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## **“Criminalization of Dissent in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE”**

**Human Rights First**

**Friday, November 14, 2014**

**808 15<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Washington, DC**

On Friday, November 14, POMED co-sponsored a discussion on the repression of pro-democracy and human rights activists in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The panel included Maryam Al-Khawaja, Co-director of the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR); Brian Dooley, Director of the Human Rights Defenders program at Human Rights First (HRF); Melanie Gingell, human rights lawyer; Khalid Ibrahim, Co-Director of the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR); and Nabeel Rajab, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), via Skype. The discussion was moderated by Joe Stork, MENA Division Deputy Director at Human Rights Watch (HRF).

Joe Stork began the discussion by explaining that the decision to focus specifically on oppression in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE was the result of a pattern of harassment of human rights activists in those countries and the surrounding region. With regard to Bahrain, Stork explained how the country once had a history of a vibrant civil society, although that has rapidly changed over the years as the Al Khalifa regime continues to tighten its grip on power. Meanwhile, an absence of space for civil society has long been characteristic of the environment in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He accused all three countries of “financing oppression” and called out Western leaders, particularly those in the U.S. and UK, for overlooking such extreme cases of abuse. He suggested that the U.S. could put pressure on these countries to reform by monitoring the trials of human rights defenders and naming specific cases in press statements.

Khalid Ibrahim gave a brief background on the history of the human rights environment in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. He then went into detail about the mission of GCHR and its work providing support and protection to human rights defenders in the region. Ibrahim urged the U.S. administration to “use its influence to ensure the release of all the detained human rights defenders in the region,” and that these activists could continue their legitimate activities without fear of retribution. “There is no prosperity without respect for human rights,” he concluded.

Brian Dooley expanded further on the relationship between the United States and the GCC. While military ties have always been extremely strong, he said relations with civil society organizations have not. Dooley warned that the continued suppression of human rights and civil societies directly fuels extremism and can be attributed to the rise of ISIS in the MENA region.

However, the threat of ISIS outside Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE is not the only concern for these governing authorities, extremism also exists as a threat to internal security as well. Dooley recommended that the U.S. utilize its strong military relationship to leverage more protection for human rights defenders. At the upcoming Manama Dialogue, he suggested that U.S. representatives in attendance could do their part by publicly naming people facing unlawful detention and call for their release. If that action alone doesn't help, Dooley proposed freezing assets for governmental elites found to be perpetrating human rights abuses.

Melanie Gringell reported on her experience observing trials for human rights defenders in the United Arab Emirates. She spoke in detail of the "UAE 94," a case of massive arrests against human rights defenders, who were later charged with trying to overthrow the government. She recalled how many of the UAE 94 showed signs of physical and psychological abuse and gave confessions obtained under duress. Gringell then raised fears over how the government's newly amended anti-terrorism laws can be used to attack human rights defenders by taking existing minor crimes and declaring them terrorist acts. She described how the UAE has introduced 68 new articles of anti-terrorism legislation that don't require the intent of violence as most internationally recognized legislation would specify.

Maryam Al-Khawaja spoke next, explaining in detail how hundreds of people in Saudi Arabia have been imprisoned without trial or knowledge of their charges and subjected to abuse. She noted how Saudi Arabia has no law for associations, which makes working for or even speaking of human rights NGOs illegal. According to Al-Khawaja, the main difference between Saudi Arabia's actions and those of Bahrain or the UAE is that the authorities in Saudi Arabia are less concerned with making charges against individuals that are politically correct or legally viable. She also explained the GCC security agreement, which allows authorities throughout the region to arrest and detain any Gulf national on any criminal charge. Travelling to any other GCC state as a human rights defender means they can get arrested, tried, and sentenced there, she warned.

Nabeel Rajab wrapped up the discussion, speaking via skype call from Bahrain. He reminded the U.S. and UK of their moral obligation to protect human rights and called on all Western governments to urge the Bahraini government to respect international law. "We just want to be like you [U.S. and European democracies] and enjoy human rights," Rajab said. He reminded the U.S. that in GCC states, human rights defenders are being labeled as terrorists while real terrorists are allowed to roam free. In order to fight terrorism, Rajab argued that the United States must address the roots of the issue and understand that religious extremism is the result of government crackdown on political discussion. Extremism will exist as long as there is no legitimate framework available for people to voice their opinions. Reiterating calls for the U.S. to pressure Bahrain to release political prisoners and respect human rights, Rajab also suggested using free trade agreements as a means to legally bind the Bahraini authorities to human rights standards.