

## SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES



## The Charms of Iran: A GCC Perspective

## PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

**Abdullah al-Shayji** is professor of international relations and chairman of the Political Science Department at Kuwait University. He is also a member of the advisory board of the committee in charge of drafting a comprehensive national security strategy for Kuwait in the Bureau of National Security and a founding member of the Gulf Research Foundation Council in Geneva. A specialist on the Gulf and U.S. politics, he is a lecturer at the Kuwaiti Army Staff and Command College and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait's Diplomatic Institute. Al-Shayji served as counselor and head of Kuwait's Information and Media Bureau at the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut, Lebanon from 2001 to 2004, and as special adviser to the speaker of the Kuwaiti Parliament and to its Foreign Relations Committee from 1992 to 1996. He is the author of *Kuwait: Ceaseless Quest for Survival in a Hostile Environment* (in Arabic). Al-Shayji holds a Ph.D. in international relations and comparative politics from the University of Texas at Austin. ■

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states view the recent steps toward U.S.-Iran rapprochement with anxiety and skepticism, according to Abdullah al-Shayji. Al-Shayji is chairman of the Political Science Department and professor of international relations at Kuwait University, and he spoke at a Gulf Roundtable entitled “The Charms of Iran: A GCC Perspective” on October 21, 2013. Al-Shayji argued that to assuage Gulf leaders’ concerns, the United States should insist that Iran act responsibly toward its neighbors and not limit bilateral talks to the issue of Iran’s nuclear program. He described how Gulf leaders view a potential U.S.-Iran nuclear agreement as the United States downgrading GCC security concerns, weakening the longstanding U.S.-GCC relationship.

Al-Shayji argued that the U.S.-Iran “charm offensive” could not have been worse timed because it exacerbates unresolved policy divergences—both recent and long-term—between the United States and the GCC. GCC frustrations with U.S. policy substantially predate talks with Iran over its nuclear program. They go back to 2002, when divergent regional strategies toward Iraq and fighting terrorism led Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States to announce that the Kingdom would protect its national interests regardless of U.S. regional goals. Saudi Arabia also criticized the 2004 U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement for dividing the GCC rather than promoting collective cooperation. The lack of progress on the Palestinian issue has caused further resentment, which has been exacerbated by perceived U.S. inaction in Syria, where the GCC hoped the United States would craft a bolder and more assertive policy to oust Bashar al-Assad. Gulf states saw an opportunity for the United States to weaken both Iran and Hezbollah through a more assertive Syria policy, and they view President Obama’s focus on chemical weapons disarmament as a major concession that has allowed Assad to remain in power. Finally, Gulf leaders viewed President Obama’s willingness to work with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as naïve and contrary to both U.S. and GCC interests.

More broadly, GCC states have come to fear that U.S. security guarantees are unreliable, al-Shayji said. The U.S. handling of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s ouster, for instance, dismayed GCC allies, who saw the U.S. turn against Mubarak as

## 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. ■

a betrayal. Al-Shayji dismissed the notion raised by some participants that a deal with Iran would actually enhance Gulf security, and that measured diplomatic relations with Iran would align U.S. policy with that carried out by Gulf allies.

Instead, al-Shayji saw the negative change as coming from Washington. He suggested that GCC leaders saw President Obama's decision to consult Congress over a possible Syria strike as reinforcing their perception that they could no longer rely on the United States for decisive action in times of crisis. Domestic developments in the United States compound GCC anxieties about U.S. will and ability to act within the region. Political dysfunction in Washington has degraded U.S. credibility among GCC states and other allies, al-Shayji noted. Forecasts of shale energy growth in North America, and a resulting decrease in U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil supplies, as well as President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" raised further questions about U.S. commitment to Gulf security.

The GCC's general unease with U.S. policy in the region amplifies states' fears of a potential U.S.-Iranian thaw. According to al-Shayji, the GCC is particularly worried that a diplomatic breakthrough might sacrifice wider Gulf geostrategic interests for narrow Iranian nuclear concessions. In addition to its nuclear program, al-Shayji argued, Iran incites sectarian tensions, interferes within GCC affairs, and broadly threatens regional security. Gulf states worry that a cessation of U.S.-Iran hostilities could lead to a reliance on local powers for regional security and would, in turn, allow Iran to dominate the Gulf. Al-Shayji also complained that the United States did not consult or warn the GCC about the recent diplomatic overtures with Iran, including the telephone call between President Obama and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Al-Shayji argued that Saudi Arabia's recent refusal to give its annual UN General Assembly speech and its rejection of a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council signaled Saudi Arabia's growing frustration with international passivity toward the Syria crisis and systematic belittlement of GCC concerns. Al-Shayji appeared skeptical of some participants' suggestion that U.S. policymakers also see moderating Iran's regional behavior as strategically important, but that pursuing a nuclear deal is a crucial first step toward achieving a more stable regional order.

In fact, al-Shayji was skeptical that any deal with Iran could be struck. He noted that the real authority on the nuclear issue in Iran is Ayatollah Khamenei, and a diplomatic break-

through would require approval from the Supreme Leader. Al-Shayji thought it unlikely that Iran would turn away from a program in which it had invested billions of dollars for decades, especially one that holds out the potential promise of making Iran a dominant power in the Middle East. He cited Iran's continued enrichment of uranium, along with an enduring Cold War mindset in the region, as reasons for caution toward Iranian objectives.

Al-Shayji suggested that the GCC might pursue two approaches should U.S. regional influence decrease and Iranian power increase. First, a new push for Gulf unity through a stronger strategic alliance could develop to deter Iran and other aggressors. Saudi Arabia might push for such a union with more urgency in the coming years, according to al-Shayji. Additionally, the GCC may look toward Asia for security if necessary. However, al-Shayji believes that expectations of a substantial Chinese or Indian presence in the Gulf are premature.

Looking ahead, al-Shayji argued that the United States must convince the GCC that its interests will be preserved in any international agreement reached with Iran. Consistently employing language about Iran acting responsibly as a nation-state in diplomatic discussions would begin to reassure GCC allies. The Gulf states will want the United States to implement a "holistic" approach that addresses wider GCC geostrategic interests vis-à-vis Iran.

Despite concerns with U.S. policy, al-Shayji does not foresee a fundamental break in GCC relations with the United States, describing the tensions as more of a family feud than the prelude to a divorce. Gulf leaders acknowledge that the alternatives to rapprochement—namely a U.S. military confrontation with Iran, or living with a nuclear Iran—are not particularly appealing, yet they hope at the same time to highlight the risks of overlooking the broader threat Iran poses for their interests. ■

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