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Britain's Barbaric "Special Relationship" with Arab Dictators

By Finian Cunningham

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Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron (R) shakes hands with Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa (L) during their meeting at 10 Downing Street in central London on

While the majority of Bahrainis struggle with poverty, discrimination in the labour market, unemployment, ill health and squalid housing, the Al Khalifa clan lives in luxurious palaces on confiscated lands, enriched through rampant business corruption, under-the-table deals with foreign banks and investors, and, of course, embezzlement of the island's oil industry."

The image of British Prime Minister David Cameron greeting Bahrain's King Hamad on the steps of 10 Downing Street last week conveys a subtle message of Britain's presumption of global superiority. It also betrays the real role of Britain's rulers in the suppression of democracy and human rights around the world.

The taller Cameron, in dapper pinstripe suit, is seen extending a benevolent hand to the dumpy little Arab tin-pot king who is donning a medieval-looking headdress and robe.

It would appear, from the photo-op, that patronage is being afforded by a thoroughly democratic leader to an antiquated ally from the Arabian desert, the latter in need of jolly-good-old Anglo-Saxon tutelage in the art of modern statecraft.

How civilized. The British premier invites the Bahraini monarch into the iconic dwelling near the supposed "mother of all parliaments" for a serving of English tea and cakes over "low-key talks".

On the agenda, according to one of Britain's "liberal" newspapers, the Guardian, the prime minister raised, apparently, the troubling matter of human rights as well as - and this is the unmentioned significant bit - trade opportunities for British businesses in the Persian Gulf kingdom.

It is a scintillating scenario of British conceit and pretence of decency. We are thus inculcated with the impression that Britain is the epitome of refined democracy. Cameron, you see, is enquiring of business opportunities while also doughtily expressing to his Al Khalifa Arab guest concerns over human rights. The British rulers, you see, are not just wrangling for a quick pound. Oh no, they have ethics and principles to defend and uphold as well.

Commenting on the meeting, Bahrain's foreign minister Shaikh Khalid Al Khalifa (a relation of the king - as is the whole government of that kingdom) said another subject on the agenda was "regional stability". (In that disclosure, Shaikh Khalid let the cat out of the bag, but more on that later.)

Let's cut through the woolly British media reportage that serves to reinforce, subliminally, a self-styled sense of civilised greatness. The truth is that the British government does not give two figs about human rights in the oil shaikhdom of Bahrain. It never had any concern and it still doesn't. By reporting that Cameron raised the issue of human rights with King Hamad, the British media are indulging in conceit that there is genuine concern about the matter among its political establishment. But history shows that to this day, human rights in Bahrain (and elsewhere) are frankly anathema to Britain's geopolitical interests.

The absolute Al Khalifa monarchy was installed in Bahrain by the British Empire more than 200 years ago. The so-called royal rulers of Bahrain were then nothing more than a tribe of Bedouins elevated by British military force to positions of lordly privilege in Bahrain. The Al Khalifas were, to put it plainly, barbaric impostors who were fortified on their new island abode to safeguard British trading interests in the Persian Gulf en route to imperial India. It was a typical British quid pro quo. The Al Khalifa cut-throats got a throne to sit on, underpinned with

“Protectorate” status, while the ever-so polite British got to rule the waves.

The Sunni Al Khalifa band of brigands was imposed against the will or consent of the indigenous Shia population of Bahrain. To this day, that is the crux of the grievance among the Bahraini majority. The Al Khalifas enriched themselves by exploiting the people from their British-protected palaces. Older people in Bahrain will tell you about the times when the Al Khalifas would send their thugs into the villages to collect taxes and tributes from the farmers and fishermen on pain of death. The young shaikhs would also drive into hamlets and take any young female that they desired for their gratification.

Such crude suzerainty may not be quite as brazen today. Today, Bahrainis are exploited and raped in more insidious ways through rigged elections and ring-fencing of the economy to satisfy the Al Khalifa rulers. While the majority of Bahrainis struggle with poverty, discrimination in the labour market, unemployment, ill health and squalid housing, the Al Khalifa clan lives in luxurious palaces on confiscated lands, enriched through rampant business corruption, under-the-table deals with foreign banks and investors, and, of course, embezzlement of the island’s oil industry.

Bahrainis have consistently protested this British imposition of despotic monarchy. They want an elected government to run the island’s oil wealth democratically, for the wellbeing of the populace, not for the crony aggrandisement of the Al Khalifa dynasty and its entourage of hangers-on. This is a basic democratic demand, a fundamental human right. Yet how could such a distortion of natural justice be sustained? Enter the British government, and in recent decades, the American too.

Down through the decades when the indigenous Bahrainis - Shia as well as Sunni - would regularly rise up against their Al Khalifa overlords, it was the British government and its military might that safeguarded the position of monarchy. In the 1950s and 60s, British troops stationed on the island opened fire on striking oil workers.

When Bahrain was finally granted nominal independence in 1971, the British may have officially left by the front door, but they came back in through the back window, as one old Bahraini memorably described it. The state security apparatus was - and continues to be - overseen by British military intelligence. It is one of the most brutal security apparatuses in the world. A notorious founding figure was Colonel Ian Henderson who was the head of the kingdom’s national security agency from 1968 to 1998. Henderson oversaw the administration of unrelenting vicious repression, during which thousands of Bahrainis deemed to be a security threat were detained without trial and tortured often at the hands of Henderson himself.

The British devised certain other means of repression. Learning from their colonial experience in India, Kenya, Ireland and elsewhere, the repression took on a sharp sectarian policy, targeting the Shia population while favouring the indigenous Sunni minority. This facilitated a divide-and-rule means of undermining popular opposition to the Al Khalifa despots. Another British innovation was the recruiting of Sunni expatriates from neighbouring countries to fill the ranks of the security forces. This social engineering had the advantage of bolstering the system of repression with a particularly anti-Shia hatred, as well as gerrymandering the island’s demography to give a

semblance of pro-regime loyalists.

Despite this influx of tens of thousands of Sunni expatriates from Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan - who were given fast-tracked citizenship - the Bahraini population still maintains a natural Shia majority. However, the issue of "naturalisation" is one of the many grievances among Bahraini Shia.

Since the latest uprising in Bahrain's long history of democratic struggle, which resurfaced on 14 February 2011, the Al Khalifa dictatorship has ruthlessly attacked the population with their foreign-manned security apparatus. Dozens have been killed, hundreds mutilated. Thousands of civilians, including women and children, have been forced into the kingdom's dungeons and tortured for doing nothing more than peacefully protesting for their democratic rights.

The Bahraini dictators could not sustain this denial of democracy without the legacy of repression bestowed by Britain. And, to be sure, the British government and Washington continue to staunchly support the Al Khalifa despotic regime. In spite of horrendous violations, both London and Washington continue to underpin the dictatorship with massive weapons sales of shotguns and tear gas - the latter deployed against people in their homes, claiming more than 40 lives over the past year. America's Fifth Fleet Navy base on the island is perhaps of the most potent symbol of Western military guarantee to the regime.

London and Washington provide other crucial political support too. An international commission of inquiry last November, headed by Egyptian lawyer Cherif Bassiouni, into regime brutality uncovered systematic violations. The inquiry called for the release of all "prisoners of conscience" and other human rights reforms. Yet, the Al Khalifa rulers have simply ignored those calls for reform, continuing to attack peaceful protesters, saturate Shia villages with tear gas and lock up hundreds of youths, as well as human rights activists such as Nabeel Rajab and Zainab Al Khawaja. The British and American governments have remained silent in the face of these ongoing outrages while the supply of weapons continues unabated - \$53 million dollars worth earlier this year from Washington alone.

London and Washington, and their mainstream news media, indulge in the cynical charade that the Al Khalifa regime is "trying to implement reforms" and engage in a "national dialogue". But when will these governments get the fact that the Bahraini people don't want to dialogue with a reprehensible, murderous regime? They want this regime to simply get off its throne and the people's backs and let them elect their own government.

Last year, in December 2011 - one month after the Bassiouni report - Bahrain's King Hamad was once again entertained in Downing Street by David Cameron. Then, as last week, the British prime minister lent diplomatic legitimacy to the Bahraini dictatorship by talking up its supposed willingness to reform and oversee human rights improvements. Britain announced that it was sending a senior police officer, John Yates, to assist Bahrain with reforms. Yates was to be joined in Bahrain by an American police colleague, John Timoney, in the supposed endeavour.

What has transpired over the past year is an even greater deterioration in human rights - proof again that both London and Washington have absolutely no desire to reform the despotic rule of

their “key” Arab ally.

The bigger picture is that the Bahraini kingdom is an integral part of the Sunni Arab Gulf dictatorships that are central to safeguarding British and American imperialist interests in the region. As with Bahrain, these absolute monarchies are the historical creation of Britain. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the former Trucial States of the United Arab Emirates, and Oman were set up by the British with the precise remit of thwarting democracy and human rights. Their function, later underwritten by Washington, was to ensure the flow of oil to Western companies and banks. That is why the invasion of Bahrain by Saudi Arabia and the UAE last year and the ongoing brutal repression of the Bahraini population were given tacit support by London and Washington.

Democracy in the Middle East cannot be tolerated by Britain or Washington. Such a development stands in complete contradiction to Western capitalist interests. That is what the Bahraini foreign minister was alluding to when he said Cameron and King Hamad would be discussing “regional stability” - stability not for the populations, but rather for Western corporate interests and their ruling Arab thugs.

The henchman function of the Persian Gulf monarchs has grown even more important in the wake of the Arab Spring. These dictatorships are not just ensuring that the Persian Gulf kingdoms and their vast resources remain subjugated to the Western masters. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have emerged as providing a cutting edge in Britain and America’s overarching scheme for regime change in the wider region as seen in NATO’s criminal re-conquest of Libya and the ongoing covert wars of aggression against Syria and Iran.

Only days before Cameron feted the Bahraini despot in London, a 16-year-old boy, Husam Al Haddad, was shot in the back and then beaten to death by Al Khalifa’s death squads. Husam was peacefully protesting for democratic rights in Bahrain.

Tea and cakes in Number 10 Downing Street? Well, that’s just a British deft touch of nicety for public consumption of the barbaric special relationship.