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**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Monday, May 9, 2011 3:07 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: While Bahrain demolishes mosques, U.S. stays silent (fyi)

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**From:** Toiv, Nora F  
**Sent:** Monday, May 09, 2011 2:14 PM  
**To:** Mills, Cheryl D; Pandith, Farah A  
**Subject:** While Bahrain demolishes mosques, U.S. stays silent (fyi)

## McClatchy Washington Bureau

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Posted on Sun, May. 08, 2011

### While Bahrain demolishes mosques, U.S. stays silent

Roy Gutman | McClatchy Newspapers

last updated: May 06, 2011 05:12:22 PM

MANAMA, Bahrain — In the ancient Bahraini village of Aali, where some graves date to 2000 B.C., the Amir Mohammed Braighi mosque had stood for more than 400 years — one of the handsomest Shiite Muslim mosques in this small island nation in the Persian Gulf.

Today, only bulldozer tracks remain.

In Nwaidrat, where anti-government protests began Feb. 14, the Mo'men mosque had long been a center for the town's Shiite population — photos show it as a handsome, square building neatly painted in ochre, with white and green trim, and a short portico in dark gray forming the main entrance.

Today, only the portico remains.

"When I was a child, I used to go and pray with my grandfather," said a 52-year-old local resident, who asked to be called only "Abu Hadi. "The area used to be totally green, with tiers of sweet water wells."

"Why did they destroy this mosque?" Abu Hadi wailed. "Muslims have prayed there for decades."

In Shiite villages across this island kingdom of 1.2 million, the Sunni Muslim government has bulldozed dozens of mosques as part of a crackdown on Shiite dissidents, an assault on human rights that is breathtaking in its expansiveness.

Authorities have held secret trials where protesters have been sentenced to death, arrested prominent mainstream opposition politicians, jailed nurses and doctors who treated injured protesters, seized the health care system that had been run primarily by Shiites, fired 1,000 Shiite professionals and canceled their pensions, detained students and teachers who took part in the protests, beat and arrested journalists, and forced the closure of the only opposition newspaper.

Nothing, however, has struck harder at the fabric of this nation, where Shiites outnumber Sunnis nearly 4 to 1, than the destruction of Shiite worship centers.

The Obama administration has said nothing in public about the destruction.

Bahrain — and its patron, Saudi Arabia — are longtime U.S. allies, and Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

Members of the Shiite opposition assembled a list of 27 mosques and other religious structures demolished or damaged in the crackdown. A tour by McClatchy of several townships suggests the number of buildings destroyed is far greater.

The demolitions are carried out daily, Shiite leaders say, with work crews often arriving in the dead of night, accompanied by police and military escorts. In many cases, the workers have hauled away the rubble, leaving no trace, before townspeople awake.

Bahrain's minister of justice and Islamic affairs, Sheikh Khalid bin Ali bin Abdulla al Khalifa, defended the demolitions in an interview, claiming that any mosque demolished had been built illegally, recently, and without permission.

"These are not mosques. These are illegal buildings," he said.

That claim, however, is easily challenged. In Aali, for example, the government rerouted a planned highway some years back so as to preserve the Amir Mohammed Braighi mosque, residents say.

McClatchy visited three other sites where "before" photos of the destroyed mosques showed they were well maintained, decades-old structures.

Some sites had a wistful air. At the Sheikh Aabed Mosque in the village of Sitra, once a ramshackle building that residents said was more than a century old, prayer rugs and other religious paraphernalia covered the ground.

On Wednesday, the State Department told McClatchy that it's "concerned by the destruction of religious sites." The statement noted that the Bahraini government had international obligations to preserve the common cultural heritage.

In private, U.S. officials are harsher. One, who's not in Bahrain, said that by bulldozing Shiite mosques and persecuting the political opposition, the government was treating its people like a "captive population."

Another U.S. official visiting the area described the Sunni leadership as "vindictive" and indicated the Obama administration was deeply worried about Bahrain's rapid downward spiral. Both officials asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Shiites have long complained of bias and discrimination here, despite massively outnumbering the entrenched Khalifa dynasty, whose prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa ibn Salman al Khalifa, 75, has held the office for the past 40 years — a current world record.

In mid-March, the government, after a month of protests, abandoned dialogue with moderate Shiites and Sunnis and invited Saudi Arabia to dispatch some 1,500 troops to help quell the unrest. The government imposed a state of emergency and began a crackdown on dissent. Among the first government acts after Saudi troops arrived was the destruction of the iconic Pearl Square, the traffic circle where demonstrators had camped out for weeks.

The government even recalled the half-dinar coins that featured the roundabout.

Most ominous is that hate speech of the sort that preceded the 1994 Rwandan genocide is now allowed in public. The pro-government English language Gulf Daily News last Sunday gave prominence to a reader's letter that compared Shiites to "termites" that should be exterminated.

"The moral is: to get rid of the white ants so they don't come back . . ." said the letter, signed only, "Sana P S."

Bahrain television has carried the canard that the Shiite sect allows its followers to lie, implying that what they say can't be trusted.

The crackdown also threatens to turn what had been an internal conflict into an international one.

Shiite led-Iran, which lies across the Gulf, is actively vying for influence in this predominantly Shiite state and has condemned the organized destruction of Shiite culture. The upheaval also has stirred passions in Shiite-ruled Iraq.

But Arab language television channels, including Al Jazeera, which is owned by the emir of Qatar, and Al Arabiya, which is Saudi owned, have been mostly silent about the wanton destruction.

Interviewed Monday, Sheikh Khalid, the justice minister, brought Arabic language spreadsheets stating the reasons for destruction as well as a book of records of the demolition program, complete with photographs. But he couldn't locate a reference to or photographs of Nwaidrat's Mo'men mosque in his briefing book, which listed all structures by number, not name.

He declined to provide a copy of the briefing book or the spreadsheet to McClatchy, saying they were "internal correspondence," and asked that no photograph be taken of him holding the briefing book.

Asked whether tearing down a long-standing, functioning place of worship would be viewed as a criminal offense in Bahrain, Sheikh Khalid appeared taken aback.

"If there is a fault or a mistake and (they) can prove it, the same place will be rebuilt in a much, much better shape," he later said.

And if they were operating under the law, why did the state demolition crews destroy the building after dark, when residents couldn't photograph the action?

"It is very difficult to do it in the morning. It is a kind of respect for people's psychology," Sheikh Khalid replied. "We were trying to put it in a way that it will not hurt the people. At least they do not see it while it is being demolished."

Because the material he was provided didn't list mosques by name, the justice minister also couldn't say for sure whether other religious structures visited by McClatchy were old construction, new construction, legal or illegal, or on private or public land.

He said there'd been 41 "procedures" against religious structures in Bahrain's capital, Manama, but in many instances, those taken down were just temporary structures. He could only point to two Sunni religious structures that had been taken down.

Sheikh Khalid himself had earlier stated publicly that Bahrain had approximately 600 religious structures, and only 10 percent had been demolished. But he declined to confirm that figure.

Every foreign resident and most Bahrainis contacted by McClatchy seemed deeply discouraged about the future of communal relations on this once-promising island, but Justice Minister Khalid disagreed.

"I think we've reached the maximum bottom we can reach," he said. "My conviction is that things will not get much worse." One day later, he chaired a press conference where he announced plans for the trial of 47 doctors and other medical personnel.

Asked Monday if the trial might not remind many abroad of the show-trials that dictators such as Joseph Stalin had held, Sheikh Khalid said quietly, "There were also trials of doctors at Nuremberg."

He was referring to the trials of 21 physicians who took part in the Nazi program to euthanize the mentally ill, retarded and physically disabled or in medical experiments on patients without their permission. (*Hannah Allam in Cairo contributed to this story.*) **ON THE WEB**