

SPEAKER

Dr. J.E. Peterson is one of the world's leading historians and political analysts specializing in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. He is affiliated with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona and served as the 2004 Sir William Luce Fellow at the University of Durham (UK). Previously, Peterson has worked at the Library of Congress and taught at Bowdoin College, the College of William and Mary, the University of Pennsylvania, and Portland State University. He has also been a Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Middle East Institute, and an Adjunct Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Until 1999, he served as the Historian of the Sultan's Armed Forces in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, and he spent 2000-2001 at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. His publications include *Defense and Regional Security in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf States, 1973-1974* (Gulf Research Center, 2006) and *Saudi Arabia and the Illusion of Security* (Oxford University Press, 2002). Dr. Peterson earned his Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins University SAIS. ■

THE GULF'S SHI'A: TOWARD LOYALTY OR REBELLION?

National identity trumps sectarian identity among the Shi'a populations of the Arab Gulf, stated J.E. Peterson, an expert on the history and politics of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states who is affiliated with the University of Arizona. He analyzed the current state of the Gulf Shi'a for the third session of the CSIS Gulf Roundtable on July 12, 2007. As a result of their diversity within the region, economic stake in the status quo, and superseding national identity, Peterson argued that Shi'a communities pose less of a threat to the Gulf's monarchies than is commonly perceived.

Peterson outlined four principles that characterize Shi'a trends in the Gulf today. First, nationalism supersedes sectarianism in defining identity for the Gulf Shi'a. Second, economic well-being is a driving concern, and their financial stake in the status quo makes many Shi'a politically conservative. Third, discrimination against some Shi'a on the margins remains a driving concern and source of tension. Fourth, Shi'a activism, like Sunni activism, is strongest among the young.

Peterson argued that Shi'a communities today are more integrated into Arab Gulf states than is commonly perceived. In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), most Shi'a remain well-integrated into society, and Shi'a business leaders take an active role in the economic life of the country. As merchants "they tend to be more conservative toward the status quo," added Peterson. In addition, Shi'a communities are often dependent upon regimes to provide favorable business policies and some protection. Peterson cited as an example of this peaceful arrangement high levels of Shiite participation in the 2005 municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, as well as the close relations between Kuwait's ruling Al-Sabah family and a number of wealthy Shi'a merchant families in Kuwait. In Saudi Arabia, the common threat posed by al Qaeda has bonded the Saudi Shi'a population closer together with the royal family.

Peterson suggested that current Sunni-Shi'a tensions in the Gulf are in stark contrast to the last period of sectarian conflict, between the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. At the time, the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca and violent unrest in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were linked to growing Iranian interference. Peterson contended that Iran's current ability to mobilize Shi'a communities in the Arab Gulf is over-

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THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

stated, and that many Arab Shi'a today see Iran as a relatively backward and underdeveloped country compared to the booming societies of the Arab Gulf.

Whereas Iran drove many of the tensions of the 1980s, discontent among Shi'a populations today has more to do with frustration with government policies in the Gulf states than religious or sectarian differences. Dismal economic opportunities for Shi'a youth also drive anti-system sentiment. Culturally, however, Peterson noted that most GCC Shi'a have deep Arab cultural roots and feel a deep common bond with their Sunni neighbors. Accordingly, many Gulf Shi'a look to Arab Shi'a religious leaders in Iraq and elsewhere for spiritual guidance, rather than to clerics based in Iran.

Where violent episodes do occur amongst the Gulf Shi'a, Peterson argued that geography limits their potential spread. In Saudi Arabia, for example, unrest among the Shi'a population has mainly been limited to the oasis of al-Qatif, an area in the Eastern Province which the Saudi security services can relatively easily isolate from neighboring populations. In other countries, as well, Shi'a populations are often relatively small and isolated.

The exception is Bahrain, a majority Shi'a country ruled by a Sunni minority. Divisions in Bahraini society remain deep and unresolved, and a generational split has emerged between those favoring political participation and those seeking to boycott the system. Though Bahrain is not yet facing mass unrest, it remains at risk into the foreseeable future. How this plays out will depend on the government's response to Shi'a grievances concerning institutional discrimination and economic inequality. In Peterson's view, if Bahrain fails to adequately address Shi'a grievances, local Islamist opposition groups may lose control over increasingly discontented members.

At the fringes of some of these Islamist groups are individuals seeking to exacerbate Sunni-Shi'a tensions through religious edicts. While Peterson was careful to stress that the majority of Saudi Sunnis accept the Shi'a presence in the kingdom, he added that the debate within Saudi Arabia's Sunni religious establishment over the status of Shi'as within Islam has a destabilizing effect. While this debate is not new, the use of religious edicts to publicize it and the rise of jihadists who insist that the Shi'a are not Muslims at all have combined to multiply the effects of this discussion.

Across borders, active social and economic networks bind many Shi'a together through shared marriage and business ties. Still, there remains little evidence that such transnational networks

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have crossed into the realm of political activism, or that networks have been successfully formed to promote narrow Shi'a causes. The internet has been a prime driver on the social and economic fronts, reducing the cost of communication and possibly contributing to the growing homogenization of Gulf Shi'a culture in the future. Beyond the internet, the spread of other technologies like satellite television and cell phones have further connected the Gulf's Shi'a, fostering a growing sense of unity at the same time that Gulf societies grow larger and more complex.

Peterson stressed that the Gulf Shi'a should not be viewed monolithically. Some communities are divided between ethnic Arab and ethnic Persians, and in Saudi Arabia, for example, Shi'a communities in different regions belong to different Shi'a sects with separate jurisprudence and clerical leadership. In Kuwait, the Shi'a community is split along secular, liberal, Islamist, and other lines.

Peterson concluded with thoughts on the current U.S. policy approach to the Gulf Shi'a. While he dismissed any explicit bias against the Shi'a from the U.S. government, he noted that U.S. policy has tended to support the region's monarchies without fully engaging opposition movements. Peterson suggested that the strategic importance of these countries for the United States has ensured that U.S. policy has remained centered on supporting allied monarchies, and looks set to continue so for years to come. ■ NM

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