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Middle East and North Africa Programme: Future Trends in the GCC Workshop Summary

Identities and Islamisms in the GCC

May 2012

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of discussions that took place at a workshop held in Chatham House in May 2012. Part of Chatham House's 'Future Trends in the GCC' project, the event brought together a group of political activists from different movements, government and NGO representatives, economists, business people and academics. The two-day workshop addressed Islamism and identity politics in the Gulf, the impact of regional dynamics and the politics of sectarianism as well as citizenship and the economy, and political development. This summary focuses on the first day of the workshop, which examined how dynamics in the broader region, including the rise of Islamist parties in North Africa and the ongoing tensions between Iran and the Gulf, would affect the GCC countries.

Key points that emerged from the first day of the workshop included:

- Changing dynamics in the wider Middle East region are bound to have an impact on the GCC states. The perceived success or failure of the Egyptian transition will affect views of both democracy and political Islam in the GCC.
- Sectarian tensions are being fuelled by inter-state competition. They also reflect socio-economic cleavages, being more pronounced in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia than in the other GCC countries where socio-economic differences are less manifest.
- There is significant variety, diversity and experimentation now taking place within Islamist movements. It is an oversimplification to see Shia Islamist movements as pro-Iranian, or to understand all salafi Sunni movements as tools of Saudi foreign policy.
- Once sectarian tensions were activated, they could take years to resolve. Denying the existence of sectarianism would not help. Civil society and independent media needed to be given some space to find other narratives, for instance to emphasise the similarities between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. This document is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

Islamisms in the GCC

The opening session focused on the diversity of Islamist movements operating in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain, where Islamist movements are relatively well organised and function more openly than in other GCC countries. Participants had very different views on the extent to which existing Islamist movements can really be said to be democratic. However, the discussions highlighted the significant variety, diversity and experimentation now taking place within Islamist currents that are sometimes incorrectly seen as monolithic. It was noted that it is an oversimplification either to see Shia Islamist movements as necessarily pro-Iranian, or to see salafi Sunni movements as tools of Saudi foreign policy. Yet it was believed that GCC governments would remain concerned about the transnational appeal of Islamist movements in case these emerged as challengers to the dominance of existing nation-states.

A participant said that the main Islamist movements in the Gulf, and the wider Middle East region, were using the concept of democracy only as a 'ladder to power' because they were confident of their own popularity. However, they questioned how tolerant Islamist movements would be of dissenting views and religious minorities, arguing that they tended to be illiberal. The illiberal tendencies of some of the newly elected Islamist MPs in Kuwait had strengthened such concerns, another participant said, noting that the parliament elected in February 2012 had already threatened to increase restrictions on freedom of speech and wanted to bring in the death penalty for blasphemy.

Another argued that in Saudi Arabia, groups that can be broadly defined as 'Islamist' have been the main sources of reform activism and that moves towards a constitutional monarchy cannot succeed without them. It was emphasised that young Saudi political activists – who represent a minority of the population, but an important intellectual current – now tend to see the debate over whether Islamism and democracy are compatible as outdated. In the speaker's view, the activists wanted both Islamic values and a greater degree of representation.

Several participants suggested that the region's Islamist movements were bound to change as Muslim Brotherhood and salafist parties became part of governments and parliaments in North Africa. 'Islam is a language of dissent, but politics dilutes ideology', it was said. Another participant said that in the case of Kuwait, Islamists had changed their rhetoric on democracy, but had made no progress on economic development in their first few months in the

Kuwaiti parliament¹. It was noted that the GCC's most successful Islamist movements had been effective in highlighting socio-economic issues, such as the cost of living and perceptions of corruption. Governmental failures to address these issues were said to be inadvertently strengthening Islamist opposition movements.

Islamist movements in the Gulf have also historically served as a platform on which ambitious men of modest background could rise to prominence in political systems where birth and wealth normally determined success. In the wider Middle East, their success was partly attributed to some of the perceived failures of secularist governments who are now associated with nepotism and cronyism; for many, secularism had negative connotations, and Islamist movements offered the hope of a more 'ethical' approach to policy, although this was so far untested.

One participant remarked that in the long-term Islamists would become more secular, arguing that movements in Iraq tend to be more concerned with gaining power than with implementing Islamic law. In Iraq, the popularity of overtly religious movements was said to have declined after the first couple of elections. Others argued that Islamist movements in the GCC were becoming more responsive to the demands of the youth, and that they were being led by the street, rather than leading it themselves, especially in Kuwait and Bahrain. This pragmatism could help them to adapt and survive. It was further argued that liberals need to find ways of working with Islamists, despite their differences, since these are important, well-organised and active groups.

Saudi Arabia

Despite common misconceptions, the events of Tunisia and Egypt had an effect on Saudi Arabia. There were already activists, mostly of an Islamist background, pushing for change and seeking to develop the idea of a constitutional monarchy compatible with Islamic values. A participant said these activists view themselves in a framework of 'shari'a and the Arab spring'.

During February and March 2011 there was a small amount of pro-reform activism as a range of 'Islamic liberals' seized the opportunity to push for their ideas to be implemented in Saudi Arabia. The most prominent act was a petition submitted to the king in late February 2011, which called for a state based on rights and institutions. The petition was signed by thousands,

¹ In the event, they remained untested, as the parliament was dissolved by a court order in June 2012.

including large numbers of young people. Although many signatories have a background in the Sahwa (Islamic awakening) movement that began in the 1990s, a fair number have moved beyond its organisational confines while embracing the same calls for change and civil society. The younger political generation has retained some of its Islamic roots but is also challenging the authority of the older sheikhs. The petition obtained support from a highly influential cleric, Sheikh Salman al-Odah, who was jailed in the mid-1990s for his part in the Sahwa movement, and who had moved away from activism following 'rehabilitation'. For some years, activists had thought he was largely unwilling to challenge the government. After he signed the petition, Sheikh Salman's regular television programme was cancelled.

Reform activists have focused on raising awareness of the issues relating to political prisoners and human rights. These were seen as issues on which consensus could be created between liberals and Islamists. One participant estimated that there are 10,000-30,000 individuals who could be described as political prisoners in Saudi Arabia, many of whom have not been given a trial. It was also noted that some are accused of involvement in jihadi movements. There have been small demonstrations in support of political prisoners, some of which have been held in front of the Ministry of the Interior, something previously unheard of in Saudi Arabia.

One participant noted that in the Saudi context, Islamist activists were by far the most organized and had the strongest mobilizing power against the state. It was argued that it would be impossible to effect real change without the support of the sahwa. The participant observed that the movement for change had lost some momentum owing to divisions over the case of Hamza Kashgari, a Saudi poet and former columnist for the Saudi newspaper *Al-Bilad*. On the anniversary of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, Kashgari had published an imaginary conversation between himself and the Prophet on Twitter, in terms deemed inappropriate by many Saudis. Islamists were split on how to deal with Kashgari. Some said that he had committed blasphemy and should be executed, while others emphasized the positive use of dialogue rather than force. A petition to encourage ideas to be fought with ideas instead of violence gathered thousands of signatures. The issue split the more conservative sahwis from the liberals and weakened activist efforts to unite both currents of thinking behind a single platform of reform demands.

Participants noted that there is a significant diversity of views among Saudis who would think of themselves as salafists. Salafi movements took different political directions depending on the political framework in which they found themselves. Since salafism has developed no political theory of its own (but

was rather an approach to Islamic texts), it was said that the views and behaviour of salafists will continue to vary in different contexts. Depictions of salafism as a monolithic force, or as a movement guided only by the Saudi authorities, were described as overly simplistic.

The impact of Egypt's transition

For the past three decades, Egypt has co-operated closely with the GCC on regional political issues, but some GCC governments are very worried about the impact of Egypt's political transition on future relations. Any sort of democratic precedent in Egypt would have an impact on the GCC countries. This was described as one of the biggest long-term challenges facing the GCC. Yet GCC governments also have bargaining chips in their relations with Egypt, given their role as sources of foreign investment and as host countries for many thousands of expatriate Egyptian workers; these could perhaps be a moderating influence on Egyptian–GCC relations.

Participants noted recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the detention of an Egyptian lawyer in Saudi Arabia and the subsequent vandalism of the Saudi embassy in Cairo. It was also suggested that the UAE was particularly concerned about the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as highlighted by recent comments made by Dubai's chief of police.

Egypt is facing a number of challenges, suggesting that it will remain more preoccupied with its internal situation than with foreign policy. The economy in particular has fallen victim to the political transition. One participant remarked that, worryingly, this reality was being neglected as a result of the focus on identity politics within the country. The political parties lacked a vision for an economic model that would create jobs and provide a good income for Egyptians. GCC fears about immediate changes in Egyptian foreign policy – such as better relations with Iran – may thus be overstated. But in the longer term, the perceived success or failure of the Egyptian transition is likely to have an impact on political movements in the Gulf states through shared cultural and religious affinities.

Iraq and the Shia authority

Participants moved on to discuss the diversity and contestation within Shia movements in the GCC, Iran and Iraq. It was said that with many Shia in the GCC looking towards Najaf in Iraq as a source of religious guidance, the eventual succession to Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, the leading Shia

authority in Najaf (and possibly in the world), would have important implications for the GCC. Possible successors were therefore discussed in some depth.

One participant argued that one of Sistani's students, Syed Muneer al-Khabbaz, could succeed him as the local juridical authority. He is influential in Iraqi politics, particularly among the moderates with political leanings towards constitutionalism. He opposes the direct involvement of clerics in politics, although he also believes they may be able to play an advisory role. He had made it clear in the past that the electorate should not vote for such clerics.

Ayatollah Basheer al-Najafi is one of the four grand ayatollahs in Najaf. He is of Pakistani origin but has been residing in Iraq for decades. He is the only ayatollah in Najaf to express agreement with the theory of *wilayat-e-faqih* (the rule of the jurists, a theory that Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini developed into a basis for his country's post-revolutionary political model, though both the concept and the application remain hotly debated in the wider Shia world). Najafi has extensive networks within Iraq but none outside the country. In comparison, Sistani has representatives in all the GCC states as well as offices in London and other prominent European cities, the US and Asia.

Ayatollah Mohammad al-Fayyad is another potential successor to Sistani. He is one of the most successful students of former Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei and the first to transcribe Khoei's notes. Theologically, his views are said to be quite similar to those of Sistani. Although he avoids political involvement his writings are said to have liberal undertones, and those who wish to revive Islamic liberalism in Iraq have used them in their arguments.

Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Hakeem, another potential successor, comes from a renowned political family in Iraq; his distant cousins are leaders of the Iraqi Supreme Council. However, he has attempted to distance himself from them as they are known to be staunch supporters of Iran. He has been portrayed as an 'Arab *marja'a* [*religious reference point*]'. Nationalist clerics often refer to themselves as the 'Iraqi Arab *marja'a*' and are staunchly opposed to the Iranian regime. Mahmoud al-Hassani al-Sarkhi is another such cleric who is fiercely opposed to both Iranian and US presence in Iraq. Ayatollah Mohammad Yaqubi is an Iraqi nationalist who was a student of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. He is critical of both Iran's regime and its *wilayat-e-faqih* system. However, he is not opposed to clerics involving themselves in politics and has his own political party, al-Fadhila, which holds a number of seats in the Iraqi parliament.

A lot is at stake as a result of the on-going rivalry between Najaf, the Iraqi centre of clerical learning, and Qom, the centre of theology in Iran. Many have suggested that Iran is trying to parachute someone in to act as a replacement for Sistani in the event of his death. It has been suggested that Ayatollah Shahroudi, the former head of the Iranian judiciary, is Iran's preferred successor to Sistani; he is a member of Ayatollah Khamenei's inner circle and has aligned himself with Khomeini's worldview. He has on several occasions attempted to open an office in Najaf but is regarded as *persona non grata* in the city. He has accused Najaf of attempting to undermine Iran's hegemony in the region. This is merely a microcosm of the ongoing rivalry between Najaf and Qom.

Some scholars such as Mehdi Khalaji have suggested that Sistani will be the last traditional authority in the Shia world. Khalaji has remarked that owing to geographical and contingent factors Sistani's successor will play a very different role and potentially be quite politically involved. One participant disagreed with Khalaji's findings, commenting that similar statements had been made about his predecessor, Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, but that this had not turned out to be the case.

The tensions between Iran and the GCC

Participants were generally pessimistic about the prospects for relations between Iran and the GCC countries, and several suggested that Iran's internal political divisions would simply encourage Iranian leaders to take more assertive and aggressive postures towards the GCC states. As an example, participants flagged the April visit by the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to Abu Musa, a disputed island in the Gulf which is occupied by Iran but claimed by the UAE. The alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington in 2011 was also emphasised, as well as Iranian official statements criticising the Bahraini government. Overall, participants felt that tensions between Iran and the GCC states would remain high, despite some cautious optimism among some participants about the progress of talks between Iran and the G5 + 1².

It was said that following the April round of talks, the atmosphere has improved somewhat. UK Foreign Secretary William Hague reassured the public that the talks were essentially positive but other European countries remain cautious. The former head of the Israeli Defence Force had recently stated that he was not convinced that Iran was attempting to develop a

² A group of countries comprising the UK, the US, China, France, Germany and Russia.

nuclear weapon and that the Iranian government was a 'rational actor'. In addition there has also been a change both within the Islamic Republic's domestic rhetoric and in its pronouncements for international audiences. One participant suggested that this could largely be attributed to the effect of sanctions on the government. The rate of inflation within the country currently stands at 40%, with implications for the ruling elite and ordinary citizens alike.

With regard to the regime itself, participants noted that Ahmadinejad had been side-lined as a result of his attempt to replace the Minister of Intelligence, a position traditionally appointed by the Supreme Leader. He was now described as a 'lame duck' president. In addition the Green Movement was described as essentially 'fire under ash'; it has continued via the Twitter generation but lacks links to civil society networks such as women's or labour movements. However, the regime also faces its own factional in-fighting. This, combined with economic weakness, may encourage officials to play up nationalist or regional causes – such as the islands – to distract from domestic issues.

A participant argued that Iran would not be able to use a nuclear weapon against the GCC, but that 'the real deal is in the security arrangements' and the wider, longer term relations between the US, Iran and the GCC countries. Concern was expressed over suggestions that the US may want to reduce its footprint in the Gulf, creating a potential security vacuum. The timing of Ahmadinejad's visit to Abu Musa was said to have been particularly clever. This took place just before start of April's nuclear talks between Iran and six other nations, when Western powers did not want to react vocally for fear of heightening the tensions around negotiations

Sectarianism and identity politics

Some observers in the Gulf have questioned the loyalty of Arab Shia to their existing nation-states and have portrayed them as instead being loyal to Iran. It was noted that an examination of the theological and political debates taking place among Shia Muslims illustrates that this is not the case. Nonetheless, this narrative continues to be used in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in particular. Some saw this as traditional 'divide and rule' tactics to discredit Shia-led opposition movements.

But the issue was acknowledged to be complex. A participant argued the GCC governments had good reason to be suspicious of Iran because of its efforts to 'export the revolution' in the 1980s. Even if this so-called 'Iranian project' was in fact dormant, a number of people in the Gulf believed that Iran

was still pro-actively trying to export its model to other countries. It was noted that the mention of 'republic' within the GCC states brought back a fear of the Islamic Republic. Although it is misguided to perceive Iran as behind Bahrain's uprisings, it is also true that Iran has a historical record of using Shia causes (along with other Islamic causes, such as the Palestinian cause) as a tool for enhancing its own strategic position. Participants pointed to specific instance in which Iran had failed to be a reliable defender of 'Shia causes', including its failure to highlight the killings of Pakistani Shias, and its decision to side with (largely Christian) Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan, despite the fact that Azerbaijan is a majority Shia country.

Another participant said that most Shia in the GCC do not follow the Iranian model, and that views of Iranian politics have evolved and changed during the course of the past thirty years, although there were still some who had a romantic or idealised notion of Iran. 'Dissatisfaction at home can create sympathy for people who seem to be speaking out on your behalf', it was said. Furthermore, the Bahraini government's decision to demolish a number of Shia mosques³ and *hussayniehs* (places for both social and religious gatherings) was described as a propaganda coup for Iran. One participant commented that it was time to disregard the theory that everything Shia was Iranian and everything Iranian was Shia. If internal factionalism and debates within Shia movements were to be disregarded, this would significantly diminish the potential for a resolution of political issues. It was noted that Bahraini Shia cannot be said to take orders from Iran, and mostly follow clerics who do not subscribe to *wilayet-e-faqih*.

Structural socio-economic cleavages between Sunni and Shia were said to be more prominent in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia than in other Gulf countries. These were exacerbated after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Until this point many Shia had not voiced discontent with their generally less well-off economic status or with the lack of recognition of their religion in schools or the national media. Governments need to address these fundamental issues, it was said; sectarianism has been less pronounced in Kuwait and Oman where the socio-economic cleavages are far less pronounced.

Although the theological dispute between Sunni and Shia Islam had existed before the 1970s, it had largely been treated as an obscure debate. Participants agreed that the Iranian revolution was a game-changer in the Gulf. The first Gulf war had led to an assertion of Shia identity as a result of the slaughter under Saddam Hussein. Equally, Sunnis believed they had lost

³ 30 were demolished in 2011.

out as a result of the 2003 Iraq war. The emergence of Iran as an active actor in Iraq reinforced sectarianism. A participant commented that for Sunnis, sectarianism was perceived as an international or regional issue, resulting from events outside the Gulf. Shia populations, on the other hand, were said to view it as a domestic socioeconomic issue that has bred a sense of victimhood and resentment.

A participant commented that a new concept of Shia Islam had come into play. The Shia populations used to be the underdogs or quiet members of society, waiting for the reappearance of the 12th Imam, but were now taking control of their own destiny. Nonetheless there remained tensions within Shia Islam over whether faith should become more politicized or should be concerned only with people's spiritual needs. As a result of this change in outlook GCC states were coming to view their Shia populations as a threat and media narratives had become increasingly sectarian.

Social media and sectarianism

Participants criticised a variety of Iranian and Saudi satellite television stations for contributing to sectarian mistrust in the GCC. It was also said that despite the optimistic statements often made about the positive role of social media in the Arab awakenings, a darker side to social media had become particularly evident in Bahrain since the beginning of 2011. The Twitter account '@7areghum', based in Bahrain, was flagged as an example. During the uprising, it sought to 'name and shame' members of the opposition. Publishing photos of people at protests, it asked other users to identify these 'Shia traitors' and provide details of their workplaces and addresses. The account also publicized the idea that the Shia are traitors and should be dealt with accordingly.

According to the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry report, published in November 2011, the @7areghum Twitter account broke a number of national and international laws. However, it is still functioning and it was suggested by participants that many Bahrainis believe that the authorities, or elements therein, are supporting or endorsing it. Others countered there was no evidence of this, and that if the Bahraini authorities were able to close accounts they disliked, they would have taken more action against opposition accounts too. It was suggested that at a minimum, ministers could do more to condemn @7areghum and other such accounts, and that there was a perception that new efforts to regulate social media would be disproportionately targeting the opposition, rather than dealing with hate speech by government supporters.

Lessons from sectarianism in Britain

In discussing sectarianism, one participant drew a comparison with Scotland's history of Catholic-Protestant tensions, which has been affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland. Sectarian tensions have been greatly reduced since the 1997 peace agreement in Northern Ireland, yet the issue remains highly sensitive and even the term 'sectarianism' is contested. Some argue it no longer exists. Others mistakenly conflate sectarianism with perceived anti-Catholic prejudice, whereas in reality, sectarianism can run in both directions.

While historically there were socio-economic cleavages between Catholic and Protestant communities, as well as discrimination in the labour market, these are now largely in the past. Today's sectarianism is more an issue of prejudice and stereotyping. Historically speaking, the phenomenon of separate schooling for Catholics and Protestants was described as a significant problem. Catholic community leaders regarded Catholic schools as a key element of their community's religious freedom. Yet separate schooling could result in a lack of personal connections with and understanding of the other community – making it easier for prejudices, stereotypes and myths to flourish. Separate schooling had also facilitated labour-market discrimination: a recruiter would never ask a candidate for a job about their religion, but would be likely to be able to identify their religion by looking at the name of their school.

Some analysts argue that so-called sectarianism in Scotland has always fundamentally been about class politics. It has been argued that many Catholics came to Scotland as poor immigrants from Ireland and were willing to work for lower wages than existing Protestant residents, which left them worse off but also engendered resentment from Protestants who thought their wages were being undercut. Other analysts counter this is in itself a selective and even a sectarian narrative, noting that Scotland had been a Catholic country until the early 16th century (when the Church of Scotland broke with the Papacy, thus becoming one of the Christian churches described as Protestant), and that being Catholic should not be conflated with being 'Irish' and thus 'foreign'. Importantly, religious affiliation does not seem to be correlated with views whether Scotland should become its own nation-state, independent of the UK.

Accusations of 'foreign loyalties', sometimes levelled against Shia in the Gulf, are a fairly frequent occurrence in other contexts too. Catholics have often been accused of disloyalty because of their religious affiliation to the Pope, a religious leader who heads the world's smallest state, the Vatican. A participant noted that similar accusations had been made against Muslims in

the UK in the highly charged atmosphere that followed the 9/11 attacks on the US. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities such as Turkmen in Iraq or Arabs in Iran were often accused of being disloyal because of family or cultural ties to similar ethnic groups in other countries.

In fact, the participant argued, the world has very few pure 'nation-states' where state boundaries neatly coincide with well-defined ethnic and religious identities. Transnational sympathies do not necessarily need to be regarded as a form of disloyalty or a threat. They can coexist with loyalty to and pride in the nation-state. The importance of encouraging citizens to feel they had a stake and a voice in that state was therefore emphasised.

It was said that identity politics in the UK remain fluid, complex and contested. Some of the most heated debates in British politics today are taking place over the future of the UK's relationship with the rest of Europe; the levels of immigration and the impact on cultural identities; and the future of the UK state itself, given the calls for Scottish independence. GCC nationals who worry that their national identity is weak may be searching in vain for an unrealistic and idealised notion of identity as something that is fixed and agreed upon. Rather, national identities may be permanently 'under construction'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants split into breakout groups to come up with recommendations for steps that governments and civil society could take to address the problem of sectarianism in the GCC. Suggestions from participants included the following:

- The GCC governments had no real need to use the sectarian card to undermine Iran. There were, after all, plenty of other reasons to criticise Iran. The use of sectarian narratives would prove counterproductive, creating dangerous tensions within the GCC countries themselves. These could take many years to resolve.
- Sectarianism should not be tolerated in the Gulf media. There were mixed views on whether laws against hate speech would help or whether they would be unfairly implemented; the main issue was perhaps the mentality of senior decision-makers in the media. GCC education curricula could also teach far more about different religious interpretations and beliefs.
- Governments could establish joint GCC councils or institutions that represented both Shia and Sunni clerics, such as a Gulf Awqaf (Islamic trust). Participants suggested that the wider 'Muslim UN', the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, could also raise the issue of sectarianism and the risk it poses to Islamic solidarity. The role of Al-Azhar, the leading Islamic university in Egypt, was also important; in 1954 it had said that Ja'afari Shiism was one of several *madhab* (schools of thought) that Muslims could legitimately follow, but today its senior clerics were far more critical of Shia Islam. Would this change as Egypt's political scene opened up?
- Participants disagreed about whether governments should first try to remedy socio-economic gaps between different communities, or whether political reform should be the top priority. Some felt both were needed at the same time, as they went hand in hand, and expressed fears that prioritising economic reform could be used as an excuse to endlessly defer political reform.
- Civil society and opposition activists should encourage Islamist groups to emphasise Muslim identity and commonalities, and to focus on unifying issues like corruption, socio-economic needs and health policy. Opposition groups should develop practical programmes to promote progress in these areas – especially on economic policy, where few had well-defined platforms – and should avoid falling back

on the easy approach of using tribal and sectarian identities to mobilise support.

- Participants expressed hope that younger Gulf nationals would be less sectarian-minded. Educated young people could create new leaders and new role models. They could adopt a programme of civic education to marginalise more extremist or divisive voices, teaching their shared history and promoting cross-community dialogue. They could lead a debate on national identity and on the possibilities of having multiple and plural identities.
- But this would be difficult unless GCC governments were willing to allow space for independent thinking and free political discussion; there was now much less space for such discussions in Bahrain, and there were even some worrying signs in UAE, where officials were becoming more worried about the activities of NGOs and thinktanks. Participants said that questions of national identity – and of who is allowed to define it – would remain highly sensitive, because national identity could be a powerful tool, both to mobilise people and to create an ‘other’ to mobilise against.

CONCLUSIONS

- The changes underway in the broader Arab world could serve as an opportunity for the GCC countries to embark on fresh political reforms as part of their programmes of development. However, the rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the conflict in Syria, could contribute to increased sectarian tensions in the GCC states in the coming years.
- Once sectarian tensions were activated, they could take years to resolve. Denying the existence of sectarianism would not help. Civil society needed to be given some space to find other narratives, for instance to emphasise the similarities between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Participants also argued that there was a need for satellite channels to back down from the sectarian discourse that some of them propagate, as the long term costs for the GCC could be high.
- Participants generally agreed that sectarianism in the Gulf was a symptom of socio-economic divisions, as it was not a constant or universal phenomenon, but something that came to the fore in certain countries at certain times. It was suggested that in the case of Bahrain, diagnosing the problem as a sectarian conflict between two communities was inaccurate and would lead to the wrong solutions. A focus on citizenship and human rights could help to avoid sectarian solutions. So would promoting inclusive and non-sectarian national identities.

The second day of the workshop went on to explore the socio-economic issues shaping the future of the GCC countries (covered in a separate report).

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE GCC

The workshops formed part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project on 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states. The research has two main tracks: political and economic development, looking at the prospects for the GCC countries to adapt and develop their systems to meet the aspirations of their citizens; and identity politics, assessing the politics of sectarianism and prospects for developing more inclusive national identities. These themes will be explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region.

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