Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

My deep study of policing in Bahrain began over ten years ago when I became fascinated by the seeming outward markers of democratization of Bahrain’s police forces, such as a strong tradition of female police officers dating back to the 1970s, or its hosting of police professional conferences. These trends co-existed with much more problematic practices such as the privileging of Sunni citizens over others in local police stations. From 2004 to 2006 I had the rare opportunity to sit in Bahraini police stations and observe everyday justice as part of an institutional ethnographic research project. It seemed apparent to me then, as it does now, that the true political and social meaning of how security forces operate in Bahrain was a complicated subject that required and still requires close attention. Since then, I have continued to engage deeply in police trends in Bahrain, building a scholarship that questions deep-seated notions—from both the East and West—as to whether the force is democratic or not, respects human rights or not, and why.

A lot has changed since 2011 and the Arab Spring. A police force that ten years ago ricocheted between progressive and regressive trends unfortunately seems to have become fixed in a regressive stance—a place that unfortunately the United States has yet to meaningfully question. This has become an embarrassment to our country, which perceives itself as a beacon of civil and human rights. We seem to have chosen to react to an alleged Shi’a/Iranian arch-diabolical plot—much overblown in armchair security studies circles and almost never empirically found by scholars whose boots are on the ground. Rather we should recognize that our ally Bahrain is actually engaging in punishing its own people for daring to ask for true democratization and human rights. Bahrain since 2011 is doubling down on Sunni chauvinism and Shi’a-Iranian fear mongering to excuse what is in essence a full-on state-sponsored attack on a majority underclass.

Today I will make the argument that the United States must push Bahrain to address police abuses during the Arab Spring and since on-going, and it must compel the country to engage in true reform of its security institutions. This approach is good for both the United States and Bahrain.

The Bahraini government appears to believe they have accomplished police reform, but what they have actually accomplished is merely a slick public relations campaign, which fails to engage the majoritarian community and contributes to an overall legitimacy problem. For example, the Bahrain police-sponsored Al-Amn magazine criticizes those that would say that anything is remotely wrong with their country or its security forces, confusing dissent with treason while at the same time publishing many a vague platitude about protecting human rights. Meanwhile, non-violent protesters who hold signs or tweet are often dealt with by arrest, conviction, and imprisonment.

More and more everyday, mainstream media outlets worldwide are recognizing that Bahrain’s continued police crackdown on its Shi’a majority represents a human rights debacle; opinions are shifting in favor of holding Bahrain accountable and the longer Bahrain stalls, the more embarrassing things become for it and its ally the United States.
The only way out for Bahrain is meaningful liberalization—power-sharing with its historically marginalized group, the indigenous Shi’a population. Although I am describing a political problem with a political solution, police reform can be a powerful tool in achieving political solutions. Common wisdom often views the police as one of the last places to turn to in making over-arching social changes because as the legal enforcement arm of the state it is often seen as merely reflecting the status quo. However, given that police are the government actors on the frontlines of day-to-day life in a society, a change of attitude in the police can be quickly palpable throughout many sectors of a society. The top police scholars in multiculturalism in police studies, such as Dr. Maki Haberfeld, have successfully made the case that working with diverse populations is as central to modern police work as the use of force.iii We also know from tried-and-true models of community-oriented policing that a police force which reflects the community’s diversity—and not dominated by one group—will be more inclined to respect human rights and have more legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

And, recent scholarship in police reform after class and ethnic-based conflict has shown that police can be the central site at which a government begins to chart its way forward, the starting not the end point of a larger political reform process.

In Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement police training and diverse recruitment was central to overall. Police training there involved an interactive curriculum of human rights, community relations, and diversity and assumed a significance and symbolism greater than the sum of its parts. It received media coverage, community buy-in, and contributed to a climate of hope and change.iv As such, multicultural police reform efforts can build the nation’s institutional capacity for human rights if it centers on bettering police services for diverse communities in an open, transparent and interactive way.v

The United States must move in this direction and invest in a joint project of police reform of the Bahraini police, which makes best practices in police multicultural training the centerpiece. Simultaneously, it must work to diversify Bahrain’s police force to better represent its people. Simply put, for Bahrain the price of American weapons and know-how must be police reform. Otherwise, the United States effectively ignores human rights violations and police abuse that should turn the stomach of anyone who believes in the values embodied in the American Bill of Rights or international human rights standards.

Once compelled, Bahrain has a reasonable way forward and the blueprint is as follows.

First, the United States must demand that the Bahrainis release the numbers of how many of their police officers are Shi’a identified at present. It is my estimation that very few are Shi’a given what I observed directly in 2004 to 2006, and that since then over a hundred male Shi’a police officers—the few that there were—have been dismissed in a form of collective punishment for the Arab Spring.

Second, the United States must insist that the Bahraini government take responsibility for police abuses of the past in a straightforward way in order to signal to the Shi’a community that it is now safe to engage in reform efforts and that trust can be rebuilt. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report recommended compensation for victims of police torture and provided a detailed
documentation of the abuse of well over 500 Bahrainis—yet never asks Bahrain to
make a clear statement of acknowledgement and apology for these dire human
rights violations (although it does end on a very vague, half-hearted note that a truth
and reconciliation process would be recommended). We know from South Africa
and Morocco that the way forward after state-sponsored police abuse must be
acknowledgement—anything less fails to win the trust of the oppressed community
and maintains the overall conflict. Unfortunately, Bahrain’s national dialogue to that
purported effect managed to alienate those it should have embraced. New efforts
cannot be so half-hearted.

Once a very basic working agreement to move forward between Bahrain and
Shi’a leaders is in place, police reform should be top on the agenda, with a focus on
police training. In the BICI Report, Bahrain indicated that the events of the Arab
Spring compelled it to require training to include more thorough human rights
models; however there is no transparency or accountability built into what is
reportedly being taught, nor is the “Systems Approach to Training” used the gold
standard in multicultural training for human rights. My experience in the United
Kingdom at the College of Policing international training program—to which
Bahrain sends its officers—is that though the human rights curriculum is presented,
it is quite easy to perform a narrative of compliance in a scholastic setting, doing
very little to shift officers and the institution. However, joint-training models of
multicultural police training, demand more of the police and are more effective.

Therefore, I recommend a five-year plan centering on a joint training
program in which leaders of the opposition are invited to work directly with police
trainers and police officers as equal pedagogical partners in an open and
transparent way. It signals a new day when members of the oppressed group are
given positions of authority in working with police officers. Inter-group mixing and
external transparency of the curriculum via media coverage and related community
meetings and press conferences ensures that the training is taken seriously and sets
the public discourse—and institutional behavior—in a new, more accountable light.

A similar program in Slovenia, after a violent conflict there, empowered
Roma (gypsy) leaders to train police officers in understanding their group’s history
and culture. It successfully turned around police-Roma conflict in a relatively short
period of time. Much like Northern Ireland, the police training in Slovenia achieved
much more than the sum of its parts, forging strong relationships between police
and Roma leaders that demonstrably prevented future violence. It also achieved a
high enough profile as to become a symbol of larger social and political reforms in
the country and the European Union around Roma social inclusion.

What would begin as a pilot program in Bahrain in the first months would be
scaled up over two years into a mandatory force-wide endeavor. The training will
include language training (Farsi) and myth-busting exercises between the groups in
which social and cultural differences are talked about from each group’s point of
view. In this way, social attitudes within the force can be gradually chipped away at.
That the top police leadership will be compelled to mandate and endorse the
program will give appropriate cover for lower-ranking officers to reflect on social
biases. In my experience, Bahrainis perform individuality and innovation in less
overt ways culturally than perhaps we are used to in the West; therefore, top
leadership must give lower ranks their full moral support. Media coverage of the program and community meetings will be key so that the innovative and important ways the program is forging the new Bahrain is visible to its people.

Third, the joint-training should be coupled with a pathways program which actively trains and recruits Shi’a and other non-Sunnis, with benchmarked goals (not necessarily a strict quota system) for diversifying the force at the 5-year mark. This means police would go into Shi’a dominated secondary schools and share their professional experiences, form clubs and mentorships, and helping to prepare students’ education and extra-curricular records to be successful in obtaining police jobs. Sunni officers will mentor potential Shi’a ones, on a one-to-one basis. This builds trust one individual at a time, but leads to lasting change in attitudes. This type of inter-group mentorship proved effective in police reform in Bosnia & Herzegovina after the Dayton Accord-- Serbs and non-Serbs developed and mentored each other in their national force and all aspects of recruitment, training, and even police patrol were mixed.iii

Fifth, a rationalized system of following officers’ careers, from the point of application to hiring, promotions and ultimately retirement, should be implemented and monitored by independent outside observers. Additional rolling benchmarks for having diverse police leaders should be implemented in order to ensure that Shi’a officers have opportunities to achieve even the highest ranks.

Finally, the ombudsman’s office-- which is tasked with reviewing citizen complaints against the police-- must be properly resourced and act independent of the state. It should be considered an interim agency in regards to this function, with the development of an independent civilian complaint review board to follow the five-year plan I have outlined here. Further, the entire five-year plan should have international and Bahraini official observers in order to ensure full compliance and implementation of the plan’s aims, while also preparing evaluations of the efforts.

In conclusion, the United States need to be more savvy in recognizing that the police continue to oppress Bahrainis who are merely asking for their full civil and human rights—and this has little if nothing to do with any pan-Shi’a plot. Further, this police oppression is not a tactical or technical question, but much more fundamentally, it is political and about compelling Bahrain to wind down the hegemonic Sunni-ness in its security forces that has historically stoked the flames of this conflict in the first place. The United States must make its relationship to Bahrain overtly conditional on a commitment to open and transparent reforms, the centerpiece of which should be police reform and training. In doing so, the United States will make the world safer for human rights and democracy, and it will be able to help its ally in the Persian Gulf achieve the stability and legitimacy it desperately needs.

Thank you for listening.

---


