

## SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

## PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

**Mohsen Milani** is executive director of the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies and professor of politics at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He writes on Iran's foreign and security policy and Persian Gulf political dynamics. His recent publications include "Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off" (*Foreign Affairs*) and "Iran's Persian Gulf Policy" (*Contemporary Iran*).

**Karim Sadjadpour** is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former chief Iran analyst at the International Crisis Group based in Washington and Tehran. He is an expert on Iranian foreign policy and Iran's nuclear program. His recent publications include "What if Israel Bombed Iran? The View from Washington" (*The Washington Post*). ■

## Iran's Regional Strategy

Iranian influence in the Middle East has peaked, and the country's strategic position at the end of 2012 is worse than it was two years ago. Mohsen Milani, professor of politics at the University of South Florida, and Karim Sadjadpour, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, discussed Iran's influence and strategy in the Middle East, the challenges and dilemmas it faces, and its perceptions at a Gulf Roundtable luncheon entitled "Iran's Regional Strategy" at CSIS on December 20, 2012.

Milani and Sadjadpour agreed that Iranian influence in the region was at its highest between 2006 and 2010. During this period, Hezbollah emerged stronger from its 2006 war with Israel, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, oil prices jumped to \$145 per barrel, and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq left behind a Shi'a-led government with ideological and financial ties to Iran. Iran used these events and others to create a "corridor of resistance," according to Milani, spanning from Syria and Lebanon in the west through Iraq to Iran and Afghanistan in the east. As of late 2010, Iran enjoyed good relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the rise of the Hezbollah-backed March 8 Coalition in Lebanon deepened Iran's influence there.

The Arab uprisings in early 2011 altered the political landscape in the region and shifted Iranian calculations. Milani noted that Iran's leadership initially supported popular protests against secular Arab leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. Although the protests themselves were not religious in nature, Ayatollah Khamenei proclaimed the uprisings to be "Islamic." Iran's dilemma began when protests erupted in Syria in March 2011. The wave of violence there forced Iran to choose between supporting popular protests and supporting the Assad regime, with which it had a long-standing alliance.

Both speakers stressed Syria's importance to Iranian regional posture and strategy. The Iranian-Syrian relationship dates to the early 1980s, when then-Syrian President Hafez al-Asad backed Iran in its war with Iraq, and Iran supported Asad's suppression of the 1982 Sunni Islamist uprising in Hama. In the decades since, Iran has used Syria

### 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. ■

to gain direct access to the Levant, from which it supports the Shi'a community in Lebanon and maintains a front in its conflict with Israel.

Iran fears the creation of a Sunni-dominated Syrian government, yet it has multiple options to retain influence in a post-Asad Syria. Milani pointed out that Iran can protect its core interests if the Alawite-dominated Syrian military and intelligence structures remain intact. He noted as well that Iran might consider using Alawite networks to develop a Syrian Hezbollah organization. In Lebanon, Milani noted, Iran is actively strengthening its base by expanding its connections in the Lebanese army. Sadjadpour added that Iran could attempt to thwart the emergence of a Sunni regime in Syria by fomenting violence through armed groups, perpetuating a stalemate. The Maliki government in Iraq supports Iran's position in Syria, as it also fears the effects of a Sunni-dominated Syria on Iraq's often restive, Sunni-dominated Anbar Province.

Seen broadly, Sadjadpour said, Syria is the epicenter of three competing paradigms in the Middle East: an Iranian Islamic resistance paradigm, a Saudi-led Sunni paradigm, and a Turkish-led "modern Islam" paradigm. The regional proxy wars in Syria have strained Iran's relations with Turkey and intensified its regional "cold war" with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Syrian conflict has undermined Iranian-Qatari engagement, which developed in recent years. However, Oman has remained a key interlocutor between Iran and other governments, especially the United States.

Syria is just one piece of the cold war between Iran and the Gulf Arab states. Underlying this rivalry are longstanding Arab-Persian tensions and sectarian rivalries. Sadjadpour argued, however, that sectarianism does not drive Iran's approach to the Gulf as much as Arab-Persian tensions and a general Iranian disdain toward Saudi Arabia. Milani also noted that animosity toward the United States shapes Iran's perception of Gulf regimes, which it sees as U.S. clients.

The two scholars emphasized the importance of understanding the Iranian leadership's mindset in order to assess Iran's options and its future actions. Most important, one must recognize that Iran's worldview is narrow. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has not left Iran since 1989. He has surrounded himself with parochial and sycophantic advisers. Iran continues to perceive the United States as an existential threat, and its interests in the Levant are often driven by ideological rather than national interests. Milani argued that Iran should abandon its involvement in the Levant altogether, disputing the assessment

that Iran has actual national interests necessitating interference in Lebanon and Syria and opposition to Israel.

The outlooks of different institutions within Iran matter as well. Sadjadpour stated that while the Iranian Foreign Ministry seems to understand that Asad's days are numbered, that ministry is marginal to Iranian decisionmaking. The more prominent Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Khamenei see any compromise or concession as a sign of weakness, a view that informs the way they handle both domestic and international problems, including the current stalemate in Syria.

In light of regional developments and Iran's threat perceptions, both speakers agreed that Iran is unlikely to relinquish its nuclear program as a result of negotiations. For Iran, the nuclear program is not merely about acquiring nuclear capabilities, but about challenging the U.S.-led international system. The United States thus faces a dilemma: making a deal depends on Khamenei, who retains ultimate control of Iranian decisionmaking. Yet, Khamenei is unlikely to agree to give up Iran's nuclear ambitions. Sadjadpour suggested that it might be possible to reach a "mini-deal" involving more intrusive inspections and limits to Iran's enrichment in exchange for a relaxed sanctions regime. Such a deal would require creative technical solutions in the context of a persistently challenging political environment. ■

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