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**“The Unfinished February 14 Uprising: What Next for Bahrain?”**  
**Dirksen Senate Office Building**  
**Constitution Avenue and 1st Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002**  
**Thursday February 9, 2012, 9:30am-11:00am**

On Thursday, Project on Middle East Democracy, in coordination with the National Security Network and the Foreign Policy Initiative, held a panel event titled *The Unfinished February 14 Uprising: What Next for Bahrain?* The event began with opening remarks from Senator **Ron Wyden** (D-OR) then moved onto a panel discussion. Panelists included **Joost Hiltermann**, deputy program director at the International Crisis Group, **Elliott Abrams**, senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and **Colin Kahl**, Associate Professor at Georgetown University. The Executive Director of Project on Middle East Democracy, **Stephen McInerney**, moderated the discussion.

**Ron Wyden** reminded the audience that despite some reports that the situation is improving, January 2012 saw the highest death toll since March of 2011, which was shortly after the uprising started. He **commended the King of Bahrain for the creation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, describing it as a show of willingness to reform and change. However, Wyden said the changes have been cosmetic,** and when NGOs are not let into the country or when protestors are still dying from government crackdowns, more needs to be done. Therefore, **Wyden stated he is not in support of the arms sales to Bahrain that the Obama administration is pushing forward because “an arms sale of any kind sends the wrong message at the wrong time ... not just to Bahrain but to the world.”** He said the U.S. should not reward the government with any support until sincere and more integral changes are made. Wyden ended on a positive note, saying he sees the Bahraini government as having an opportunity to initiate honest dialogue to choose peace and reform instead of violence. He also vowed to work toward the U.S. federal government being a partner in human rights promotion. During a brief Q&A session with the Senator, it was asked how the Obama administration could balance its short- and long-term interests when it came to Bahrain. Wyden responded that he would let the administration speak for itself on that, but **emphasized that the facts cannot be disputed, and the situation on the ground must be addressed. “At the end of the day, [an arms sale] is still a big important message, and it happens to be the wrong one,” he said.**

**Joost Hiltermann** began by speaking about the observation and report that **Cherif Bassiouni** conducted in Bahrain, saying the report was filled with documentation about oppression, destruction, and repression of free speech and media. He also mentioned the [website](#) the Bahraini government has setup to illustrate all the BICI recommendations it has implemented. However, **Hiltermann echoed Senator Wyden’s sentiments that the changes have been relatively small in comparison to what really needs to be done, and described the Bahraini government as playing a “game of charm” targeted at the international community to mold foreign policy.** For example, the website is in English, not Arabic, which means it is meant for the international

audience, not the internal Bahraini one. Hiltermann concluded by saying that the problems go beyond human rights violations. Bahrain needs dialogue, accountability, and judicial reform – especially electoral law reform.

**Elliott Abrams** said he believes that greater pressure from the U.S. could have lessened the extent of the crackdown from the Bahraini government. He **expressed his disappointment in the Obama administration’s “almost complete inability to ameliorate the violence in Bahrain.”** Abrams also said that Bahrain risks being the only monarchy in the region that will not have the majority of its people’s support, and unless major reforms are implemented, the situation will only deteriorate further. He mentioned the need for a level of power sharing between the government and the people as one positive step toward change. With regard the arms sale, Abrams said he may be more supportive of it had the U.S. government been more candid about the reasoning and content of the sale, but as the situation stands, he has high levels of concern for the anniversary of the uprising approaching, and reminded the audience that time is running out for the U.S. to apply pressure on the regime.

**Colin Kahl** said he sees the Obama administration as having two goals for Bahrain: reform and partnership. Reform in many sectors (security, electoral law, human rights, etc) may sound idealistic, but that is necessary for the nation’s long-term stability. Partnership refers especially to security. Bahrain is a key ally for the U.S. in an area of the world where there is economic interest and a high level of terrorism threats. Kahl said the U.S. must learn to navigate these two goals by “deploying its values pragmatically.” Regarding the possibility of cutting off aid to Bahrain to push reform, Kahl said it could never work because the stakes of losing the ally relationship are bigger for the U.S. than for Bahrain. **Asymmetrical stakes make a threat such as cutting off aid impractical and ineffective.** He concluded by saying the U.S. must emphasize that Bahrain’s stability is in everyone’s long-term interest, and in the absence of reform, the future will hold “deep turmoil.”

During Q&A, many questions surrounded concerns about the arms sale and about how U.S.-Iran tensions would influence U.S. policy toward Bahrain. Regarding the arms sale, Kahl said **cancelling the sale of arms would not make a difference – it would not trigger the Bahraini government to make grandiose reforms overnight.** Sending these arms, provided they are truly used for Bahrain’s external defenses, could be in the interest of the U.S. because it could mean better security and stability for Bahrain. Showing some support now could increase the leverage the U.S. has to apply pressure for reform. Regarding the U.S.-Iran tensions, Kahl said that he did not feel it would make much of a difference in shaping U.S. policy toward Bahrain, but did say that it **raises concerns about the prevalent sectarian tensions in the region.**