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MEI Event: India and Arab Spring

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The Middle East Institute, New Delhi organized its first public event *India and the Arab Spring: Implications and Options* on Friday 28 October 2011. Held in collaboration with the India International Centre (IIC) the Panel Discussion took place at IIC. Four principal speakers initiated the discussion on India's response to the Arab Spring; they were Ambassador Chinmaya R. Gharekhan (former special envoy of Prime Minister and MEI Academic Council Member), Dr. Arvind Gupta (Lal Bahadur Shastri Chair in IDSA) Ambassador Khaled al-Baqly (Ambassador of Egypt in India), and Prof. A. K. Pasha (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi). Commodore (retd.) C. Uday Bhaskar, Chairperson of the MEI Academic Council, presided over the session.

Ambassador Gharekhan brought attention to the gravity of the situation emphasizing on the Shia-Sunni divide that has led to tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of the situation in Syria and Bahrain. He opined that India needs to continue with its neutral policy of not taking sides in the internal matters of a sovereign country.

While giving a detailed account of the emerging scenario in the region, Dr. Gupta said that the general feeling among the observers is that India reacted late but appropriately looking at India's vital interests including energy security and the Indian expatriate population in the region. The speaker urged that the government should weigh all the possibilities as far as its policy towards the region is concerned.

Ambassador Khaled al-Baqly was forthright in agreeing that his country is going through a very difficult phase and the transitional military council is facing several challenges as far as

satisfying the youth and their aspirations are concerned. The ambassador reminded the audience of the long and historical friendship between India and Egypt urging India to play a more active role as far as the emerging situation in the region is concerned.

Prof. Pasha, speaking with his experience of the region, said that the upheaval in the Arab world should not be termed as a 'revolution' but the wall of fear among the masses has been broken. He further pointed out that on account of the proactive role of the Persian Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, and their hobnobbing with external powers people are viewing them as puppets of the US. He was critical of India's response to the events in the region saying that it needs to go beyond cautious diplomacy and that India needs to play a larger role in the region to protect its interest and should try to host the opposition figures in these countries to deal with the unstable nature of the polity in West Asia.

The discussion was followed by the Question/Answer session that lasted for more than thirty minutes making it a fruitful and intense exchange. The Honorary Director of MEI Prof. P. R. Kumaraswamy thanked all the speakers and participants at the end, which was followed by informal discussions of the emerging situation over tea.

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