



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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"After the BICI Report: What Next for Bahrain?"

Kenney Auditorium, SAIS

1740 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC 20036

Monday December 5, 2011, 12:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

On Monday, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) hosted an event entitled "After the BICI Report: What Next for Bahrain?" **Matthew Duss**, director of Middle East Progress at the Center for American Progress, moderated the discussion. The panel featured Senator **Ron Wyden** (D-OR); **Brian Dooley**, director of Human Rights First; **Andrew Exum**, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security; and **Toby Jones**, assistant professor of history at Rutgers University.

After a brief introduction from Duss, Senator Wyden discussed the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), asserting that "the Commission has confirmed what others have been reporting about the human rights violations that took place during the protests that began earlier this year [...] the repression was systemic and widespread." He added that the BICI report has "shown the wisdom of stopping" the proposed \$53 million arms sale to Bahrain: "America should not be rewarding brutal regimes with arms. It's that simple." Wyden urged the Bahraini government's swift implementation of the report's recommended reforms, while noting that the BICI's recommendations are "not sufficient," and that "**progress must also be made in areas not covered by the Commission's Report.**" Wyden also argued that while some may claim that Bahrain's status as a U.S. ally constrains the U.S.'s ability to coerce the Bahraini regime, "**being friends with Bahrain should make it easier for us to point out when they go astray, not harder.**" He concluded by stating that the report provides a good starting point for progress and a transition towards a more democratic, inclusive society, and that he is hopeful that Bahrain will move forward and "the alliance between our two countries will endure."

Then, Dooley echoed Wyden's sentiment that the BICI report confirmed what many already knew: the Bahraini crackdown was characterized by a systemic practice of acts that amounted to torture. He noted that the report does not list the names or ranks of any responsible individuals. Dooley added that the Government of Bahrain must implement all of the report's recommendations, release all political detainees, and grant access to non-governmental observers and international journalists.

Jones argued that "Bahrain desperately needs a game changer," as "the situation is dire." **Bahrain, he said, needs a set of political tools that provide for reconciliation.** Jones added that he sees nothing in the BICI report that provides for this set of tools. Furthermore, Jones noted that the report does not include a "set of mechanisms for making clear what the responsibilities of the government are." The report, he asserted, has accomplished one thing: it has produced a "damning narrative of the excessive use of force," implicating the regime as the responsible party. Meanwhile, the report has been a political failure thus far, as it has failed to achieve its implicit political goals, or to even discuss political steps. Duss interjected, highlighting the apparent tension in U.S. policy between values and national interests, a false dichotomy that is apparent in the case of Bahrain.

Exum addressed this tension between ideals and interests, stating that the U.S. is in a "difficult position" in terms of its policy in the Gulf: whereas popular protests call for democratization in the Gulf, the U.S. is most invested in the nations that are not democratic and that, furthermore, are actively obstructing democratic reforms. **He posed the question of whether reducing U.S. involvement with a given regime will help or hurt the cause of advancing U.S. interests.** Exum posited that there exists a middle ground that will allow the U.S. to affect a regime's behavior and disposition without harming U.S. interests.

During the question and answer session, the speakers agreed that the uprisings of the Arab Spring have proven that ideals and interests are compatible, and that the U.S. advances its interests in the region by advocating its ideals. While this compatibility has been proven in theory, U.S. policy has not yet caught up. Jones noted that it will be interesting to see how the U.S. will define its interests in the era after the Arab Spring. For now, however, the American response remains trapped: U.S. support for democracy may advance its interests in the long term, but concerns remain for policy makers in the short term. Jones was sure that the benefits outweigh the risks in the short term. Panelists also warned that the Government of Bahrain will surely find ways to talk about reform while doing something else; in other words, the regime will use new strategies in an attempt to out-manuever calls for reform. Jones concluded by stating, "It's not 2010 anymore. This is a totally new era in Arab politics." Dooley warned that the tone of Bahraini protests is changing, and that if the regime fails to reform or offer a space for expression, unrest is likely to escalate toward extremism.