

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Dr. Gregory Gause is a professor of political science at the University of Vermont, where he led the university's Middle East Studies Program for a decade. He spent this spring in Saudi Arabia, meeting with senior officials, academics and businessmen for a forthcoming monograph. Prior to teaching at UVM, he taught political science at Columbia University. He was a fellow for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and a fellow for Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings. He is the author of several books and articles on Saudi Arabia and Gulf security, including a book entitled *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1987. ■

Saudi Arabia: Domestic Dynamics and Regional Policies

Saudi debate on a range of social and regional policy issues has expanded considerably over the last five years. Much of this discussion is driven by the media which has expanded its coverage of women's rights, freedom of speech, and government accountability. For the first time, commentators are also calling for the government to use Saudi Arabia's political and economic clout to chart a more activist regional policy, particularly vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq. Dr. Gregory Gause, professor of political science at the University of Vermont, suggests the King is listening to a certain extent. He offered his assessment of Saudi Arabia's shifting domestic dynamics and regional policies at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable event on May 21, 2010.

Gause argued that the status of women is a good barometer for Saudi Arabia's progress on liberal reforms. By this measure, he said, the country has made small but significant strides in the past 5 to 10 years. *Ikhtilat* (mixing of the genders) has become more common at large public events, and the King recently established the first co-ed university in the Kingdom in defiance of vocal religious elements. Individual Saudi women have also begun "pushing the envelope," writing provocative articles in the press and publishing (often racy) novels. While political and cultural barriers remain steep, Gause argued that the King is laying the groundwork for future gender reforms by encouraging active debate and commentary on the issue.

Increasingly, he said, the print media has served as a forum for these kinds of social and cultural discussions. Gause observed that newspapers are "a lot livelier" than they were a decade ago and columnists are more willing to tackle "interesting and provocative" subject matter. Despite these changes, Gause cautioned that former editor-in-chief of *Al Watan* Jamal Khashoggi's recent dismissal suggests limits to the regime's tolerance for dissent. Although the Saudi government has encouraged public debate over certain issues, journalists continue to face censorship and penalties for crossing the frequently ambiguous "red lines."

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. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

Recently, the Saudi government has begun to tolerate more public discussion of charges of corruption. Gause cited King Abdullah's reaction to the deadly floods in Jeddah in late 2009 that killed around 130 people. In response to revelations that officials in Jeddah had mispent and diverted public funds away from projects that would have mitigated the impact of the floods, the King directed Prince Khalid al-Faisal, the relatively newly appointed governor of Mecca, to investigate. Prince Khalid's report named names—although they have not become public—and the King referred those names to the judicial authorities. The Saudi press subsequently praised King Abdullah's actions, claiming he had “set the standard” for government accountability.

While public opinion is not a major factor in Saudi foreign policymaking, there has been a very recent increase in public discussion of the Kingdom's regional stance. Gause asserted that public forums and columns have gently chided the Saudi government for not assuming more proactive roles in Iraq and against Iran. In private discussions, he has detected a desire among Saudi foreign policy specialists for King Abdullah to overcome his personal antipathy against Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and exert greater influence in Iraq. Saudi commentators have also called for a more aggressive stance towards Iran and its proxies throughout the region.

Gause attributed the Saudi regime's perceived passivity on the Iranian issue in part to traditional Saudi caution regarding direct confrontations with neighbors. His understanding is that the regime perceives Iran's political (versus military) influence to be the largest threat to regional stability. Consequently, the Saudi government is grappling with ways to “build coalitions against or break up coalitions of Iran's clients and allies.” Thus far, Saudi Arabia's efforts have had mixed success. The 2007 Saudi-brokered Mecca Agreement between Hamas and the PLO was short-lived. Saudi support for the March 14 movement in Lebanon helped it win the 2009 elections, but that has not meant that it could sideline Hizballah. The Kingdom spins its military offensive in northern Yemen against the Houthis as a victory over “Iran's clients,” but many observers detect an exaggeration of Saudi success and little hard evidence of Iranian involvement.

According to Gause, the Saudi regime does not have an official stance on Iran's nuclear program, other than its

desire for a nuclear-free Middle East. He observed that Saudi Arabia is uncertain about how to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions: it would like the United States to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, but does not want Iran to retaliate against the Gulf states if the United States or Israel launches a military strike, which Iran would almost certainly do. Gause predicted that Saudi officials would delay making any decisions about their own proliferation options should Iran acquire nuclear weapons until it was absolutely necessary, and that perceived U.S. security guarantees would weigh heavily into their calculations. Public debate over the strategic consequences of a nuclear Iran has also been noticeably muted, and Gause voiced concern that when the time comes to select a course of action, the regime will not have considered its full range of options.

In spite of this, the changes the Kingdom has undergone over the past decade have not significantly altered its relationship with the United States, which Gause characterized as being “in good shape.” Going forward, he warned against the U.S. government publicly pressuring the Saudi regime to further improve its human rights record, claiming that NGOs are in a better position to “help move the debate.” In the foreign policy realm, it remains to be seen how the United States and Saudi Arabia calibrate their relationship in light of a stalled Arab-Israeli peace process and a nuclear-ambitious Iran. ■

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