

**What Next for Bahrain?
Senator Ron Wyden
Thursday, February 9th, 2012**

Remarks as prepared

Good morning everyone. I'd like to thank the Project on Middle East Democracy for continuing to highlight the importance of what's going on in Bahrain. I'd like to also thank the Foreign Policy Initiative and the National Security Network for helping to make this event possible.

We are all here to assess the situation in Bahrain almost a year after the protests in that country began, and over two months since the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry released their recommendations.

However, it might be more accurate to say that it has been a year since the start of the **latest** protests. For decades, the people of Bahrain have periodically taken to the streets to demand political and social reforms. But this last year has seen the largest series of protests -- protests that have again been met with government violence.

It is easy to get upset about what has been happening in Bahrain.

January saw the highest death toll in Bahrain since March of 2011. Nine people lost their lives, and the number of deaths continues to increase as the one-year anniversary of the uprisings approaches.

Violent clashes between the government and protestors continue. Torture appears to be the cause of death for at least one of protestors. And security forces continue to attack funeral processions, displays of public mourning, and other peaceful gatherings. Some deaths apparently occurred as a result of the government's excessive use of tear gas. Just a few days ago, on February 1st, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights reported two more deaths resulting from tear gas inhalation.

The government of Bahrain argues that they are making progress in implementing the reforms recommended by the Independent Commission. They also point to increasing violence among the protestors as a cause of the clashes with police. In fairness, there is some truth to this. Some protestors, increasingly frustrated with the brutality they face at the hands of their own government, have lashed out with violence. And there have been efforts – still limited, but increasing – to comply with the recommendations of the Independent Commission.

In addition, I would be remiss if I failed to applaud the King for setting up the Independent Commission. It took an astonishingly rare act of political courage to allow such an outside investigation, and to sit – live on national television – while the results of the investigation were reported. The Commission was not perfect, and it was limited in scope, but it showed at least a willingness to be honest about the human rights issues in Bahrain. I hope to see more of that political courage.

However, movement toward reform has so far been minor – and, I fear, cosmetic. They clearly not gone far enough to indicate that the government is serious about larger reform – much less address the systemic discrimination that continues to persist in the country.

I am also worried that the government's practice of turning away outside monitors will make it even harder to get a balanced view of what is happening inside Bahrain.

Just a few weeks ago, Brian Dooley of Human Rights First, was denied entry in to Bahrain. So was Richard Sollom of Physicians for Human Rights. These denials came after the Bahraini Foreign Minister indicated that Bahrain would not deny entry to representatives from non-governmental organizations. To measure any progress claimed by the government, it is absolutely critical that independent human rights monitors are allowed unrestricted access into and around the country.

I have also been disappointed by the timid response from our Administration.

As many of you already know, the Administration notified Congress in September of their plan to sell \$53 million worth of arms to Bahrain. That was bad timing and inappropriate given the violence being perpetrated by the government at that time.

That is why I introduced a Joint Resolution that would have prohibited the arms sale from proceeding until certain conditions were met. Several of my colleagues and I also sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outlining our concerns about the proposed arms sale. In response, the State Department acknowledged our concerns and indicated it would suspend the sale.

Unfortunately, the State Department has revealed that it is continuing with other arms sales to Bahrain. The State Department has publicly said that the arms sales include spare parts and maintenance of equipment for external defense. I do not

believe that any of the items will be used against protestors, but I do think that the sales send the wrong message.

The continued violence by the police, continued tear-gassings, and continued abuses perpetrated by the government, should cause our government to use every lever it has to influence the Kingdom.

I've had very candid and frank conversations with senior administration officials about my concerns, and I understand that our diplomats are in a difficult position. But I want to underscore the fact that continuing with an arms sale – of *any* kind – sends the wrong message at the wrong time. And not just to Bahrainis, but to the world.

The United States must be consistent in its approach to democracy and human rights. Every exception we make undermines our nation's claim to be the true champion of these values throughout world.

Given the explosion of sectarian violence and hatred in Bahrain, it is easy to be pessimistic.

But it is also possible that we will see a new start for Bahrain.

The government of Bahrain has the opportunity to allow peaceful protest. To start an honest dialog. To take a step forward without sliding back.

The choice is in the hands of the government of Bahrain. They can choose peace, dialog and reform. Or they can continue down the destructive path of frustration, fear, and violence.

We know what the right choice is. Let's hope the Government of Bahrain knows it as well.

There will be no better referendum on their progress than how they handle peaceful protestors in the coming days. I'm sure we'll all be watching how events unfold very carefully.

Thank you all. Happy to take any questions you might have right now.