



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

Project on Middle East Democracy and Freedom House

The State of Reform: Human Rights, Democratic Development and Individual Freedoms in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States

2105 Rayburn House Office Building, 1 November 2007, 2:30 PM

Project on Middle East Democracy and Freedom House presented a panel of speakers addressing the issue of reform in Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states. **Thomas Melia**, Deputy Executive Director of Freedom House and former Director of Middle East Programs at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and **Ali Alyami**, Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, spoke on reform in Saudi Arabia. **David Mikosz**, Associate Director of the Center for Democracy and Election Management at the American University in Washington, D.C., and **Nathan Brown**, Professor of Political Science at George Washington University and Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, spoke about reform in the other Gulf states.

Thomas Melia spoke about Freedom House's assessment of freedom in Saudi Arabia, and noted that it ranked among the worst of the worst. He did say that there have been slight improvements since the Khobar Tower Bombing forced the issue to the royal family's attention, including recent judicial reform and slightly more open discussion of formerly taboo topics. However, Saudis are fundamentally not free and this is not changing. He concluded by saying that "reform will only come from within Saudi Arabia;" the Saudis will have to find solutions that make sense to them.

Ali Alyami began by mentioning Mrs. Bush's recent visit to Saudi Arabia to speak to women about breast cancer and told how she "donned the Saudi black *abaya* out of respect for the culture." However, he argued that "the *abaya* represents the most dehumanizing and repressive policy" and that it is not about culture or tradition, but a pure Saudi-Wahhabi plot. He suggested that Saudi women would have been better served by Mrs. Bush helping them fight their segregation and gain their rights than talking about cancer.

He went on to speak about several "steps" that have been taken by the Saudi government, but argued that they mean nothing in terms of real change and reform. First, he pointed out that King Abdullah has met with reformers and had national dialog meetings. However, none of the recommendations have been carried out. Also, the staff of human rights associations that were formed are appointed and paid by the government, making them meaningless. Finally, while there have been municipal council elections, women and the armed forces were disenfranchised, and the councils have no power.

David Mikosz focused his remarks on the importance of properly run electoral administrations. He said that while there are bound to be occasional problems with elections, the question is are

they deliberate or accidental. With proper, non-partisan electoral administrations the problems don't drive the people away from the electoral system. He cited as an example that Kuwaitis may be disappointed in the lack of power of their elected officials but they don't feel cheated because of the electoral system. He also argued that the electoral system can ameliorate problems by helping to widen the reach of citizenship and participation.

Nathan Brown started off speaking about four features of the small Gulf states, such as Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. First, they are family monarchies. He emphasized that the family is an institution and the country is jointly run rather than controlled by one person. Second, there is a strong division between citizens and non-citizens. This feature is very apparent because of the large number of foreign workers in these countries who do not have rights. Third, oil wealth is a critical factor. Forth, there is some mechanism for consultation, though they are not democratic whether elected or appointed.

He then spoke about two things that have happened in these states, and two that have not. First, freedom of expression has expanded; there are more political debates, at least about social issues. Second, the parliaments or consultative councils have incrementally increased in terms of democracy and power. He cited the example of the Kuwaiti parliament that is successful in bring down ministers they oppose. Of the two things that are not changing, the first is that foreign labor has no rights at all. He said that until this issue gets a lot of media attention and/or is cast in terms of negatively impacting the business climate there will not be any action on the issue. Second, there is no fiscal accountability and no real action to control the corruption that has come with the oil wealth. He suggested, in conclusion, that democratization will most likely come to the Gulf through a steady accretion of powers to an increasingly assertive parliament.

Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA), who attended the event, told the panel that he is preparing to take a congressional delegation to the Middle East and asked about the United States' credibility since we can be accused with upholding Egypt's authoritarian government or of attempting to overturn election results we don't like. He said we are basically saying do what we tell you rather than do what we do.

Nathan Brown responded by agreeing that the first thing everyone in the Arab world comments on is Guantanamo. However, many elites have studied in the US and the American model still has some credibility. Thomas Melia said that what most activists are saying is listen to your own people. He also said that America is a good example because it is dynamic and self correcting. There is "pushback" against unpopular policies; our democracy is always a work in progress. Ali Alyami replied that Congress can do a lot to empower the people of the Gulf. He also said that you can't compare US mistakes like Abu Ghraib to the government policies of the Gulf.

During the Q&A, the panel was asked how helpful it really is for the US to push for reform and if it hurt the credibility of local reformers. Ali Alyami responded that without international pressure nothing would ever change. He said the US should make military protection of the Saudis contingent on reform because with out the reform they are exporting extremism that is making everyone less safe. Thomas Melia added that international solidarity is welcome by local human rights activists. Nathan Brown admitted that there is a dilemma in promoting reform, but it is less of an issue in the Gulf than in other parts of the world. He cited the example

of women being able to vote in Kuwait, and said that it happened because the Kuwaitis got tired of being asked why women couldn't vote over and over again. Constant outside questioning gradually created wide acceptance for women voting.