

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
MENA Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Arabian Peninsula: Yemen and Bahrain
Tuesday, November 19, 2013**

With so much focus being given to the conflict in Syria, the ever changing political landscape in Egypt, and of course, Iran's march toward full nuclear breakout capability, it is vitally important that we not lose sight of the big picture and remain engaged throughout the region. The U.S. must look ahead and try to anticipate problems before they arise by being proactive, rather than reactive as all too often we are.

Today we take a look at two of these countries – Yemen and Bahrain - that may not get much media attention but whose recent developments are cause for concern for U.S. national security interests and may have regional implications as well.

After more than 33 years in power in Yemen, the President of Yemen was forced to resign from office in early 2012 as a result of the rising tide of a pro-democracy movement in Yemen. Since that time, Yemen has been in a period of political transition as the Yemeni people attempt to draft a new constitution, implement new electoral laws and move toward a more inclusive governing body by implementing a National Dialogue process.

The U.S. and the international community must support the National Dialogue in its effort to get a consensus on how to move the country forward toward a path for democracy. But in order for the political process to stand a chance, the economy and the security situation must all improve in Yemen. There has been a serious and worrisome rise in extremism and civil unrest has not simmered down.

Contrary to what some in the Administration believe, al-Qaeda has not been decimated and is not on the run – it is resurgent throughout the region and Yemen is no different. The fragile socio-economic and political situations in Yemen have fostered an environment that allows al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to gain safe havens from which to operate, posing a serious threat to Yemen's stability and to our U.S. national security.

And just as Yemen has seen its fair share of uprisings as a result of the Arab Spring, so has Bahrain. Bahrain has served as the longtime headquarters for the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet, so it's in the vital interests of our national security to see a stable, unified and democratic Bahrain.

In 2002, it appeared that the government of Bahrain has set itself out on a path toward democratization. A National Action Charter was adopted by the people that led the way to Bahrain's first parliamentary elections in nearly three decades, and the first municipal elections in almost 50 years; suffrage was extended to women, political parties were finally legalized, and I introduced a resolution praising these efforts in July 2004.

That resolution reaffirmed the friendship between the U.S. and Bahrain and offered to assist Bahrain in the future should any challenge arise on its road to democracy, and that offer still stands. Fast forward to 2011, and it became clear that Bahrain did not reach the end of the path toward democracy. The political dialogue that began in 2011 has failed to bring about any of the reforms required, with several prominent members of the moderate reform parties being targeted by the regime for arrest and prosecution.

The Administration has largely remained silent throughout most of the process, but it needs to be more vocal and supportive of the non-violent, moderate reformists in Bahrain and it must stress to the government the importance of a political solution that can only be achieved by the people of Bahrain themselves. It must also call attention to the growing number of reports on human rights abuses in the country and the increasing numbers of political prisoners.

All sides must come together in Bahrain to find a political solution, and the Administration must work with the government and the opposition to come together to solve their disputes, address the human rights abuses and to fully implement the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.

As we convene this hearing today, I look forward to hearing the Administration's strategic goals and objectives in both Yemen and Bahrain, and what concrete steps we are taking to ensure regional stability as well as furthering U.S. national security interests.