Arab Reform Initiative

Press Release, 2 March 2023

ARI Sadly Announces the Death of Bassma Kodmani



(Paris - 2 March 2023) -- It is with deepest sadness that we announce the death of ARI's founder and board member, Dr. Bassma Kodmani, who passed away on 2 March 2023 after succumbing to a prolonged illness that she fought with admirable courage and determination. Bassma was a passionate intellectual and committed activist for her beloved Syria and the broader Arab region which she aspired to see as free and prosperous. An inspiring figure, brilliant analyst, and exceptionally warm and generous colleague and friend, she leaves a void that will be impossible to fill.

The Arab Reform Initiative would not exist today without Bassma Kodmani. In 2004, in the aftermath of disastrous efforts to promote democratization in the Arab region via military invasion and externally imposed regime change, ARI was created to build a home-grown agenda for political and social reform, with Bassma at the helm. Her vision for how research and knowledge can be harnessed to promote change from within, through building expertise and a network of researchers, policy-makers, and stakeholders who are committed to the political transformation of the region, alongside her commitment to elevating the voices and perspectives of those who often go unheard on the national and international stage, has served as the blueprint for ARI's work ever since.

Attempting to capture in brief all of Bassma's work, contributions, innovations, and impact would be a fool's errand. We instead wish to highlight just a few of her many accomplishments that nonetheless give a glimpse into her acuity, daring, and the truly ground-breaking nature of her work. Bassma spearheaded state-of-the-art research on Arab security sectors, leading the first-ever efforts to engage representatives of security institutions in policy dialogues with civil society actors and putting forth new conceptual frameworks for understanding the nexus of security and autocracy in the Arab region. She brought together Islamists and secularists in a sustained dialogue on divisive issues to establish a joint reform vision for meaningful and durable democratization. She launched the Arab Democracy Index, an exclusive region-wide project measuring the democratic transition across the region. And all this before the cataclysmic events of 2011.

With the 2011 Arab uprisings and the monumental shifts that took place across the region in the aftermath of the revolutions, Bassma added a new dimension to her work. In 2011, she co-founded the Syrian National Council and later was a member

of the Constitutional Committee, participating in the Geneva process as a member of the Syrian Negotiations Commission. As she related to us, this experience was a personal praxis: putting her many years of study and research into conflict and peacebuilding processes, democratization, and just and fair state-building into practice. Yet despite the incredible demands on her time and energy that her activism for the Syrian cause made, she never lost her morale nor her dedication to ARI. On the contrary, ARI expanded significantly during this period and developed new lines of research to reflect the changing realities of the region and the need for urgent action. Under her direction, ARI's work took stock of the disintegration of the region's nation-states and what would be needed to rebuild them, sounding the alarm bell about the risks related to breaking up existing national entities. She constantly sought to identify the spaces for engagement and the activists finding creative and alternative ways to advocate for the reform and reconstruction of their national bodies. And she continued to position ARI as a catalyst for social groups to articulate their agendas and wage the defining battles for democratic change.

In 2019, Bassma stepped down from her direction of ARI but remained with us as a member of the board, offering sound advice, strategic insight, and broad encouragement and support. While our sadness over her passing will be with us for a long time, her legacy will continue through our work and our commitment to promoting participatory politics, social justice, accountability, and full and equal rights across the region. She has left an indelible mark on the organization and its staff, and, we are sure, the much wider circle of people whose lives she touched.

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About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net

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