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“Changing Dynamics in the Gulf: GCC, Iran, U.S.”

Wednesday, June 16, 2014, 1:00-2:30pm

The Stimson Center

1111 19th Street NW, Washington D.C., 20036

On Wednesday, July 2, 2014 the Middle East/Southwest Asia Program at the Stimson Center hosted an event entitled “Changing Dynamics in the Gulf: GCC, Iran, U.S.” The discussion featured **Emile Hokayem**, Senior Fellow for Middle East Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, **Michael Connell**, Senior Research Scientist and Director of the Iranian Studies Program at the Center for Naval Analysis, and **Geneive Abdo**, Fellow at Stimson’s Middle East Program and non-resident Fellow at the Brookings Saban Center.

Emile Hokayem opened the discussion by questioning how Gulf states look at Iran-U.S. relations, specifically regarding both countries’ positions on nuclear diplomacy and the recent ISIS attacks in Iraq. He emphasized that these and other current events have made the past year a “pivotal moment for foreign policy makers...debating on diplomacy or relations with Iran.” Additionally, he said the gulf states are developing increasing anxiety as a result of potential changes in the regional dynamic and, more pertinently, potential closer relations between the U.S. and Iran. Hokayem continued by noting that perceptions of America have changed in the region from the period of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, during which the United States seemed disorganized and hostile to regional interests, to one of “more structural capacity.” Thus, while Gulf states are not aligned in all of their interests they are “aligned in their threat assessment of Iran,” such that all agree that the costs of a powerful Iran would be high on their security agenda but not all countries may be able to act on that threat. Hokayem went on to discuss the structural problems inhibiting a potential alliance between Iran and the Gulf, beginning with security and ending with geography. Next, he discussed problems of perception, which work against any unity between the two powers. The Gulf states are “afraid of nuclear diplomacy” for they know that the U.S. is anxious to accept any deal, and Iran will escalate their negotiating power on regional issues as a result. The Gulf is also concerned that Iran’s increasing political diplomatic maneuvering allows the country prestige and the right to “deal with the big powers in the region but ignore all their neighbors,” while concurrently the West is “self-detering” throughout this process for fear of changing the outcome of nuclear negotiations. Hokayem concluded his discussion by saying that these concerns are all legitimate, but inflated, and that the direction of Iranian engagement with the Saudis in particular and the Gulf at large remains to be seen.

Next, **Geneive Abdo** shifted the discussion to a more skeptical view of any potential future diplomacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia, noting that “every time a new president is elected in Iran, the country wants to re-align towards the Gulf” and dismissing the recent efforts to open discussion with the Gulf countries by the Iranian government as “just gestures.” Saudi Arabia remains the “historical elephant in the room” in the memory of Iranians, and as a nation that operates significantly off of collective memory, Abdo argued, Iran has taken a roundabout route to diplomacy with the Saudis by targeting Kuwait and Bahrain but not “the main enchilada.” She recalled former Supreme Leader **Ayatollah Khomeini**’s dislike and distrust of the Saudi’s to support her argument that large sectarian differences between the Sunni and Shi’as in Iran and the region at large will prevent any rapprochement between the two, as they have in the past. Abdo noted that various officials in President **Hassan**

Rouhani's government publicly have tried to improve relations, but even if this succeeds at the administrative level and gains some public traction, which she believes is unlikely at best, the Iranian reformists will still have to face the hardliners who will not give in to any relations with the Gulf. She noted that the Saudis analyze Iranian policy “not by what they say but what’s happening on the ground,” and their current involvement in Syria is counter to any support they may allege to the Sunni monarchies.

Finally, **Michael Connell** spoke on the general trajectory of U.S. policy options in Iran and the Gulf as well as their military possibilities in Iraq. He began by stating that the most dangerous course of action for the United States in Iraq would be intervening on the ground, and that the “middle” level of danger would be sending in soft military force, which is already in effect now but may lead to the most dangerous option without supervision, and the least dangerous course of action, which is to do nothing. Doing nothing, Connell argued, is the option that is preferred by the Gulf, because those making the choice must realize that there always is a sectarian element in the region and in this case that force is particularly strong and destabilizing. He noted that the U.S. just offered \$500 million in aid to Syrian groups that are allied with Russia and Iran, while the U.S. is simultaneously showing support for a Shi’a government, because it is in opposition to Sunni militants in Iraq. He argued that these U.S. policies may send mixed messages and create a “deficit of trust to American key allies,” namely Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. However while “the picture that has been painted looks bleak,” he noted, “the underlying dynamics of the interactions in the region remain the same.” The GCC still relies on the U.S. to meet its security needs, and will continue to do so for the next decade. Furthermore, any talk of a decreasing American dependence on Gulf oil is inflated and the U.S. “almost surely will not abandon the Gulf” in that respect. Connell proceeded to emphasize that any dialogue from the Iranian government on a rapprochement with Iran is “merely tactical” to create a relationship that may “help with sanctions relief” and nothing more. Connell concluded by noting that while there are “short term bumps,” the U.S. will not be allied with Iran unless there are “major internal shifts” in the country first.

During the question and answer period, the speakers addressed the potential of further GCC integration and how such an occurrence would be viewed by the United States, with Hokayem noting that the smaller Gulf states do not want to be constrained by Saudi Arabia, and issues such as missile defense and sniper security could not possibly be overcome or united to create a viable defense policy for all the countries to be secure in the GCC. Connell said that the United States would want GCC unity, but Hokayem argued that the perception in the region is that America wants to do the opposite and that it is hard to convince Gulf states that US does have an interest in maintaining their unity. Finally, Abdo argued that Iran does not use sectarianism as a weapon and would prefer to distance itself from those arguments in the region, while again Hokayem pointed out that the current events in Iran’s political scene may suggest otherwise.