

## GULF ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

## PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

**Gregory Gause** is a professor of political science at the University of Vermont and a leading scholar of Gulf foreign policy in the United States. Gause has published two books on Gulf security and foreign policy, and his scholarly articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Security Studies*, *The Middle East Journal*, and in other journals and edited volumes. He received his B.A. from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and his Ph.D. from Harvard University.

**Stephen Negus** is a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, where he focuses on the evolution of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. He has lived and worked as a journalist in the Arab world for the last 15 years, and has been posted to Iraq as a correspondent with the *Financial Times* and *Economist* from 2004 to 2008. In 1997 Negus helped to launch the Cairo Times, one of the few independent Arab news sources at the time. He was educated at the University of California, Berkeley and American University in Cairo. ■

## Iraq's Reintegration into the Gulf

“Ordinary Iraqis fear that the Gulf states are working against Iraq,” explained Stephen Negus of the Woodrow Wilson Center. While there is a small Gulf Arab presence in the country, “Iran is indispensable to Iraq in a way the Gulf has not been and is not likely to become,” he added. Gregory Gause of the University of Vermont claimed that the Sunni leadership of many Gulf states fear a Shi'a Iraq because they see it as an extension of Iranian power. “Saudi Arabia has been a key force behind keeping Iraq from reintegrating into the Gulf and views the Maliki government as a client of Iran,” he argued. Negus and Gause examined the reintegration of Iraq into the Gulf at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable on October 6, 2008.

“There is no Arab Gulf presence to counterbalance the Iranian presence in Iraq” argued Negus. Few Gulf investors are showing much interest in Iraq, and tens of billions of dollars in debt to Arab neighbors run up by Saddam Hussein's government is a persistent source of tension. Very few Gulf firms are bidding on oil exploration contracts in the Kurdish Regional Government area. In contrast, Iran's relations with Iraq are multi-faceted and complex. Most of the Baghdad government's Shi'a leaders have spent significant time in Iran and have deep connections there. Iranian tourists, many of them Shi'a religious pilgrims, flood into Iraq. Iraq is also Iran's second largest non-oil market, and trade with Iran is expected to reach \$3 billion by the end of 2008. After China, Iran supplies the largest amount of basic and consumer goods available in Iraq.

Despite the tension between Iraq and the Sunni Gulf, “there are recent trends that indicate warming ties between Iraq and the Gulf states,” Negus added, in part as a Gulf Arab effort to counter Iran's growing influence. An improved security environment has contributed to better relations, as has the Maliki government's growing willingness to confront Shi'a militias. The United Arab Emirates has been a leader in this thaw; the country opened a hospital in Baghdad in 2003 and hosted an Iraq investment conference in Dubai. In recent weeks, ties have deepened with the naming of a new UAE Ambassador to Baghdad and a high profile visit by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh

## 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. ■

Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahayan. Beyond the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain have also announced plans to open embassies, and the Egyptian Foreign Minister recently made a surprise visit to Baghdad, as did an ambassador from the Arab League.

The obstacles to the political reintegration of Iraq in the Gulf remain substantial, however. Widespread Sunni Arab mistrust of Shi'a intentions in general,

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and those of the current Iraqi government more specifically, make it unlikely that a deep bond of friendship will emerge. A more dynamic level of interaction in which Iraq and the Gulf states are not antagonistic might be the best outcome in the foreseeable future.

Gause argued that, while Saudi policy is driven more by geopolitical concerns, sectarian tensions lurk right below the surface in public opinion in the Sunni countries. The media storm over Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's recent condemnation of what he called Shi'a efforts to penetrate Sunni societies is just the most recent example. Gulf media reports about Iranian " sleeper cells " in the Gulf states is another.

When Sunni-Shi'a tensions threatened to tear Iraq apart in 2005-2006, Saudi Arabia sought simultaneously to engage and contain Iran. As part of this effort, the Saudi government hosted Iranian President Ahmedinejad in Riyadh in 2006 and former president Rafsanjani to Mecca in 2008, sent Prince Bandar bin Sultan as an emissary to Tehran, announced it was consulting with Iran on Lebanon in early 2007, and facilitated dialogue with Saudi Shi'a within the Kingdom itself.

By mid-2007, there were signs that the Saudis were rethinking that softer line toward Iran and considering a more active policy of playing "the sectarian card." Many Saudis were reportedly active in fighting in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon in May 2007, seen by some as an effort to stoke sectarian tensions in Lebanon and contain Hezbollah's forces. Tensions flared again following the Hezbollah victory in Lebanon in May 2008. The fact that the government of Qatar brokered the Lebanese unity deal that ended the crisis was salt on the Saudis' wound.

Heightened sectarianism will likely affect the region in the several ways. First, it could inflame Sunni mil-

itants in Iraq and create an atmosphere which would strengthen al-Qaeda, which seems to thrive in areas with Sunni-Shia' tensions. It could also strengthen Salafi groups in the Palestinian territories, posing another challenge to the Palestinian leadership and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Gause noted that Iranian-Saudi sectarian competition tends to play out in weak Arab states, and as those states become weaker, sub-state identities become stronger. He added that

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the United States has a keen interest in managing and containing this conflict. A key test will be the Iraqi provincial elections, which could provoke a sharp increase in Sunni-Shi'a violence.

Overall, Gause believes that the smaller Gulf countries have only a minor role to play in Iraq. Iranian influence is so pervasive in Iraq that the Gulf Arab states cannot expect to push Iran out, politically or economically. Oil money affords them some influence, but Iran and Saudi Arabia will be the major regional drivers of events in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia opposes the quick withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from Iraq and will likely see such a step as a victory for Iran, Gause argued. Saudi Arabia's increased sense of vulnerability will probably compel it to draw even closer to the United States. ■

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