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“Dynamic Gulf: Forces of Change in a Strategic Region”

Panel II: A New Ruling Bargain? Reform and Gulf Elite Dynamics

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)

Friday, June 14, 2013, 10:45am-12:15pm

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 second panel, "A New Ruling Bargain? Reform and Gulf Elite Dynamics," was moderated by Prof. **Marc Lynch**, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University, and featured panelists **Andrew Hammond**, former Reuters correspondent for Saudi Arabia, **Ali Al Shihabi**, author and investment banker from Saudi Arabia, and Prof. **Abdulhadi al-Khalaf**, former Bahraini member of parliament and professor of Sociology at Lund University in Sweden. The Panelists discussed the future of the Gulf monarchies' ruling families, political systems and political culture in the face of the political transitions brought on by the Arab Spring, emerging crises in countries like Syria and Yemen, as well as the influence of countries like Iran and deteriorating sectarian relations across the region.

Andrew Hammond opened the discussion by commenting how lasting essentialist depictions of Arabs, especially in the Gulf, which depict people in the region as unchanging and satisfied with the political status quo, are produced by the regime and orientalist. In reality, the notion that the Saudi monarchy remains "unshakable" is definitely a questionable one. He also argued that the Salafi ideology in Saudi Arabia has evolved dramatically in recent years, as only two years ago the Salafi clerics would argue that protesting was "un-Islamic" but now Saudi clerics are some of the most politically active members of Saudi society. Hammond clarified that while the Muslim Brotherhood likewise plays a major role in Saudi society, it doesn't carry the political weight of the clerics. As he commented, "the brotherhood is a movement of laymen, not clerics." Unlike Shi'a political movements, where individuals take on the roles of politicians and clerics simultaneously (as most obvious in the case of Hezbollah leader **Hassan Nasrallah**), Sunni political movement in the Arab world typically keep separate the roles of clerics and lay politicians.

As for democracy promotion in Saudi Arabia, Mr. Hammond mentioned that some in Saudi Arabia fear democracy in Saudi Arabia because such **attacks on the ruling monarchy would empower the clerics more, and worst case scenario would lead to Saudi Arabia becoming a theocracy similar to Iran's**. With respect to the Gulf in general, Mr. Hammond pointed to Bahrain as an example of how elites in the Gulf are not interested in creating meaningful change in nearly any capacity. In fact, the ruling families' responses to crises in countries like Libya and Syria largely indicate counter-revolutionary goals. However, most opposition figures and groups in Gulf countries have not been calling for the fall of the local regime the way protesters in countries like Egypt and Libya did.

Ali Al Shihabi began his remarks by elites are actually fine with the idea of social and political change, they just become distrustful and dissatisfied unless those changes are well defined.

Western elites and political analysts are obsessed with their version of democracy in his view, stating that **Westerners often support “cosmetic” realities**, such as the “elections” in Iran that are ultimately decided by the whim of the Supreme Leader, at the expense of actionable, achievable goals, such as an independent judiciary, budget transparency to combat rulers’ excesses and government corruption, and expanded press freedom. Elites do understand that political and social change has to take place, but have concerns as to how that change should and will develop. Anyone who has read de Tocqueville would know that governments are at their most vulnerable when they are reforming. Ideally, these will take place over time (perhaps decades, though hopefully not centuries), and should occur not as fast as revolutions like the one in Egypt took place, nor in a way that requires the near destruction of state institutions. In other words, reforms need to focus on governance and not freedom and democracy. He also argued that the power and stability of Saudi Arabia “legitimizes” all the other Gulf monarchies, and that the future of the Gulf’s political identity will be written in Riyadh.

Prof. **Abdulhadi al-Khalaf** opened his statement by stating how Gulf monarchies have been able to maintain a remarkable amount of stability in spite of them enduring countless wars, coups d’état, palace coups, and other challenges, as well as maintained their strength oftentimes in countries where more than 50% of the population are migrant workers who lack citizenship and rights. **“The ruling families in the Gulf,” Khalaf argued, “just love fragmenting societies,”** and distribute wealth in such a way that puts different sects, whether they be along religious, ethnic, even gender lines or lines within villages, into competition with each other. This authoritarianism, as well as their wealth in general and alliances with the West (no one in the West, for example, decried the dissolution of the parliament on which al-Khalaf served in Bahrain) are what ensure the survival of the Gulf regimes.

As Dr. Lynch opened up discussion within the panel, Mr. Shihabi argued that observers should not ignore the positives of regimes like the Saudi monarchy: the country has maintained nearly a century of stability in stark contrast to regimes like **Saddam Hussein’s** in Iraq or **Muammar al-Qaddafi’s** in Libya. And as the question and answer period began, Mr. Hammond argued that corruption in the Gulf will not be completely fixed until people have the right to vote in response to a question challenging Mr. Shihadi’s assertion that enacting “governance” reforms will be easier than enacting “democratic” ones. In response to a question on why the “new ruling bargain” in the Gulf remains largely the same even post-Arab spring, Mr. Shihabi argued that things like budgetary transparency improve gradually, and do not develop rapidly through Islamic political movements or other revolutionary movements. In response to several questions on migrant worker populations in the Gulf who lack citizenship and other basic rights, Mr. al-Khalaf argued that as Gulf countries reform and the migrant populations increase, they too will demand greater inclusion within the evolving political system. Finally, following a question on whether or not American democratization efforts were taken seriously in the Gulf, Mr. Hammond responded with a resounding no.