, thirteen Indians who were living in a Bahraini labour camp were killed in a fire, and the building was later found to be unsafe. Though this was a particularly high death toll, there are two or three similar fires each year.

Complicity of British organisations

British organisations continue to play a leading role in construction projects where abuses have been condemned by several bodies. The British Museum in London, for example, is involved closely with the Saadiyat Island project in Abu Dhabi, a vast construction site where branches of the Guggenheim and Louvre are being built next to five-star hotels and shopping malls.

A leading attraction will be the Sheikh Zaayad Museum, filled with art and historical objects loaned at lucrative prices by the British Museum to the Abu Dhabi government. Twenty-four full-time staff members at the British Museum are working on the project, which will last ten years, and while the museum in London declined to comment on how much the involvement with Saadiyat Island is worth, informed sources have confirmed to MEMO that it is a figure in the “tens of millions.”

A similar source also said that after criticism began of the British Museum’s work on Saadiyat Island, an emergency meeting was held for all staff the next day and consultants were put under strict instructions not to talk to the media.

In the context of this lucrative deal, the museum appears to be turning a blind eye to the lack of progress in improving conditions for the migrant workers on the project. In a statement to MEMO, a press spokesperson claimed that construction on the museum they were consulting on was yet to begin, and that “continuous improvements have been made” in worker conditions.

However, an investigation for the Guardian, published in December 2013, revealed that the situation was far worse than a government-commissioned report had described. Dozens

Around 300 exiled Bahraini activists are thought to be seeking refuge in the UK

of workers were deported last year for striking over pay and conditions. Men were seen jumping out of windows to avoid riots. A worker who claimed that he lost his leg while building luxury villas has been forced to live on the top floor of a migrant camp for a year. His claim for compensation and request for ground-floor accommodation have been rejected.

UK-Gulf relations

Around 300 exiled Bahraini activists are now thought to be seeking refuge in the UK. The Foreign Office stubbornly refuses to engage with them, whereas in Washington, various political opposition parties and human rights organisations have met several times with the US State Department. A prominent Bahraini activist living in exile in London said that not one of her phone calls or emails to the Foreign Office had received a response.

A group of British expats also report “negligence” on the part of the British Embassy in Bahrain after they were prevented from leaving the country because of debt. One told the Observer: “The embassy is a total and absolute waste of time, as is the FCO. They are not interested. They have done nothing in fear of upsetting their hosts. This is not an embassy, this is a trade mission.”

The UK enjoys a very close relationship with both countries, in commercial, defence, cultural and diplomatic terms. In Bahrain this derives from a colonial legacy; in the UAE the presence of 100,000 British expats makes bilateral relations a key priority for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as significant defence interests. An expeditionary squadron of the RAF is now based in Dubai. The British ambassador to the UAE describes the relationship as “incredibly close.”

In 2012 UK exports to Bahrain increased by around 25 per cent. Many of these exports are in the arms sector, a prominent British industry which enjoys specialist support from the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which has deployed a Trade & Investment team to Bahrain to help facilitate deals. In October 2012 a memorandum of understanding on military co-operation

*100,000 British
expats live in the
UAE*

was signed between Bahrain and the UK, which included areas such as intelligence exchange and military training.

In 2008, the UK Trade and Investment's Defence and Security Organisation (a government body), identified Bahrain as a key market for the UK defence industry, warranting special support, and promotional efforts have continued since. It is understood that the Bahrain air force wants to replace a squadron of aging F-5 fighters from 2018; while it is considering a second batch of F-16s from American manufacturers, Bahrain's King Hamad expressed a liking for the British-made Typhoon when he met PM Cameron in London last August. In Dubai, British Aerospace is seeing stiff competition from both American and French companies, and David Cameron diverted from his recent visit to Sri Lanka to make a surprise visit at the Dubai Air Show, drumming up support for British interests.

Bahrain has been identified as a key market for the UK defence industry

According to research by Campaign against the Arms Trade, between January 2010 and June 2013 the UK government approved 118 arms export licences to Bahrain, totalling £21m worth of goods. In addition there have been 64 licences granted for dual-use exports, amounting to over £18m.

British companies, including BAE Systems, exported small arms, ammunition, tear gas and smoke grenades, some of which are understood to have been used during subsequent suppression of the civilian population by the Bahrain police.

More worryingly, speculation is mounting that British arms that have been shipped to the UAE appear to have been shipped onwards to Egypt and used for internal suppression. As MEMO revealed in November, the exiled Egyptian presidential candidate Ahmad Shafiq authorised a shipment from Dubai to Egypt of armaments.

Gulf PR

Both Bahrain and the Emirates use propaganda campaigns in their own countries and hire London-based PR firms to sanitise their reputation abroad. In Bahrain, international observers have been denied access to the country repeatedly.

It is suspected that the UAE has set up a human rights organisation to issue favourable reports about its own human rights situation. The Global Network for Rights & Development, a Norway-based organisation, issued a report in November which ranked the UAE “first among Arab countries and 14th globally for respecting human rights.” Bloggers have speculated that the report was bogus.

Nevertheless, the report received widespread coverage in the UAE and Arab press, although it was not covered in the Western media. The GNRD claimed to have worked with 2000 “international observers” to compile the report, though no details of who these observers are were available on their website at the time of writing.

The methodology, according to reports in several UAE newspapers, scored the UAE favourably for freedom of expression, the right to assembly, the right to liberty and the right to be free from discrimination. The results of the GNDR report are surprising, given that Freedom House, a US-based think-tank which has been ranking countries globally for human rights since 1972, in collaboration with Harvard University, rate the United Arab Emirates below Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya for press freedom and both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch warned of “systematic torture” in the country throughout 2013.

After repeated attempts, MEMO was finally able to contact an employee of GNRD. She said that she was unable to share details of any of the “2000 international observers” referenced in press articles about the report, nor share a press release about the report, nor share the report itself. She also would not share any details about how the ratings had been calculated.

The spokesperson declined to comment on the discrepancy between the findings of Freedom House, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, compared with those in the GNDR report. MEMO was unable to find any press coverage of the report outside of the Gulf States.

The British Army attracted widespread criticism in February 2013 when it renamed a hall at Sandhurst Academy after King Hamad of Bahrain instead of Mons, a battle that took place in Belgium in which 1,600 British soldiers died. The Bahraini ruler gave millions to Sandhurst, the Daily Telegraph reported. The military academy, located in Surrey, also received a £15 million donation from the United Arab Emirates to build an accommodation block, which will be named after the Emirates' founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan.

The British Army is not the only UK-based organisation to receive significant donations from the UAE and effectively sell naming rights. The London School of Economics, facing reductions in government funding (which now accounts for just 15 per cent of its turnover), received a £2.5m donation from Sheikh Zayed in 2006, and is understood to have received more funding since, naming a lecture hall after him. Sheikh Zayed has previously sponsored research claiming that Zionists were responsible for the Holocaust and that the US military had carried out the September 11 attacks.

Finally, Andrew Gilligan, a reporter with the Daily Telegraph who was sacked from the BBC for “sexing up” stories, reported that the Emirates Centre for Human Rights, which has been campaigning on behalf of many torture victims in the UAE, was a “terrorist-linked group” with “undeclared links to the Muslim Brotherhood.” He alleged that the group invited a speaker who forecast the “coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies.” The speaker was in fact Christopher Davidson, a well-respected academic from Durham University and best-selling author, who described the attack as a “smear” and said that he hadn’t been contacted before Gilligan ran the piece.

Sandhurst Academy received a £15 million donation from the UAE

Rori Donaghy told MEMO that he was misquoted by Gilligan and that the allegations of extremism were completely false. He added, “It seems strange that Gilligan, a reporter with a focus on current affairs in the UK, chose to report about a tiny human rights organisation focusing on a single Gulf state.”

Middle East Monitor understands that press officers at the UAE embassy in London and Cairo issued a memo to dozens of journalists on the same day, highlighting the news that the Emirates Centre for Human Rights had now been described as having links to terror organisations.

The Daily Telegraph, despite publishing Gilligan’s allegation that the centre had “links to a terrorist group” subsequently quoted Donaghy in relation to human rights stories in UAE, suggesting that the newspaper now views him as a credible source. Bahrain is believed to have spent over £7m since 2011 hiring London-based PR firm Bell Pottinger to polish its PR image abroad, as well as over £9m paid to M&C Saatchi, also based in London.

It is clear that human rights are not, in fact, at the “irreducible core” of policy for the British government. In supporting two despotic regimes in the Gulf, at the expense of human rights, Britain has favoured trade deals over morals. Bahrain and the UAE have done a good job in sanitising their image abroad, making it easier for the British government to work with them without redress from the public.

MEMO ●
MIDDLE EAST MONITOR
Creating New Perspectives

middleeastmonitor.com