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"Dynamic Gulf: Forces of Change in a Strategic Region"
Panel I: New Trends in Activism: Youth, Women, and Islamists
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace & the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)
Friday, June 14, 2013 8:45am-10:30am
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) co-hosted a conference titled "Dynamic Gulf: Forces of Change in a Strategic Region." The first panel, "New Trends in Activism: Youth, Women, and Islamists", was moderated by **Stephen McInerney**, Executive Director of POMED, and featured as panelists **Kristin Smith Diwan**, Assistant Professor of Comparative and Regional Studies at the American University School of International Service; **Jane Kinninmont**, senior research fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House; and **Ahmed al Omran**, Saudi blogger and writer for the Riyadh Bureau. The panelists discussed how activist movements in the Gulf have adapted to changing social factors, new media, and the involvement of new actors.

In his opening remarks, **Frederick Wehrey**, senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, discussed the perception among policymakers in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings that the Gulf remained a stable region immune to change. He noted that the exceptionality of the Gulf region in this regard was often attributed to factors such as oil rents, small and homogeneous populations, robust security forces, and high levels of wealth. However, Wehrey pointed out that another body of scholarship had been devoted to predicting the collapse of the Gulf regimes, focusing on factors such as the involvement of new social and political actors, an increasing youth population questioning the social contract, the diminishing returns of subsidies, increasing sectarianism, and the changing dynamics of global partnerships with external actors.

Kristen Diwan began her discussion by noting that describing the Gulf as "dynamic" pushed back against a "strong meta-narrative" that the Gulf is an "island of stability," and added that it was important to acknowledge the changes taking place in the region. One of the major changes she identified is the overall form that activism takes. Traditionally, activism in the Gulf states occurred through organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and emphasized hierarchy, recruitment, education, da'wah, and a group mindset. However, Diwan noted **that recent social changes, such as the rise of consumerism, have created an environment that is more individualistic, attune to personal preferences, and less exclusive.** This phenomenon is also creating more opportunities for engagement and interaction. As a result, **the old model of engagement used by organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer effective in rallying youth.** New structures of activism, Diwan said, are not nearly as top-down, and are rooted more in volunteerism which allows activists to pursue individual strengths and interests. This new model also relies more on technology. These changes are important because they force us to take another look at who is influencing the younger generation, and reflect the frustration that young people are feeling with the formal government structure.

Jane Kinninmont re-emphasized the dynamism of the Gulf, noting that even if we are not seeing changes in formal political structures, we are seeing changes in informal politics and activism. Kinninmont said that although political grievances and demands over time have had common themes,

the form that these grievances take has changed. She noted that since 2011, even Gulf countries with established parliamentary systems have grown dissatisfied with formal political structures. **One of the newer forms this dissatisfaction has taken is the emergence of "leaderless" protests.** This structure is beneficial to protestors because having no leadership makes it difficult for the government to suppress protests by arresting the top tiers of leadership, or to co-opt the leadership by giving them jobs. However, having no clear leadership makes it difficult to hold negotiations between the government and the opposition. Kinninmont also pointed out that the ideological basis for activism has changed substantially over time—from nationalism, to pan-Arabism, to political Islam—and noted that **observers should question what ideological basis will follow Islamism.** Next, Kinninmont discussed aspects of activism that were genuinely new developments. The involvement of women in political spaces is a recent development she said, pointing to a generation of young women that are involved in the government and in protests. "That generation of women wants something in return," she said; however, women remain lacking in representation, and even those women in parliamentary structures are a very small minority and are largely pro-government. Another new factor impacting activism, Kinninmont said, is the access to international and social media, and the increased availability of information. She concluded by **noting that it was important to remember that activism was not always necessarily "oppositional" in nature,** and urged the audience to question what happens to people when they become "newly politicized" as those in the Gulf are.

Ahmed al Omran pointed to three activist movements that had been present in Saudi Arabia since the 2011 Arab uprisings. The first was the Shi'a movement in the eastern province; the second was the movement of the families of prisoners; and the third was the Saudi women's movement for the right to drive. He noted two commonalities between these three movements. The first was that **much of the activism took place on the streets,** which was a rare occurrence until very recently. Al Omran pointed out that Saudi Arabia was an absolute monarchy, and that the people had no tradition of challenging the government. Furthermore, the Saudi regime often used religion to mollify protestors, imploring the religious establishment to issue fatwas against protestors. Secondly, al Omran **emphasized the role of social media in providing a means through which to organize and hold debates.** However, he noted that **"these tools are agnostic,"** and explained that the Saudi government eventually adopted social media as a way to promote their own agenda and counter the narratives of activist movements. He concluded that although protests had been limited, social media had encouraged new forms of criticism and debate that "are not just talk." He added, **"At some point, these people begin to convert these words into action."**

In response to a question from the audience about how youth in the Gulf felt about U.S. policy in the region, al Omran responded that, although the groups often claim that they are not waiting for our expecting U.S. support, **there has been frustration that the U.S. has largely been ignoring government crackdowns on protests.** Kinninmont added that youth tended to be critical of U.S. policy in Israel, Iraq, and Syria, and noted that the U.S. was "caught between a rock and a hard place" because, while the people in the Gulf see the U.S. as siding with their governments, the governments are sensitive to language from the U.S. encouraging democracy. Another audience member asked about the role of Gulf students educated abroad in the changing dynamics of activism. Kinninmont replied that students educated abroad were a major factor in driving change, but added that many came back to work for the government rather than to challenge it. Al Omran disagreed, noting that many returning graduates were unable to find employment, even with the government. He said this only served to further frustrate youth, and **cautioned that Saudi Arabia might face a "brain drain" in the coming years.**