

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Sir John Jenkins is a senior fellow at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University and the executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies-Middle East in Manama, Bahrain. A British diplomat for more than three decades, he has served as Her Majesty's ambassador to Burma, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, Her Majesty's consul-general in Jerusalem, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) director for the Middle East and North Africa. In 2014, he headed the UK government's policy review of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam. He additionally took an active part in Sir John Chilcott's Iraq Inquiry. Until his departure from the FCO, Jenkins was the British government's senior diplomatic Arabist. Jenkins holds a Ph.D. and a B.A. from Cambridge University. ■

Egos and Ideologies: Islamism in the Gulf

The fault line dividing Gulf Arab states' views of the Muslim Brotherhood has much more to do with the group's political rather than its theological content, Sir John Jenkins argued at a recent CSIS Middle East Program roundtable. Jenkins, a former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia with long service in the Middle East, spoke at the CSIS roundtable on "Egos and Ideologies: Islamism in the Gulf" on October 6, 2017.

Historical Connections

Gulf leaders engaged with the Brotherhood soon after its founding in Egypt in 1928. By the mid-twentieth century, they came to see Islamic revivalists as allies in countering Arab Nationalism, which Gulf rulers viewed as a threatening secular modernist movement. Thousands of Brotherhood members fled political repression in Egypt and the Levant to settle in the Gulf in the early years of statehood. With almost no college graduates among the native population, these immigrants filled educational and other professional roles, and even some high-ranking government positions.

Over time, some Gulf leaders grew suspicious that the Brotherhood's pan-Islamist ambitions might represent a threat to Gulf regimes. The "first hint of trouble" according to Jenkins came with the Muslim Brotherhood's embrace of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Brotherhood members welcomed the revolution as a harbinger of Islamist power, even if the Brotherhood is avowedly Sunni and Iran is a largely Shi'ite state; Gulf governments loathed it as a harbinger of revolution. Concerns spiked again in 1990 when some Muslim Brotherhood leaders expressed support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Following the invasion, Saudi Arabia lashed out at members of the Sahwa, or "Awakening movement," which was an admixture of Saudi theology and Brotherhood political activism.

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable Series 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, Iran, and Yemen. The roundtable regularly assembles 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. ■

The Growing Divide

The political upheavals that seized the Arab world in 2011 revealed and deepened fissures between Gulf states on the Brotherhood. Gulf states' positions followed three competing schools of thought, Jenkins said. The first school of thought regards political Islamism as “the wave of the future.” The second takes it to be a natural part of the political landscape that is best co-opted into existing power structures. Leaders in Qatar and Turkey subscribe to some mixture of these views, and they began promoting them more assertively in the wake of regional transitions. Qatar stood apart among Gulf Arab states in identifying political Islamism as a tool that could extend the country's influence in a region undergoing tumultuous shifts in power.

A third camp saw in Islamists a dangerous vanguard whose talk of democracy concealed hegemonic political ambitions, and which sought to invoke religion to weaponize Islamic doctrine in its favor. In this view, the Qatari and Turkish backing of Islamists represented a reckless effort to further state interests at the expense of sowing *fitna*, or sedition and internal discord, in the Muslim community. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) feared that if Egypt were to fall under sustained Muslim Brotherhood control, the rest of North Africa would follow. They were staring down this prospect at the same time that Iran was growing more assertive in the region, jihadi-salafi groups lured young citizens to their ranks and perpetrated startling attacks, and Western powers appeared inclined to wind down their commitments in the Middle East. Jenkins argued that these states saw in political Islamism “the most serious challenge to stability in the region—its prosperity, security, and the survival of its ruling elites—since the high tide of Nasserism in the 1960s.”

Saudi and Emirati Threat Perceptions

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the most closely aligned in their views of the Brotherhood, Jenkins pointed out some nuanced differences. For the Saudi monarchy, whose rule is grounded in an expectation of undivided loyalty to a national dynasty with religious legitimacy, Islamists present “a profound ideological threat to the very basis of the state.” Indications of pro-Brotherhood sympathies among some segments of Saudi society have disquieted Riyadh. As Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman leads an ambitious reform project that includes greater social and economic liberalism, religious critiques of politics are especially sensitive.

For the UAE, the threat posed by the political Islamism espoused by the Brotherhood is partly about the leadership's legitimacy, and partly about rulers' efforts to nudge a largely conservative society to build a national identity around globalism and tolerance. The UAE's small size and fragmentation into seven distinct constituent emirates heighten the importance it feels in maintaining cohesion, Jenkins said, and it felt so threatened by the influence of the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Al Islah, that it outlawed the group in 2014.

While the UAE and Saudi Arabia share a broad suspicion of political Islamism, they have often tolerated it in friendly states when it has operated under the control and supervision of the government. “The issue,” Jenkins asserted, “is fundamentally not about the existence of political Islamism, but about who is allowed to instrumentalize it, and whether it will ever genuinely accept subordination to national goals.” Jenkins cited as proof the experiences of Kuwait and Bahrain, where Brotherhood affiliates have come to occupy a largely undisruptive place in national parliaments. Beyond the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have seemed to tolerate the Brotherhood's political participation in places like Morocco and Jordan. In Syria, Saudi Arabia has been willing to support Brotherhood-aligned actors in the opposition, while the UAE has not.

Broader Implications

Jenkins argued that attitudes toward the Brotherhood and what it represents are an important part of the current diplomatic crisis that divides Qatar and several of its neighbors. It is not merely about the clashing egos of elites; it is about elites' sharply different analyses of what the Brotherhood holds for the future of the region. ■

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