

## GULF ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY



## PARTICIPATING SCHOLAR

**Joost Hiltermann** is Deputy Program Director for Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group (ICG). Based in Istanbul, he manages a team of analysts conducting research throughout the region on the drivers and risks of armed conflict. The program's latest report is entitled *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrist and the Surge*. Prior to joining ICG Hiltermann served for a decade with Human Rights Watch as executive director of the Arms Division and director of the Iraq Documents Project. He also spent five years at the Ramallah-based Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq, where he was research director. Hiltermann earned a Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is the author of dozens of reports and academic articles and is a frequent commentator in the media. His book, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, was recently published by Cambridge University Press. ■

## Iraq after the Surge Implications for the Gulf States

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From the perspective of the Arab Gulf states, the United States is finally “getting it right in Iraq” stated Joost Hiltermann, Deputy Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group (ICG). Hiltermann asserted that the U.S. surge strategy, combined with U.S. engagement with Sunni tribes through the so-called Sunni Awakening (or *sahwa*), has created precisely the openings Arab states were calling for to create some political accommodation in Iraq. Still, significant challenges remain. Hiltermann analyzed the challenges and opportunities posed by the surge and its implications for the Gulf states at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable on February 22, 2008.

As Hiltermann explained, the surge has given ordinary Iraqis hope. It has pushed out al Qaeda and the Sadrist militias from many areas and created space for political accommodation. Whether this opportunity is used to stabilize Iraq or merely to wait out the U.S. military depends on whether the central government can use the interregnum to grow stronger. Police forces remain weak and ineffective in fighting crime, and sectarian strife still paralyzes Iraqi politics. While Sunni Arabs feel that the “tide is turning” in favor of giving them a greater voice in government, Hiltermann wondered how sustainable it might be. In particular, he worried that a drawdown of U.S. troops to pre-surge levels will likely lead to a re-escalation of the proxy battle between the Arab Gulf states and Iran.

Still, Hiltermann argued that the Gulf Arab states will likely deal with a Shi'a-led Iraqi government as long as it compromises on key issues, such as the oil law and federalism. Given the difficulty of resolving these issues, however, any progress will proceed at a slow pace. If the central government is too weak to deliver on them, Arab states are likely to decide that supporting local sectarian actors as surrogates is their best alternative.

Prior to the surge and the emergence of the Sunni Awakening—two relatively unrelated events—many in the Gulf states saw al Qaeda as part of a useful bulwark against Iran, despite the fact that al Qaeda loyalists were provoking the Iraqi Shi'a who then heavily retaliated. Still, some feared that al Qaeda would focus its attention on the Gulf Arab regimes as soon as the United States withdrew from Iraq. For the Gulf states, the emergence of the *sahwa* became a useful way to help curb Iranian ambitions as well as confront al Qaeda, and they welcomed this shift in U.S. strategy. If Iraq as a whole could not balance against

## 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. ■

Iran (as many Gulf states encouraged Iraq to do in the 1980s), then at least the Sunni tribes can play part of that role.

Though Hiltermann recognized the positive elements in bolstering the Sunni tribes, he cautioned about expanding the model elsewhere. He viewed the U.S. strategy as strengthening local actors at the expense of the central government, and observed that Iraq's tribes have parochial interests and are notoriously difficult to organize. Making the model work

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in relatively homogeneous Anbar Province is far easier than implementing it in more diverse provinces such as Diyala and Nineweh, which have significant non-Sunni Arab populations. The strategy may be most problematic in the southern provinces and other mixed areas where the main challenge is Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, and not al Qaeda. Rather than confront the Sadrists, Hiltermann argued that they need to be brought into the political system.

In the wake of a U.S. withdrawal, Hiltermann judged that a proxy battle between the Arab Gulf states and Iran would likely escalate. In such a situation, the Iranians have various advantages which may allow them to further project their power in the region. He cautioned, however, that neither the Sadrists nor the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) are wholly Iranian proxies. While there are elements within the parties that are likely Iranian agents, the parties as a whole are not. Despite pan-Shi'a affinity, Iranians and Iraqi Shi'a continue to distrust each other. Iran will likely continue to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq, but there is a limit to this strategy. He noted that Iran shares the U.S. interest in supporting the current government in Baghdad and keeping the country unified.

Ultimately, a swift U.S. exit would have negative consequences for all of Iraq's neighbors including Iran, Hiltermann said. Despite the rhetoric, Iraq's neighbors want the United States to stay in Iraq for the foreseeable future. No regional state wants to deal with a power vacuum, especially if Iraq's central government and security forces remain weak. They have their own preferences for how weak or strong Iraq should be, yet they all agree that it should be stable and unified. The Arab Gulf states will have to accept an Iraq ruled by a Shi'a majority as well as a certain degree of Kurdish autonomy, Hiltermann added.

For Iraqis, the surge has also changed the debate. A new generation of indigenous Iraqi nationalists who have not spent

time in exile is now emerging, encompassing representatives from all of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups. This new generation of politicians has a real stake in keeping the country unified. The sense of nationalism is growing, he said, pointing to signs that both the Sadrist leadership and that of the Fadila party (centered in Basra) have urged a unified Iraq. Hiltermann downplayed the importance of broader Arab nationalism as a mobilizing force to unite Iraqis. Arab nationalism has

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been irrelevant in Iraq since 2003, and remains problematic because it alienates the Kurds.

Vital for strengthening the Iraqi state will be a series of elections that bring to the forefront a new generation of indigenous Iraqi leaders, allowing those who boycotted previous elections, especially Sunni groups, to participate in the system. A greater Sunni role would be an important step from the perspective of the Gulf states, because it would limit Shi'a dominance of the political system.

There is now an opportunity to support the central government instead of shoring up peripheral actors which can only undermine Iraq's unity. For that to happen, Hiltermann concluded, the secular cross-sectarian middle class has to emerge as a potent political force. ■

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