

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for Promoting

ZK.9.b.14441

Support to Israel and dictatorships:

Why the US has lost in the Middle East

The sudden eruption of the Palestinian conflict caught many by surprise. But for those who have lived under occupation for the past half a century or those who live in the Palestinian Diaspora, it was only expected given the failure of the peace process to deliver.

The public expression of anger and outrage at the massacre of the Palestinian youths by the Israeli soldiers has been particularly strong. The US President, Bill Clinton, who had hoped he would leave the White House after he had achieved a comprehensive and working settlement of this issue did not get his way. He has now resigned himself to accepting a humiliating exit with the most important dream far away from reality.

For Ehud Barak, his name will be associated with the total collapse of the process started by his predecessors. His name will now be associated with Ariel Sharon, the architect of the Sabra and Chatila massacres in 1982. The international opinion has now shifted against the Israelis who sent their helicopter gunships and tanks to crush to death scores of Palestinian youths and demolish many homes.

But for Yasser Arafat, the newly-launched uprising has been a saviour. He was seen by many as a weak leader who had often been bypassed by events and manoeuvres. Now his image has changed. At Sharm El Sheikh, the coast Egyptian town where the latest American venture to salvage the Israeli government failed, he did not totally sell out to the bigger powers at the table of negotiations.

To the Palestinians, the world community has failed them drastically and left them to the merciless Israelis. The natural reaction of this nation would have been a total and uncompromising rejection of the Israeli policies and an ultimatum to pull their troops from the territories occupied in 1967. This would have been in line with the UN resolutions 242 and 338.

The United Nations has been at the forefront to force Saddam Hussain to abide by the UN resolutions against his government. Economic sanctions have been in force since 1990 while Iraqis died of hunger and illness. The Arab countries also took

part in blockading Iraq. In contrast, the Israelis seem to get away with the most vicious murders, and contempt of the international community.

The United States is seen as the main power behind the UN policies towards both Iraq and Israel. While it chose to take uncompromising stands against Iraq, it has failed to take any step to stop the massacre of the Palestinians. Instead it has bullied members of the Security Council into ignoring the fate of the Palestinians and letting Israel off the hook. Jerusalem is part of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 and, apart from the US, no other country has accepted Israeli sovereignty over the holy city.

Members of the Security Council still consider the occupation illegal and demand that Israel pulls its forces out of Jerusalem and the whole of West Bank and the Golan Heights. The political, military and financial support by the United States has hardened the Israeli stands and prevented a real solution in the region.

The world community has not, however, taken strong stands to ensure Israeli compliance with the said resolutions. The Palestinians are the only people in the world who have been forced to live in refugee camps for more than half a century.

In Bahrain, which has been the scene of public demonstrations in the past six years, people have reacted angrily to the Israeli occupational policies. Having experienced similar atrocities, albeit on smaller scale, the Bahrainis have effectively relived their own recent experience.

Bahrainis know what it means to have foreign troops firing at locals and killing them. They appreciate what it means to be displaced from their homeland and understand the psychological trauma of a people who stood empty-handed to face an oppressive occupational regime.

This is why the Bahraini demonstrations were different from others that took place elsewhere. The participants in these demonstrations have first hand experiences in stone-throwing against foreign troops and were subjected to interrogation and torture by foreigners. They were also banished from their homeland and their lands

confiscated by the rulers or re-located to foreign settlers.

The Americans have become worried about their position in the Middle East. This has become more serious especially after the attack on their cruiser, the Cole, allegedly by two suicidal bombers. They have now alerted their personnel in the Gulf to take extra precautions to avoid being trapped in unnecessary difficulty. It is unlikely that major attacks against the Americans will take place at least in Bahrain where the American installations are highly fortified and where the people are not known for their violent nature. The government will, however, try to cash on the crisis, especially as it finds itself accused of inhumane treatment of its own citizens. The opposition has called for civil protests against the Israelis and in support of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. Students, preachers, intellectuals, poets and other professionals have joined forces to present a unified stand against aggression. The government, on the other hand, has attempted to hijack these activities but to no avail. It therefore started attacking pro-Palestinian demonstrations that took to the streets on 20, 22 and 27 October.

It is likely that the situation will remain tense for some time to come especially if the Israelis have not ceased their attacks on civilians. It is in the interest of the Americans to stop their unequivocal support to the Israelis and take a neutral stand in the conflict like the other powers. It must have realised by now that imposed peace is as bad as imposed war. What is wanted is a just peace which caters for the legitimate rights of the Palestinians in their homeland. Moreover, the five million Palestinian refugees must be allowed back to their homeland.

The United States is seen as the main supporter of dictatorships in the region, and has done little to improve human rights or democracy in the Middle East. These factors have collectively led the Arab and Muslim masses to look negatively at the US role in the Middle East. The hope is that the recent developments will lead the US to a more balanced approach. Its stands in the Palestinian crisis will be the main indicator.

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Banning a human rights NGO

The tribal government banned the formation of a non-governmental organization for human rights in Bahrain. Leading personalities and lawyers had submitted an application for the formation of a non-governmental organization for human rights protection. The labour minister met on 28 October with the group that submitted the application and informed of the decision taken by the prime minister to ban the formation of such an organization. The labour minister said that the premier had appointed a committee for human rights as part of the unconstitutional Shura Council and that this committee is "enough for Bahrain".

The banning of the formation of the NGO is a damning evidence that the tribal dictatorship has no intention whatsoever to respect the basic rights of Bahrainis. The prisons constructed by the ruling family for torturing and jailing Bahrainis are full of innocent and leading citizens. Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain, Mr. Hassan Mushaimaa and scores others are being held without charges since January 1996. The ruling family treats the people of Bahrain as enemies and denies them respect, dignity and political rights. The tribal dictatorship knows that if an independent NGO is formed inside Bahrain it will be the focus for the forthcoming visit by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention next February. The NGO would also gain the trust of the population, something that the ruling family has failed to achieve since its invasion of Bahrain in the eighteenth century.

Opposition calls for respect of constitutional due process

On 3 October, the Amir addressed the appointed Shura Council and said that he intends to announce on 16 December "a new administrative and constitutional concept of our State". This statement was followed up by reports in the local press that this meant that the constitution will be changed without recourse to the legitimate due process prescribed by the constitution. The Amir went on to say that "the beginning of a new phase... will include administrative development and a new constitution for our country".

According to the country's constitution Article 104 "for an amendment to be made to any provision of this Constitution, it is stipulated that it shall be passed by a majority vote of two-thirds of the members constituting the National Assembly and ratified by the Amir". This article clearly specifies the due process that must be followed if the constitution is to be changed. Any other set-up will not be a politically legitimate one so long as the elected National Assembly has not been functioning as specified by the legal contract between the nation and the ruling family.

During the past few weeks several editorials in the government-controlled press

started speaking about the intention of the Amir to change the country's constitutions. The speculations started following the announcement of the Amir in the beginning of October that he has new plans, to be further highlighted during his enthronement day on 16 December, for a new constitutional and administrative framework. Since then, one of the mouthpieces of the regimewrote to say that the Amir intends to create an appointed upper chamber over and above an elected one.

Bahrain has been run unconstitutionally since the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1975. According to Bahrain's constitution, the legislative power is shared between the Amir and an elected parliament. The latter has monitoring powers over the executive branch of the government. Moreover the constitution specifies the existence of an independent "Supreme Judicial Council".

Few months ago the government created a "Supreme Judicial Council". However, this council contravenes the constitution because it lacks powers and has no independence. It is merely a consultative body whose function is to advise the justice minister. The latter has the upper hand in all cases. The creation of the judicial council was described by one of the journalists as "27 years late in creation, and is yet unconstitutional".

The speculations being orchestrated by the government's mouthpiece is that an "elected parliament" may at last be forced on the government. But such a parliament will be a lower house under the supervision of an "appointed house of senates". The powers of the elected house may also be redefined to strip them from those specified in the constitution. The government's mouthpiece repeatedly mentioned the model of the British House of Lords as an example of an appointed upper chamber. The comparison is not accurate, as all know that the British House of Commons (which is the elected lower house) is the main power in the land.

Opposition figures inside and outside Bahrain have published papers in local and outside press explaining their views, which are:

1. The country's constitution contains provisions for amendments to articles. Recognized changes must be passed through the constitutional due process. This means the constitutional National Assembly must be restored so that changes can be voted on and agreed by the representatives of the nation.

2. The Shura Council is not a legislative body and is not constitutional. Regardless of its composition, and regardless of inclusion or exclusion of various elements from Bahrain's society, the entire concept can never be considered as a democratic development. The Shura Council has been, and continues to be, a backward step and an ugly abuse of power by an executive power that is running away from accountability.

3. The opposition is not against developing the legislative power into two chambers. But for these development to take place the constitution must be respected and the National Assembly must be restored as specified by the country's constitution.

4. The nation has been prevented from proper consultation and the government has created a class of cronies and selfish individuals. This class of misguided people did not and cannot represent the nation. They represent the prime minister who appointed them in the first place, and who also can dismiss them any time he wishes to do so. The basics of politics are very clear in this regard.

5. Elections by themselves do not mean much. Hence, the election proposed by the premier for a Shura Council in 2004 is not acceptable unless they comply with the constitution. The Shura Council is totally rejected, be it appointed or elected. This is because it is nothing more than a chatting house that has no power to legislate or to monitor the government. The Shura Council does not even have a power to set an agenda for its meetings. The agenda is set out by the executive power and is then handed down to the bureau of the council for discussion. Any outcome of such discussion is not mandatory in any case. Hence, since the creation of the powerless Shura Council in 1993, it disagreed with the government only once. This was when the council disagreed with the government's ban on satellite dishes. The government disregarded that objection and went ahead with its ban.

6. The talk about changes to the administrative structure is battling. The cabinet has been changing the administrative structure since 1996. All the structural changes were directed towards the concentration of power in the hands of few individuals who must also be members of the ruling Al-Khalifa family. A process of "Khalifanization" has been going on at full speed.

7. It is clear that the government is testing the waters by releasing half-stories through its mouthpieces. Civilized nations would have gone through a rational process with conventions involving the entire nation, instead of a top-down unconstitutional and dictatorial change process that eventually fails to salvage a country from its political crisis.

Suppressing pro-Palestinian activities

On Friday 27 October, the foreign-staffed security forces attacked a pro-Palestinian demonstration that marched through the capital, Manama, after Friday prayers in Ras-Romman Grand Mosque. The security forces launched their attack against the

peaceful citizens and an eyewitness stated that he saw two citizens, one of them bleeding, being led for detention and torture. The attacks on pro-Palestinian demonstrations started on Friday 20 October, and then were repeated on Sunday 22 October and on 27 October.

On Sunday evening, 22 October, the foreign-staffed security forces attacked the citizens who gathered at a community center in Nuaim, Manama, in support of the Palestinian cause. The security forces deployed tear gas and rubber bullets against the peaceful demonstrators. This is the second attack against pro-Palestinian demonstrators in three days.

On Friday, 20 October, the security forces attacked demonstrators in Manama and later on arrested scores of participants. The security forces also detained two religious scholars, Seyyed Mohammed Al-Ghoreifi, from Nuaim, and Seyyed Hussain Al-Hayki, from Samahij, on Friday. They were tortured severely and released after two days of detention. Scores of youths were also detained and tortured for their participation in pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

Pro-Palestinian slogans spread on walls around the country, and the security forces were seen painting over the slogans in Hamad Town, Karzakkan and Karbabad.

In Ras Romman and Muharraq, the citizens marched following the end of Friday prayers. The Imam of Hamad Kanoo Mosque in Muharraq, Sheikh Walid Al-Mahmood, spoke against the atrocities of the Israeli forces and urged all Muslims to unite and defend the people of Palestine. The well-known lawyer, Abdulla Hashim, spoke on behalf of the organisers of the demonstration and called for an end to the naturalisation process with the Israelis. In Isa and Hamad Towns, the citizens marched and chanted pro-Palestinian slogans.

Al-Hayat newspaper reported on 27 October that a man was arrested in Bahrain in connection with involvement to plan a suicide operation against US interests. A government spokesman denied the claim. However, it is thought that the government has been saying to Western circles that it is attacking the pro-Palestinian demonstrations because one of these demonstrations approached the compounds of the US Embassy on 20 October. The government's rumours reached the outside in the form of exaggerated reports about suicidal attacks. The government is spreading these types of saying so that it wins the support of the US and the West for suppressing the citizens.

On 18 October, the pro-democracy personality, Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuamin, wrote an article in Al-Quds denouncing the extent of defeat suffered by the Arab regimes. He denounced the irresponsible behaviour of the Bahraini ruling family, which had mobilised its entire capabilities to force people to attend gatherings against an Arab neighbouring country. Moreover, the ruling family intends to construct a wall depicting the names of those

who attended the gatherings against Qatar. According to Al-Nuaimi, this is but a stark example of the level of shamelessness reached by an Arab regime.

Charging citizens for education

The unconstitutional Shura Council was instructed to talk about a decree being prepared by the ruling family for charging Bahraini students attending secondary education. Political observers noted that the ruling family aims for either of two things from ordering the Shura Council to talk about the proposed decree. It wants to say that the Shura Council is able to talk about a decree being issued and that the government may listen to these talks.

On the other hand, the ruling family has imported thousands of Bedouins from Syria and Arabia and all these have absorbed the cash available for citizens' housing, education and health services. The ruling family transferred all the funds donated by Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahyan in 1996 to these imported people, whom the ruling family is using to change the demography of Bahrain. The ruling family now wants to take more cash from the citizens and transfer the funds to the imported population.

UN Technical Team in Bahrain

A UN Senior Human Rights Commissioner, Gianni Magazzeni, accompanied by Human Rights Officer, Karim Chezraoui, are visiting Bahrain at the head of a delegation from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. This visit was part of the concessions offered by the Bahraini government last year to avert the issuing of a resolution by UN human rights working groups. When the government was forced last year to invite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, it requested an initial "technical" visit by UN officials to "indicate areas for improvement and training".

The government attempted several times to use this technical assessment visit to cancel the forthcoming visit by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention next February. Bahraini jails are filled with political prisoners and detainees and it is not yet clear what will the government do ahead of the UN team arrival next February.

"UN House", free of charge

The authorities have been putting pressure on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to move to a new place. The idea is to combine the offices of UNDP plus the one dealing with information (which is presently inactive) together with UNICEF (which only issues greeting cards) into one structure to be called the "UN House" to be inaugurated during the visit of Kofi Anan in November. State-controlled papers are already talking about it as if it were a reality. The government has told UNDP to accept the offer at no charge

to them. It is becoming clear that the government is attempting to win some favours from UN quarters in an attempt to cancel or influence the forthcoming visit by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention next February.

Amnesty Exhibition in Beirut

In Beirut, Amnesty International organised several activities as part of the anti-torture programme. A photo exhibition was held at the UNESCO headquarters in Beirut. Posters of tortured people in Bahrain represented a main part of the exhibition and many visitors expressed outrage at the extent of atrocities committed by the Bahraini government against the peaceful citizens who are calling for their basic rights.

Human rights advocates call for an end to police state

Twenty nine Arab personalities signed a petition in Rabat (Morocco) calling on the Amir of Bahrain to stop the violations of human rights, to release all political prisoners and detainees, to allow all exiles to return home without preconditions and to restore the constitutional parliament that has been disbanded since 1975. The personalities were participating in the conference held for the protection of human rights advocates in the Arab World. Bahraini human rights activists participated in the conference and presented a paper on the police state in Bahrain and how the advocates of human rights and democracy are ill-treated.

Debating Journalists Society

In a debate broadcast by Bahrain TV on 17 October, the journalists Ali Saleh, Aqil Swar, Hafedh Al-Sheikh and Ali Sayyar presented their views towards the recent formation of the Journalists Society. Nabil Al-Hamer and Abdul Monem Ibrahim represented the government's view while the others explained how the information ministry intervenes in the activities of journalists and prevents them from expressing their views and that this Journalists Society will be used by the ministry for the sole purpose of controlling journalism.

Ruling family to construct an "enslavement" monument

The people of Bahrain continued to air their anger at the atrocities of the Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinians. Demonstrations in the main areas of Manama, Muharraq and Sanabis were followed up by more activities in the schools.

In the meantime, the ruling family was concerned with other matters. The new port being built at Hidd will be named after the prime minister, whose policies for the past quarter of a century have made Bahrain one of the worst countries in the region in the violation of human rights. Moreover, the government-controlled press announced



that "a panel of experts appointed to judge the entries for the Millennium Commemoration Monument Design Competition" which is aimed at "designing a giant living monument, which will be built" to carry the names of those who attended the gatherings organized by the ruling family in different part of the country. The report said that a member of the Al-Khalifa family "Rashid bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa" will chair the selection process for setting up the monument on a 75,000 square metre site, near Sakhir Palace. The project manager, Nick Pankovas, promised to make a "tourist attraction" out of the monument.

The opposition believes that such a project has no purpose other than symbolizing the enslavement of people. Three individuals received \$94,000 each for accepting to act as a front for the rallies. It has transpired that the Amir had awarded Abdul Rahman Jamshir, Hussain Sultan Ghanim and Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Hussain a large sum of money, 35,000 dinars (about \$ 94,000) each, for accepting to act as a front for organising rallies of loyalty to the ruling family. Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Hussain invested the amount of money in the opening of a shop for the selling of perfumes in Adelya, Manama. The three individuals were given exact amounts of money so that they do not quarrel with each other in public, as happened in one of the rallies.

New PR scheme

The prime minister announced that he allocated a "2.6-hectare piece of land for the new Philippine School following the signing of the lease agreement between the officials from the school and the Ministry of Finance and National Economy". The people of Bahrain welcome such moves as a sign of respect for the friendly communities living and working in Bahrain and hope that the prime minister will also provide the same opportunities for the natives whose schools and societies are shut down.

However, the recent focusing of news on items relating to the respect awarded by the ruling Al-Khalifa family to Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais, Ismailis, Phillipinos, etc, is part of the new PR strategy. In the past years, the regime's strategy was to say to regional and international powers that it was under threat from the Shia community and it needed their support to suppress them. That racist policy has failed miserably and many people were fed-up hearing the claims of the regime that it had uncovered Shia and Iranian-backed plots to overturn the government. The new strategy is therefore aimed to present the ruling Al-Khalifa family as the most friendly rulers to all types of religious and ethnic minorities, in the hope of gaining support for the feudal dictatorship.

PM abuses Waqf funds

On the other hand, it is expected that the prime minister will change the admin-

istration of the Shia Waqf Department (which is attached to the justice ministry) to enable him to get more funds from the Waqf for financing his private business empire. The Waqf is considered to be one of the cash-rich institutions in Bahrain as a result of its history.

In the past, the Al-Khalifa ruling family used to confiscate lands on a large scale from the indigenous community. Many people from the indigenous community used to transfer their private properties for religious endowment (Waqf). Once transferred to religious endowment it became difficult for the Al-Khalifa family to confiscate the land or the fund. The Waqf was later transferred to a government department after the introduction of administrative reforms in 1926. The first committees that managed the Waqf were elected freely by locals. Then the government cancelled those elections and appointed individuals close to the ruling family. Nowadays, the Waqf funds and properties are mismanaged and abused by the prime minister and his cronies without accountability.

No rights for labour

The magazine "International Union Rights" in its Volume 7, Issue 3, 2000, exposed the nature of the tribal dictatorship that has consistently denied Bahrainis their rights. The magazine stated "The General Committee for Bahrain Workers has officially requested that the authorities reconsider the status of trade unions in Bahrain. The GCBW has expressed the need for the country to accept international labour standards and lift the ban, which currently outlaws independent trade unions and permits only the establishment of workers committees.

The workers committees have attempted to form trade unions in the past but have been met with government repression. On this occasion the GCBW submitted an official letter to the government requesting permission to form a trade union in accordance with the principles of the ILO and of the Arab Labour Organisation. The leaders of the committee were then summoned to the labour ministry and informed that their requests were "totally rejected" and there would be "grave consequences" if they continued with such demands. ICTUR has written to the Amir of Bahrain's Offices and to the Labour Ministry requesting that due consideration be given to the demands of these workers".

It is worth noting that the prime minister had intervened and suspended the elections that were due to take place before end of the year. The delaying of election until next February was aimed at clearing this critical period from the expected encounter with labour activists who vowed to resist the intervention of the interior ministry in the elections. The government does not want troubles at a time when it is preparing to host the next GCC summit and when the International Court at The Hague is ex-

pected to issue its verdict about the dispute with Qatar on Hawar islands.

The majority of citizens who are against being used as publicity stunts were angered by these cheap practices. A group of daring citizens managed on 2 October to get their message clearly by painting slogans of protests on a wall belonging to Al-Safreyah Palace. Since then, an armoured vehicle has been stationed by the wall for surveillance purposes.

Citizens arrested

On 2 October, the security forces attacked Karzukkan and arrested Ibrahim Ahmed Shehab Al-Fardan, 19, Hussain Isa Abdulla Al-Fardan, 23, Nasr-Din Isa Abdulla Al-Fardan, 18, Fadhil Abbas Al-Ashori, 17 and Hamid Hassan Abdul Rasool, 30. The latter had been released but the other youths are still languishing in detention cells.

In the same period, Mohammed Abdul Hussain Saleh Al-Shehabi, was returning from Saudi Arabia across the causeway linking the two countries. Mr. Al-Shehabi was detained and transferred to Budaya Police Stations. On 3 October, he was seen at the police station in exhausted conditions with obvious marks of ill treatment and torture.

Police and intelligence officers mounted scores of dawn raids around the country in continuation of the crackdown policy against all forms of peaceful dissent. Some of those known to have been detained after dawn raids on 1 October include were: Seyyed Jaffer Mossa Nasser, 22, from Markh; Hussain Sdaif, 22, from Sitra; Bader Al-Sabbagh, 23, from Sanabis; Yousif Al-Romi, 25, from Manama. The dawn raids conducted in Dahi on 26 September resulted in the arrest of several people including Mohammed Salman Hussain, Saleh Al-Sheikh, and Ali Yousif.

Scores of other people were summoned ahead of the rally organised by the ruling family at Duraz Abo-Subh Beach on 2 October. The citizens were threatened of grave consequences if any protest emerges during the visit of the Amir to the Area. The entire government was mobilised for this event and the newspapers stated that 80,000 would attend. In fact less than 8,000 attended (less than 10% of the target number) and most of these were security personnel and schools' pupils who had been forced to attend.

Gulf Air victims forgotten

The 40th commemorative day of the Gulf Air crash coincides with 2 October, the day the ruling family is holding its rally at Duraz Abo-Subh Beach. The residents of the northern region have called for the boycotting of the rally. The government's press confirmed what the opposition had already said, "buses will be made available" to transport people from Muharraq, Rifaa, Zallaq and other places to the rally area in Duraz.