

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Where Do We Go From Here? The World After the Iran Deal

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Amb. Nicholas Burns is the Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the practice of diplomacy and international relations at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He served in the United States Foreign Service for 27 years until his retirement in 2008, including as under secretary of state for political affairs and ambassador to NATO. He received his M.A. in international relations from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

Dr. Vali Nasr is the dean of the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). His most recent book, *The Dispensable Nation* (Random House, 2013), deals with the implications of the Obama administration's foreign policy on U.S. strategic interests. From 2009 to 2011, he served as the special adviser to the president's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He earned his Ph.D. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. ■

The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 is changing the Middle East strategic environment, requiring the United States to take a more active leadership role in the region, according to Amb. Nicholas Burns and Dr. Vali Nasr. Burns, Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School and Nasr, Dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University spoke at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable entitled "Where Do We Go From Here? The World After the Iran Deal," on September 25, 2015.

Burns addressed the diplomacy and U.S. domestic politics involved in implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He warned of the ramifications of domestic political gridlock undermining the agreement, and he argued that Congress should let the White House implement the deal. Any Congressional or political action that blocked implementation would not only hurt the Obama administration, but also U.S. credibility, Burns said. Secondly, he noted that the agreement's inherent weakness is that after 15 years it gives Iran the right to develop a civilian nuclear program that could become military. Therefore, he insisted that it is vital not only that the United States, Europe, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remain vigilant and hold Iran to its commitments during the first 15 years of the agreement, but perhaps even more so after 2030, when restrictions on Iranian enrichment will begin to expire. Guarding against harmful Iranian actions on the nuclear field will therefore be a long-term effort for future administrations.

Burns also argued strongly that the United States should seek to contain Iran's push for power in the Sunni world and its malign behavior there, including support of armed groups that threaten regional partners. At the same time, the U.S. should also be ready to seek opportunities to cooperate with Tehran and test to see if the Iranians can change their behavior in places such as Afghanistan and Syria.

Nasr analyzed the various ways in which regional actors are responding to the deal and how those responses are shaping the emerging strategic context in the region. He

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 strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, 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. ■

argued the resulting environment will require continuous U.S. leadership and attention.

From the Iranian perspective, Iran's upcoming elections—for parliament, president, and Council of Expert (which selects the Supreme Leader)—will affect prospects for the deal's implementation. The most significant of these will be the 2017 presidential elections, he said. In order to escape a one-term presidency, Rouhani must deliver on his promise of economic dividends and overcome the perception which prevails among many Iranian moderate and hardliners that Iran conceded too much at the negotiating table for too little in return.

For Arab partners of the United States, the deal is forcing them to reevaluate the terms of their partnerships with the United States. For one, Gulf states are unsure what more open U.S.-Iranian communication will mean for U.S.-Arab alliances that, in the past, centered largely on the containment of Iran. Meanwhile, increasing North American energy production has made the United States less dependent on imports from the Middle East. Even counterterrorism does not provide as clear a platform for U.S.-Arab cooperation as it once did, said Nasr—in some cases for example, the United States appears to be more closely aligned with Iran than with Gulf powers on how to meet the threat of the Islamic State group (ISG).

Both speakers urged the United States to play a stronger leadership role in addressing conflicts in the Middle East. By stepping back from its leadership role without offering an alternative, Nasr argued, the United States has become a destabilizing force in the Middle East. Burns added that U.S. influence has traditionally been based on its ability to shape coalitions of partners and allies for collective action. By drawing back from its key role of an organizing power in the Middle East, the United States has allowed regional powers—including U.S. allies—to pursue disparate and uncoordinated policies. In Syria for example, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia all have different policies, which complicates the fight against ISG. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are forging a new path by showing their willingness to use force outside the parameters of a U.S. coalition.

The speakers also discussed the threat of a more aggressive Russian strategy in the region. Russia has historically used its access to Iran as a diplomatic commodity. Direct U.S.-Iranian talks thus erode some of its leverage in the region. Moscow has responded by reaching out to other Arab governments and renewing its diplomatic engagement.

Both speakers warned against allowing President Putin to set the regional agenda.

Within a shifting regional strategic framework, successful implementation of the JCPOA requires that the United States close ranks with both Israel and its Gulf allies. Burns suggested that the United States encourage Israel and the GCC states to work more closely with each other on common strategic interests. Reassuring allies will mean not only boosting military aid and weapons sales, but also preserving Israel's qualitative military edge and addressing the root causes of allies' insecurity. Nasr stressed the importance of the latter element, and cautioned that relying on military assistance alone to compensate for Iran's perceived gains would be counterproductive and could increase the potential for future confrontation.

The speakers were in agreement that the U.S. should play a more active role in Syria, where according to Nasr, "the future of the Middle East is being written." Burns expressed his belief that a "Geneva III" conference or similar political forum will ultimately be necessary to resolve the war. However, he stressed that the United States must provide more effective assistance to opposition forces in order to enter negotiations from a position of strength.

In the post-JCPOA period, the speakers agreed, the need for U.S. attention in the region is likely to grow rather than diminish. The U.S. is a global power, Burns acknowledged, but it must pay greater attention to the Middle East to secure its vital interests in the world. If regional actors and U.S. allies view the Iran deal as another step towards disentangling U.S. commitments in the Middle East, Nasr added, it could prove even more destabilizing in the region and beyond. ■

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