

## SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

## PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

**Frederic Wehrey** is a senior policy analyst at RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, CA where he focuses on Persian Gulf security, Iran, and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. He served as an Iran analyst on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon, is the author or co-author of numerous publications, and is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

**Kristin Smith Diwan** is an assistant professor of comparative and regional studies at the American University's School of International Service. Her interests revolve around how Islamic political movements build support and further social Islamization through the economy. She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a Fulbright grant and Mellon fellowship, and holds a PhD in political science from Harvard University. ■

## Eyes on Bahrain

The unrest raging in Bahrain is hardly surprising. The Bahraini uprising feeds on old political tensions, according to Kristin Smith Diwan, professor of international relations at American University's School of International Service, and is part of a genuine call for a more representative government. Fred Wehrey, senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, believes the discontent is more narrowly rooted in the struggle between Sunni rulers and the Shi'a opposition. Shi'a are the majority of Bahrain's inhabitants and suffer the lion's share of political and economic hardship. Both scholars agree that domestic and regional dynamics preclude meaningful political reforms. They shared their insights at a Gulf Roundtable hosted by the CSIS Middle East Program on March 8, 2011.

Bahraini political dynamics play out in the parliament, which is a "fault-line" between the regime and opposition. According to Wehrey, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa has used the Bahraini parliament as a tool to divide the opposition. Since a 2002 revision of the constitution created the Consultative Council as the upper house of parliament, the king has stacked the parliament with polarized members who spend more time arguing with each other than challenging the monarchy. He also has cast Shi'a and Islamist parties as Iranian and Saudi pawns respectively, using regional identity politics to fragment an opposition that could once muster real power. Wehrey argued that these strategies have largely accomplished the king's aims, discrediting the parliament and reducing it to a toothless "debating house" for municipal and international issues rather than national concerns.

The 2006 Bahraini parliamentary elections demonstrated how the king's strategies had helped him turn the parliament into a "buffer" between the monarchy and the opposition. The regime successfully gerrymandered voting districts, imported Sunni voters from the mainland, and silenced moderate Sunni voices—all while the two major opposition parties split over the simple question of whether to participate.

The outcome of all these splits has been a growing disillusionment among Bahraini Shi'a with the existing political system. In Diwan's assessment, the recent uprising targets not only the government's manipulative political strategies, but also the inability of opposition parties to make reforms. She characterized the movement as a "genuine democratic uprising" characterized less by sectarian

## 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. ■

divisions than by a unified call for socioeconomic equality and a greater political voice. She noted that in Pearl Square, where the bulk of the protesters gathered, Sunnis and Shi'a both assumed responsibility for the area and organized joint prayer sessions.

Both scholars agreed that Bahrain's domestic and regional climates hold little promise for greater Shi'a political involvement. Internally, the rise of anti-Shi'a Salafi and Ikhwan movements has sharpened sectarian tensions. In Wehrey's view, suspicions that Shi'a parties harbor Iranian or Hezbollah sympathies may be unfounded, but still make it easier for the regime to tighten its grip. Moreover, as Diwan pointed out, the government's violent crackdown on the protesters in Pearl Square alienated al Wefaq, the country's largest Shi'a opposition group and the one previously most likely to compromise. Its members resigned from parliament and refuse to participate in Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa's national dialogue process until the monarchy steps down. The dialogue process itself includes centrist Islamists but still leans decidedly toward the monarchy.

The regional environment supports the Bahraini regime's hold on power and is similarly unsupportive of Shi'a interests. Diwan argued that other GCC governments perceive the unrest in Bahrain as a challenge to their authority since other GCC population segments share Bahraini protesters' grievances and also have large Shi'a minority populations. Both Wehrey and Diwan noted that Saudi Arabia has been particularly vocal in encouraging the Bahraini regime to take a hard line against the uprising. By the same token, Iran has been ambivalent towards the Shi'a-dominated movement. Diwan posited that Iran may fear delegitimizing the opposition in the eyes of Bahrain's leaders, or a fallout in Iran's economic relations with Bahrain. While Iran could still support the Bahraini opposition covertly, it has so far perceived overt support as too risky.

Saudi involvement is one of the most important constraints on political reform in Bahrain. Wehrey noted that Saudi royals may tolerate a reshuffle of Bahrain's cabinet to include more Shi'a but perceive any meaningful parliamentary change as a "slippery slope" which could shift the balance of power in Bahrain and give Shi'a the upper hand. Yet at the same time, Wehrey suggested that more discrete changes—such as a Shi'a prime minister—could prove bearable for Saudi Arabia under certain conditions. Diwan likewise noted that in the past, the Saudi government eventually came to accept Bahrain's 2002 constitutional reforms after initially voicing disapproval, and could gradually accept a political process which attempted to integrate parts of the Bahraini opposition.

For the United States, whose Fifth Fleet is in Manama, the unrest in Bahrain poses a difficult predicament: it does not wish to anger its GCC allies by advocating fundamental political change in Bahrain, yet it opposes the regime's violent retaliation against the protesters. In trying to balance these concerns, U.S. officials have supported Crown Prince Salman's national dialogue strategy while also denouncing "foreign intervention"—perhaps, Diwan said, in reference to Saudi Arabia. Both scholars judged that the negative impact of this balancing act has so far been minimal; little resentment has materialized against the United States. Diwan noted, however, that a more intense government crackdown could reverse this trend. Encouraging Shi'a aspirations for reform could help the United States protect its image in Bahrain, but the regional costs of playing a more active role are likely to be high. U.S. officials should not necessarily fear political liberalization in Bahrain, but it remains to be seen whether or how they help bring it about. ■

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