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**“The Arab Spring after Two Years: Prospects for Democracy in the Gulf States”  
The National Endowment for Democracy (NED)'s International Forum for Democratic Studies  
and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)  
Wednesday, February 13, 2013, 8:30am-12:15pm  
NED, 1025 F Street NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20004**

NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies and POMED put on a conference on Wednesday (2/13) titled “The Arab Spring after Two Years: Prospects for Democracy in the Gulf States.” **Carl Gershman** of NED and U.S. Representative **James McGovern** (D-MA) gave opening remarks. The first panel, “The Future of Reform in the Gulf,” was chaired by **Tamara Cofman Wittes** of the Brookings Institution and featured **Jafar Alshayeb**, a Saudi human rights activist, **Laith Kubba** of NED, and Ambassador **Richard LeBaron** of the Atlantic Council. Next was “The Crisis in Bahrain: Is a Negotiated Solution Possible?” chaired by **Stephen McNerney** of POMED featuring **Khalil al-Marzooq** of Al-Wefaq Political Society, **Jalila al-Salman** of the Bahrain Teachers' Association, and **Tom Malinowski** of Human Rights Watch.

**Carl Gershman** opened the event by identifying the three reasons for holding the conference: to express solidarity with those striving for democracy; to emphasize that there is no contradiction between pushing for reform and defending strategic interests, or between reform and stability, but quite the contrary; and to support and encourage the tentative, uncertain steps toward negotiation in Bahrain. Gershman noted **Maryam Alkhawaja**'s efforts as acting president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR).

**James McGovern** summarized the last two years' events in Bahrain, noting that though some the BICI report's recommendations are being implemented, human rights violations continue. He mentioned the continued detentions of **Abdulhadi al-Khawaja** and **Nabeel Rajab** of BCHR. McGovern implored the government of Bahrain to engage in a genuine dialogue and to release political prisoners. He said the U.S. must send a strong message to Bahrain by banning all arms sales, and, if repression continues, actively seeking to relocate the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. He added that the U.S. must show Bahrain that its true strategic allies are those that seek a democratic Bahrain. McGovern called the situation a test for the U.S., which must be consistent if it wants to be a human rights leader. He added that the U.S. must change its Middle East policy and that doing so will have a positive impact and increase U.S. security.

Taking questions, McGovern acknowledged that the U.S.'s double standard undermines its ability to push for human rights. He said that the U.S. must show leadership by making its position clear, though what happens in these countries will be determined by their people. McGovern admitted that Bahrain was not a high profile issue in Congress until the crackdown, and that many members of Congress saw it as a national security issue. Faced with the reality that the situation is boiling over, more members are becoming aware and concerned. McGovern emphasized that human rights and national security cannot be separated, and that if the U.S. really cares about human rights it must behave like it, not just talk.

### **“The Future of Reform in the Gulf”**

**Jafar Alshayeb** said the desire for democracy has existed in all of the GCC countries for many years, but the Arab Spring provided the environment to talk openly about the need for change and power-

sharing. He noted the prodemocracy activities taking place in Kuwait, Oman, and UAE, and Saudi Arabia despite the restrictive environments. In Saudi, the main issue is the long-term detention of prisoners, possibly more than 10,000. He said that for the first time women are participating, demanding their relatives' release, and that female students are also protesting, demanding better services from their universities. Alshayeb views the Arab Spring as raising three challenges. 1) Ideological: these countries use religious legitimacy to rule, but this is now being questioned. 2) Political: people are challenging the limitations of the absolute ruling families and demanding more power sharing. 3) Social: there is rising awareness, especially among women and youth, for pursuing more participation. Alshayeb asserted that people are not satisfied with the reforms enacted so far, and that the GCC countries other than Oman are still using financial packages and half-measures to stave off further reform. Additionally, repression is still being used, and the governments are also using sectarianism to divide the opposition. He predicted very slow, unplanned moves from the government, and growth in the opposition. Alshayeb said it is important to support political participation and power-sharing now before things accelerate and the risk of breakdown increases. The regimes also have to face unemployment, corruption, and minority rights.

**Laith Kubba** said we need to take the signs under the surface in the Gulf seriously, because similar things happened in Tunisia three years ago but nobody believed an eruption would occur. Because the revolutions are messy, risky and dangerous, reform may be a better path. He said that the governments, which he called outdated, must not assume that their populations live in a bubble and can be placated with conditioning and money. Kubba reviewed the actors demanding change: those driven by economic factors, minorities, which are the primary source, migrant workers, and a generation of women whose aspirations cannot be met under the current order. He noted that even some parts of the royal families view reform as the logical choice. He cited the need better analysis of how to be effective but to also do no harm. Kubba argued that in the Gulf there are many complicated factors, and no one solution or method, but two guiding principles: you can never go wrong emphasizing principles or by aligning yourselves with the people of the region. He said the right trajectory is to try to have gradual reforms that are inclusive of actors, rather than waiting for things to blow up. Kubba added that the actors need help designing modalities for these changes, and that the objective must be democratic systems.

**Richard LeBaron** said moving the needle in the Gulf is difficult because there is a huge trust issue for the U.S. as a foreign policy practitioner. They see the U.S. as incompetent for losing Iraq to Iran and failing with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. There is concern that the U.S. will strike a bargain with Iran and abandon the Gulf. He said that the U.S. views the changes as natural and helpful, while the regimes view them as existential threats. They view the MB in power in Egypt as a manifestation of a long-term strategy to take control over the region. The issue for them is not reform, but survival. LeBaron said this needs to be considered or the U.S. will look like mindless meddlers. If the U.S. approaches these regimes with the goal of constitutional or democratic monarchy, they will shut down. He noted that the Gulf is already pivoting to Asia, and China will be more sympathetic. The UAE may be slowly developing a more participatory form of governance that they can live with, and U.S. should let that play out. As a superpower, the U.S. can advocate for multiple interests at the same time, as it did in pushing for the women's vote in Kuwait and addressing migrant workers' rights there. LeBaron said the U.S. needs to game out the levers it thinks it has, because, for example, Bahrain's main patron is not the 5<sup>th</sup> fleet, but Saudi Arabia. The U.S. needs to understand how to have a dialogue without spooking its allies, and to consider the time horizon. LeBaron concluded that the U.S. has to defend its principles, push back against sectarianism, and advocate for human rights.

During the Q&A session, Alshayeb said regimes will reject all reform, whether suggested by its people or external sources. He alleged that the problem with the U.S. approach is that its diplomats only deal with a limited group of people, but said it can play an important role. He noted that younger members of

the royal family assuming high positions would be important because of the generation gap in Saudi society. Kubba suggested that the ruling families are pragmatists that have survived thus far by balancing tribal and other internal interests, so we need to carefully read the signs that are present. He said the U.S. must have a frank conversation with its allies about the risks of refusing to reform, because if it does not address these issues now, it will have to react to them later. He emphasized that those seeking democracy need technological help. Kubba called Bahrain a lab where democratic transition is being tested and said Morocco should be an example because it is moving in the right direction. LeBaron agreed on the need to have "the conversation" with these regimes, but to do so in a way that will actually work. He advocated for the different stakeholders in Washington to have an internal discussion to figure out what they really want. He disputed that there is a competition between values and interests, saying that if the U.S.'s behavior does not align with American values that there is a larger problem. LeBaron said the idea that the U.S. only interacts with elites is a myth, as he can attest to engaging civil society. He said the issue of migrant workers is huge and deserves much more attention. Finally, he said he thinks of Qatar and UAE as brands run by families more than countries, and that the tarnishing of their brands should be part of the conversation.

### **"The Crisis in Bahrain: Is a Negotiated Solution Possible?"**

**Stephen McInerney** introduced the panel discussion and pointed out that the discussion, coinciding with the second anniversary of the beginning of the movement in Bahrain, provided an excellent opportunity to assess the recent efforts to launch a national dialogue inclusive of all political forces.

**Khalil al-Marzooq** noted that the anniversary of the Bahrain uprisings—Valentine's Day—is not coincidental, but a "symbol of love and light," and indicative of the priorities of Bahraini citizens. The escalation of protests in the past month demonstrates the people's commitment to achieving their aspirations. He remarked that the call for dialogue and political opening may or may not be credible as it could be a tactic to legitimize the regime, but it is also an opportunity that should be taken advantage of. For the last 15 years the authorities have on occasion promised to deliver reform, but they were largely "decorative moves" lacking in substance. Al-Marzooq clarified that politicians must "seize opportunity and create credibility, and move towards... a process to a solution." There are many potential scenarios, and no guaranteed final result, but the situation should not be allowed to deteriorate indefinitely. It is necessary to "abide by a credible process that opens up a platform for real negotiations" and move to a system that "protects the rights of everyone" and does not allow external actors to manipulate the result. It is therefore time for all stakeholders—including the international community—to abide by their standards, values, and principles, rather than strategic interests. Regional stability cannot be achieved without each state realizing stability, which cannot occur unless all actors are part of the discussion.

**Jalila al-Salman** reported on the state of labor and education politics, drawing from her personal experiences and those of her colleagues as "the struggle continues and so [do] the atrocities." Companies continue to dismiss their employees and violations against workers have increased. Eighty percent of educators have been subject to violations, with 63% having undergone questioning by security forces, 50% suspended or forced to take a salary cut, and 7% demoted. Teachers have been dismissed, questioned, imprisoned, and mistreated in multiple ways. Meanwhile more than 400 students have been suspended from the University of Bahrain, and seven sent to a military tribunal, 144 to a civilian court, and another 80 have been arrested. The struggle over the university began on March 13, when thugs raided the university. A number of students have since been detained, expelled, returned, and re-expelled. Many of the students dismissed were excellent students on scholarship, and are now being asked to pay back the funds. As an educator, woman, and laborer, al-Salman herself is a "living example of atrocity." She was arrested multiple times, sexually abused, and forced to sign a confession of

wrongdoing. She did not expect anything from the dialogue, but said that negotiations should take place that do not allow the government to impose its ideology. This call for dialogue is probably "propaganda from the Bahraini regime for the international community," since the Ministers of Education and Justice—in large part responsible for committing the aforementioned atrocities—will still participate.

**Tom Malinowski** recalled his detention in Bahrain, which typified the regime's strategy of arresting everyone present at a demonstration. It enabled him to speak with police forces, who, in following orders, have also become "victims in this crisis." Malinowski contended that Bahrain has "not yet crossed the point of no return," and that there is still a chance for compromise. The key issue is not the dialogue, but whether a "negotiated solution is possible." It would require: empowering parliament to manage country affairs, which is elected in a fair way (not gerrymandered), guarantees of minority rights, a constitutional monarchy, and complete integration of security forces rather than a sectarian arrangement. He said the key is whether the dialogue is intended as a mechanism to achieve a viable solution, or time-buying show. There are promising signs, but the government merely acting as a mediator is unacceptable as it is "party to the conflict and needs to be at the negotiating table." Moreover, the government has yet to take any confidence-building measures, release political prisoners, or prepare its constituency for a compromise. Instead, it has resorted to demonizing supporters of the dialogue, including the U.S., impeding progress. Malinowski also described the current reality in Bahrain as demonstrative of the weaknesses in U.S. foreign policy. The administration has tried to simultaneously maintain its security relationship with Bahrain and reassure the monarchy while also stressing human rights and compromise. Malinowski argued that the only way to save the security partnership is to de-emphasize it and focus on stabilizing the political situation, engaging with both government and opposition figures equally. He said the U.S. needs to urge Bahrain to: take confidence building measures, release political prisoners, tamp down its rhetoric, and ensure that the dialogue produces a compromise so that moderates are not alienated and discredited. If it fails, the U.S. will be forced to reevaluate its security relationship. He concluded that it is time for the U.S. to demonstrate that its support for human rights is "principled, not situational," and Bahrain is the place to prove it.

In the follow up discussion, al-Marzooq said that the problem in Bahrain is ultimately not a sectarian one, but one between the rulers and the ruled—the people have no say in the political system, which "nullifies power of legitimate authority." He contended that the Bahraini people are tolerant, but if the sectarian divide is strategically used to polarize society, it would be "disastrous" and it would take 4-5 generations to overcome—constituting a potential point of leverage for internal and external forces. Al-Salman described the impact of government action on the educational environment as entirely detrimental because replacement teachers are unqualified, which is clearly evident in student performance. Malinowski pointed out that the security partnership is more necessary for Bahrain than the U.S. given the lack of viable alternatives—a potential leverage point.

During the Q&A, al-Salman said that she could not return to her former life given her experiences, and that she and others were targeted not for being women, but for their activism. She also stated that international activists should pressure their governments to change their foreign policy and approach to diplomacy towards Bahrain. Al-Marzooq enumerated the minimum requirements for compromise, but also emphasized that a fair electoral system does not end with the ratification of a new constitution, pointing to developments in Morocco as a successful example of reform efforts that brought all relevant actors to the table. Malinowski pointed out that in the long-term it is important for the Gulf countries to recognize the implications of the U.S. pivot to Asia for GCC leaders, as well as the impracticality and unlikelihood of Bahrain continuing to "simmer at a low boil for a long time or return to a state of stable repression." He ended by emphasizing the obligation to include the monarchy in any discussion—so that its role will "be more than symbolic...that dialogue isn't a trap that leads to its ultimate demise."