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Workshop Summary

Kuwait Study Group: Identity, Citizenship and Sectarianism in the GCC

Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme in partnership with the Gulf University for Science and Technology

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of discussions that took place at a roundtable discussion held in February 2012 at the Gulf Centre for Policy Studies at the Gulf University of Science and Technology in Kuwait City. Part of Chatham House's 'Future Trends in the GCC' research project, the discussion brought together a group of academics, civil society representatives, entrepreneurs, journalists and bloggers from different GCC countries to discuss some of the key trends shaping GCC politics, with a focus on trends in identity politics and the politics of sectarianism in the GCC. A preceding discussion[1] addressed the subjects of parliamentary politics, political engagement and youth movements.

Key points that emerged from the meeting included:

- National identity is still being defined and contested in the GCC states, most of which are less than five decades old. Official narratives of national identity tend to emphasize the role of rulers and their families as representatives of the nation, and usually privilege Sunni Muslim, male, tribal identities. Yet the Gulf states – particularly the port cities – have strong historical traditions of diversity and multiculturalism that could be drawn upon to develop more inclusive notions of national identity.

- Participants felt there is inadequate representation of, or attention to, the youth who make up the majority of the population, or to the women who make up half of the citizenry and the majority of university students. It was suggested that new ways need to be found to represent these less traditional forces in societies and institutions that are often fairly traditional.

- The GCC has experienced a surge in sectarian tensions since early 2011 as a result of the interplay between the Bahraini uprising and the increasing Saudi–Iranian tensions. These sectarian tensions were seen as being basically a political phenomenon based on competition for power and resources.

- Nonetheless, it was suggested that Bahrainis and other GCC nationals also need to ask themselves about the social factors

[1] Kuwait Study Group: The Experience of Parliamentary Politics in the GCC, Workshop Summary http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183411

that allowed these tensions to grow; many still deny the previous existence of sectarianism, portraying it as solely a government creation or a foreign import. Neither of these presents the full picture.

- It was said that civil society groups could play an important role in addressing the causes of sectarian tensions, promoting dialogue and calling for specific policies to address the spatial, economic, social and labour-market segregation that sometimes divides different religious and ethnic groups in the GCC. Professional associations can be important in bringing people together on the basis of shared professional interests rather than religious or ethnic identities. They would, however, face resistance from political, religious and official leaders who personally benefit from sect-based divisions.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following 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.'

SESSION 1: DECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICS OF SECTARIANISM

Participants discussed sectarianism as a political phenomenon, noting that tensions between different religious sects have not been a constant feature of Gulf history. Indeed, it was noted that relations between different communities vary greatly among the GCC states, as do the relations between the government and different communities and political movements. For instance, in Bahrain much of the opposition to the ruling Al Khalifa family, who are Sunni, comes from the country's Shia community, yet in the 1950s and 1960s the opposition was largely made up of Sunni Muslims. In Kuwait the Shia minority has tended to be more supportive of the ruling Al Sabah family, who, like the Al Khalifa, are Sunni. By contrast, in Qatar few political or social distinctions are made between Sunni and Shia; 'People are very assimilated and it is hard to tell who is from which sect,' it was said.

The uprising in Bahrain, and the accusations by the GCC governments that Iran is seeking to back a Shia-led revolution there, have sharpened sectarian tensions across the GCC, with a particular knock-on effect on Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Participants noted that the Bahraini protests initially included both Sunni and Shia members of the opposition, but that the situation has become more polarized along sectarian lines. In particular, this reflects fears among GCC Sunnis that Shia Bahrainis will be more loyal to Iran than to their own countries – which the Shia citizens of the GCC tend to see as a slur. A participant said that Bahraini Shia and Kuwaiti Shia have a strong sense of their national identities as Bahrainis or Kuwaitis, but expressed concern that states could fuel radicalization by perpetuating social injustice. It was further argued that if GCC citizens who are Shia feel they are disenfranchised and economically marginalized on account of their religion, some of them may end up turning to external alliances.

A 2009 survey of a random sample of Bahraini citizens revealed that people's opinions on issues such as health, education and the political situation were more likely to be determined by their ethnic or sectarian affiliations than by their economic conditions. The survey also revealed some mistrust between the Shia and Sunni populations. For example, if a Shia was asked by a Sunni about the political situation in Bahrain, he was likely to give a pro-government opinion, but if interviewed by another Shia he was likely to say the situation was bad. The extent to which people were unwilling to represent their political views accurately owing to fear or embarrassment was seen as a worrying sign for any future political dialogue.

It was argued that, contrary to appearances, Bahrain's problems were not unique. Every country has issues of inequality and resentment of privileged elites by those who do not feel they are given an equal stake in the country. In Bahrain, these fissures have been particularly deep as they partly overlap with religious differences; Shia Bahrainis are more likely to perceive themselves to be victims of economic discrimination (and, especially since the uprising, as being disproportionately targeted by the police). There are specific policies to exclude Shia from most positions within the security forces, and to dilute the Shia vote through gerrymandering. That said, it was noted that it is the ruling elite, not the Sunni community as a whole, that dominates the economy and the political system. There are wealthy Shia Bahrainis, while many Sunni Bahrainis are not well off. Perceptions of Sunni–Shia differences are also being accentuated by the intensifying competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Other GCC countries face less tension, but also have political systems that are dominated by an elite associated with the ruling family. In Saudi Arabia, citizens in different regions of the country complain about the economic and political dominance of the capital and of the Najd region, where the ruling family is from. There are also notable inequalities between tribes. In the UAE and Qatar, the basic standard of living is significantly higher and the levels of discontent are not comparable; yet there is still resentment over perceptions that some tribes (and, in the UAE's case, emirates) receive privileged treatment. The most significant gap – that between citizens and non-citizens – was mentioned by only a few participants.

Discussing the political economy of sectarianism, a participant argued that GCC states knew that citizens who enjoy good living standards and economic security are more likely to be supportive of their governments, but that it was increasingly costly to buy off the growing populations. Particularly in the less well-off GCC countries, it was economically rational for governments to exclude some parts of the population from rentier-state benefits, and to focus their economic resources on their most loyal support base. It was highlighted that some people, irrespective of their material conditions, would continue to oppose the political status quo for political reasons. Governments were therefore unlikely to expend limited resources on an attempt to silence their enemies, when they could be used instead to support their friends.

It was also said that there is a tradition of playing 'divide and rule', dating back to the colonial period. Governments benefit when societies and opposition movements are divided. The intensification of sectarian tensions in Bahrain was thought to have been encouraged by the state media. It appears to have

benefited the government – at least in the short term – by encouraging many Sunnis to back the royal family as the perceived 'lesser of two evils' against an opposition movement that the state media routinely portray as Iranian agents. Private media channels, particularly Saudi and Iranian ones, were also criticized by various participants for spreading sectarian misinformation.

At the same time, a participant said that GCC societies needed to examine themselves and ask why there had been a general failure to create a 'social melting pot'. Few political parties have so far succeeded in building inclusive political movements based on citizenship and national agendas rather than on religion or tribal allegiances. It was noted, however, that this was not entirely an organic phenomenon; a participant cited the repeated arson attacks on the offices of Wa'ad, a Bahraini liberal party made up of both Sunnis and Shia, and the imprisonment of its (Sunni) secretary-general, Ebrahim Sharif, for his role in the 2011 uprising. It was said that there was not enough interaction between communities at the grassroots level. A participant noted that in Bahrain (though the observation had relevance to other countries) people tended to discuss politics within their own home, or at most their local community, and so had not been sufficiently exposed to different opinions. They had been shocked to encounter radically different opinions through social media.

SESSION 2: THE NOTION OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE GCC

Participants considered the notion of citizenship in the GCC, including economic benefits, perceptions of rights and views of national identity. Several agreed that the entire concept of citizenship in the GCC states will need to be examined and assessed as the expectations of the new generation evolve. A participant said that 'there is an evolution in rent-seeking behaviour', arguing that citizens have become accustomed to state handouts and are increasingly likely to see them as a right, not as a gift. Another participant argued that economically based loyalty would decline over time. It was stated that in other countries such as the United States, citizens are proud to be citizens; their pride has not arisen because they have received gifts from their government. In the GCC, by contrast, it was argued that citizens are equated to shareholders in a cooperative. One participant said that when these gifts were no longer available citizens would have no desire to stay in these countries.

Another participant countered that it was possible to find examples of citizens who were receiving few benefits, yet were among the most loyal to the government. One example was Bahraini salafis living on social welfare. The use of identity politics, notions of allegiance and national identity all play an important part in securing support for Gulf rulers.

The national identities that have been created are directly related to the ruling families. National day celebrations, songs, texts, poetry and so on tend to reflect the views and historical narratives of the elite. A participant argued that 'all the Gulf countries are imposing the identity of a minority on the whole country'. Saudi Arabia is a rare example of an entire nation named after its rulers. A participant said that in the UAE, formal pledges of allegiance to the rulers can only be made through one's tribe; this option is not available for non-tribal Emiratis who want to show their loyalty. It was said that in Qatar national-day celebrations are used to demonstrate 'Qatari' traditions – such as forms of dress and dancing – which come only from the ruling Al Thani tribe. 'We don't have diversity; difference is seen as disloyalty', a participant said.

Another participant said that the *khaleeji* (Gulf) identity had historically been based on the hybrid and multicultural nature of Gulf port cities, including influences from the wider Arab world, the Indian subcontinent and Persia, which are often downplayed or ignored today. It was said that concepts of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism are being neglected, and that this might be connected to anxieties about the large size of the expatriate

population, and the economic incentives to maintain a very limited pool of legally recognized citizens who are entitled to economic benefits.

A participant analysed the teaching of citizenship in Kuwaiti schools, arguing it is focused specifically on a Sunni, Muslim, male, *hadhar* (urbanized) identity. It was pointed out that citizenship classes mention women's rights but avoid dealing with the fact that women do not have equal legal rights, and that there is no attempt to teach the history of struggle for women's rights. In 2010 the Minster of Education was forced to resign after removing a question from school exam papers that was thought to cause sectarian tensions. Sunni Islamist MPs accused her of 'messing with the fate of the Kuwaiti people'. MPs who had urged her to remove the question from the exam paper were accused of not being 'loyal' Kuwaitis.

The education curriculum was seen by several participants as an important area where a more inclusive understanding of history and concept of national identity could be developed, if governments were willing to do this. A participant said that in Bahrain students are taught only the Sunni interpretation of Islam, which leaves Shia students feeling excluded at an early age. The history taught in schools is very different from what parents may teach at home, and excludes the long history of opposition in Bahrain. There is increasing segregation in Bahraini schools; '[Sunni and Shia] parents went to the same school, but their children won't', a participant said.

Another participant argued that trends in education in the UAE were contributing to an identity crisis, as a de-Arabization of the system has occurred. English is used as the main language of teaching right through to higher education, and a staggering 92% of universities use English as the main language of instruction, it was said. There is a generation gap between older nationals who mainly speak Arabic, and their more educated children and grandchildren for whom Arabic is now a second language. Some felt that the young people who make up the majority of the GCC citizenry are not adequately represented in the national narrative; one said that, at best, school and university students were seen as future rather than current citizens.

A participant said that the borders of the GCC states were relatively recent, even arbitrary, rather than corresponding to the traditional Western idea of a nation-state. It was argued that this lack of coherent nation-states created a high risk that GCC citizens would look to subnational and transnational religious, political and ethnic identities 'to fill the vacuum', which greater GCC unification could help to fill instead.

Conversely, another participant argued that there are few ideal ‘nation-states’ anywhere in the world and that European countries with much older borders are still debating and defining their national identity in the context of large-scale immigration, European integration and in some case separatist challenges (Scotland, the Basques and Catalonia were mentioned). It was suggested that national identities may always be contested and evolving, and that the idea there should be a fixed, certain national identity may be an unrealistic and even undesirable goal. A participant suggested that citizens may feel more secure about their national identity if they feel empowered to have a say in how it is defined. It was noted that there has been a lack of public consultation about proposals for GCC unification and that governments have not explained the nature of these proposals to their citizens.

SESSION 3: BREAKOUT SESSIONS

During the breakout sessions participants discussed a number of ideas for GCC policy-makers, civil society and individual citizens to develop more inclusive notions of citizenship and national identity. Key findings included the following:

- The surge in sectarian tensions in Bahrain has political and economic roots, but Bahrainis also need to ask themselves about the social causes of these tensions; many still deny the previous existence of sectarianism, portraying it as solely a government creation or a foreign import. Neither of these presents the full picture.

- There is an ongoing issue of geographic, social and economic segregation within societies and cities. Particularly in Bahrain, policies should be adopted to reverse the geographical segregation between Sunni and Shia. A survey conducted in 2009 revealed that just 12% of Bahrainis live in mixed areas. Steps should also be taken to reverse the growing *de facto* segregation in state education (as children usually attend their local schools).

- The various breakout groups also suggested that there is a need for education to be reformed, and an all-inclusive identity to be taught at a young age. The education system should not exclude any sectors of society, whether Sunni, Shia or Christian.

- *De facto* discrimination in the workplace needs to be addressed. All citizens should feel that they have the right to file a complaint if they have missed out on an opportunity on account of their race, beliefs, gender, sect etc.

- Some participants recommended the adoption and implementation of laws criminalizing hate speech, along the lines of a draft that was submitted to the Kuwait government in February. Others argued that in the absence of independent judiciaries, a hate speech law might be politicized and implemented only against those who are out of favour with the authorities. There was general agreement that state television should represent different sections of society and could play a role in educating citizens about different religious beliefs. Civil society groups have an important role to play in encouraging dialogue and in discouraging policies that add to sectarian tensions.

Professional associations can be important in bringing people together on the basis of shared professional interests rather than religious or ethnic identities.

- Some participants questioned whether civil society could effect change when senior decision-makers lacked the political will to see such changes through. Others argued that resolving social issues could be a catalyst for political change, and that building bottom-up support for dialogue and compromise could help to empower reformers within the regimes.

- It was suggested that the social contract will ultimately need to evolve to ensure that citizens are partners in their countries, with their rights and obligations laid out in constitutions that have legal force, rather relying on the traditional bargains associated with the welfare state and with tribal models of government.

- It was said that young people (particularly students) – who have led uprisings in other countries – are increasingly educated and interested in having a say in how their countries will develop in future. Yet there are few mechanisms for them to be consulted or represented. Universities should be allowed to develop safe spaces for free discussion and to encourage critical thinking; questioning and criticism should not be seen as disloyalty.

- Participants also emphasized the need for political development to be rooted in local culture, traditions and history. It was said, for instance, that the different histories of each GCC state mean there is a unique relationship between each ruling family and the different elements of the wider society. A participant also argued there should be more time and money invested in developing the study of politics in the Gulf states themselves, where it is often still seen as a sensitive area. This would enable each state to develop its own indigenous capabilities and political model based on its individual history.

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE GCC

The Kuwait Study Groups formed part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project looking at '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.

www.chathamhouse.org/research/middle-east/current-projects/bahrain-and-gulf

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