

## SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES



## PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

**Bernard Haykel** is professor of Near Eastern studies and director of the Institute for the Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia at Princeton University. He also directs the university's Oil, Energy and the Middle East Project. He was previously professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern history at New York University. His present research and writing focuses on the history and politics of Islamism in the Arabian peninsula, and he has a forthcoming book on the history of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia from the 1950s to the present. He is co-editor of the recently published *Complexity and Change in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Dr. Haykel holds a doctorate in Islamic Studies from Oxford University. ■

## The Gulf in a Changing Region

Over the past two years, the Arab uprisings have swept through the Middle East, forcing governments to grapple with popular demands in new ways. To explain Saudi Arabia and Qatar's responses to this transformative period, Princeton University Professor Bernard Haykel led a Gulf Roundtable discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies titled "The Gulf in a Changing Region" on November 30, 2012. He delivered a broad overview of the topic that explained not only the Gulf monarchies' relative stability but also their approaches to managing transformations in the surrounding region.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar weathered the Arab Spring's storm relatively easily. Reaching deep into its pockets, Saudi Arabia pumped \$170 billion of public expenditures into the economy and promised new jobs for the unemployed. The power of ruling families in the Gulf is rooted in close ties to society's tribal and religious structures, which has given them a resilient base of legitimacy and support even as other governments around the region faced popular challenges. Saudi rulers in particular have also often been able to co-opt opposition movements before they coalesce, typically meeting demands for greater rights and representation with a combination of gradual reform and a robust security presence.

Significant problems nevertheless confront Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Haykel added. Both countries face youth bulges that are potential sources of instability. Adding public sector jobs cannot create sufficient employment opportunities for these young people. Gulf states' dependence on high oil prices is another area of vulnerability. A drop in prices would squeeze budgets, which were planned with steady prices in mind. Sustained low price would force governments to draw on past surpluses, reducing their ability to adjust spending in crises and fund their social welfare systems. Political consequences could follow.

The uprisings in neighboring Bahrain and Yemen presented additional challenges for Saudi Arabia. Feeling that Bahrain's Sunni monarchy was threatened, Saudi Arabia

## 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. ■

and the UAE dispatched about 2000 troops to support the king. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia took a different approach, facilitating the transfer of power from 34-year dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh to Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Yet Haykel argued that this represented only a temporary solution to Yemen's problems. From dissident jihadis to dwindling water supplies, Yemen faces a host of problems that require more than band-aids. Meanwhile, Haykel argued, Saudi Arabia has treated Bahrain and Yemen almost as domestic provinces, offering financial assistance and planning.

Other developments in the Arab world have prompted significant responses from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Along with other Gulf countries, they share an interest in countering Iranian power and influence. In Syria, both countries have funneled arms and cash to various opposition groups in hopes of toppling Iran's ally, President Bashar al-Assad. Qatar mostly funds Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition groups, while Saudi Arabia deals more with Salafi groups, demonstrating their different ideological inclinations. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have slowly begun engaging the Muslim Brotherhood-led government after digesting the initial shock of Mubarak's fall. In return for lending financial and diplomatic support, Haykel suggested, Saudi Arabia expects that Egypt will stay within the "red line" it has set of not adopting an independent foreign policy toward Iran.

Another key interest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar is the preservation of friendly monarchies. Nearby Jordan is currently undergoing a period of heightened instability due to fuel subsidy cuts and the passage of controversial election laws. To assist the Hashemite monarchy, Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia and Qatar have pledged \$2.5 billion in aid over the next few years to Jordan in hopes of easing its economic hardship. Kuwait is also experiencing large protests calling for democratic reforms that the monarchy has partially accommodated. Haykel explained the Saudi view on Kuwait's dilemma as stemming from its leaders' perception that such dissent is exactly what it should never permit in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has constructed its foreign policy through an opaque process of decision making. Members of the Saudi royal family usually prefer to work through personal relationships as opposed to institutions. Recent developments in the Saudi hierarchy show that this familial network of power is evolving. The new interior minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef is the first grandson—as opposed to

son—of the Kingdom's founder to hold such a prominent position, marking an important generational shift within the royal family. Perhaps more importantly, the king recently underwent back surgery, and Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz is reportedly infirm, magnifying the probability of leadership changes in the near future.

Qatar does not seem to possess a comprehensive long-term strategy that guides its foreign policy. Haykel suggested that Qatar has shown by its financial and diplomatic investments that it is willing to work with almost everyone. The lone exception to this friendly policy is Iran, whose interests Qatar often tries to thwart. One illustration of this effort is Emir Hamad II's recent visit to Hamas-controlled Gaza, where he pledged \$400 million in development aid. Before the Syrian uprising, Hamas had built a working relationship with Iran, and Qatar has since seized the opportunity presented by the civil war to court Hamas.

Outside observers should expect little fundamental political change from these countries in the foreseeable future. Barring a dramatic fall in oil prices, change in Saudi Arabia and Qatar will in all likelihood come only through the generational shifts that are slowly taking place within the royal families. ■

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