



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Sectarianism or Civil Rights: Reform in the Gulf

Summary of Panel Discussion

In a panel discussion at Georgetown University on October 18th 2006, against the backdrop of increasing sectarian violence in Iraq, two experts discussed the sources and consequences of sectarianism in the Gulf.

Joe Stork, the Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa program of Human Rights Watch, said that sectarianism is essentially a political struggle over resources, mostly power. Though in several cases sectarianism appears as a religious phenomenon, such as in Iraq and Lebanon, he said, he also pointed to the sectarian clashes between Hamas and Fateh as an example of non-religious sectarian strife.

Most of the manifestations of sectarianism, Stork continued, are non-violent, in contrast to the situations in Iraq and Lebanon. Sectarianism frequently revolves around one class or community receiving more political benefits or economic opportunities than another.

In Iraq and Bahrain, Stork said, sectarianism is a product of the way power was exercised. In Iraq, he said that the current sectarianism was the product of Saddam Hussein's government, followed by the more recent American intervention and today the Shi'ite dominated government. In Bahrain, he added, sectarianism is related to the divide between the Sunni ruling family, which has been accruing more and more resources to itself, and the Shi'ite majority.

The Iranian revolution, Stork said, had enormous consequences for sectarianism in Bahrain and Iraq. Though the raw material in both societies existed before the revolution, sectarianism was far from the major political dynamic at that time. It very much has been since, he said.

Sectarianism was also an issue in Bahrain's reforms in 2001 and 2002, Stork said, because of the king's Royal Decree 56, which establishes that any officials who violated human rights before 2002 would be immune from accountability. Most of the prisoners who had been tortured in the 1990s were Shi'ite, Stork said, but many of victims from earlier decades had been Sunni.

Prof. John Duke Anthony, the President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and an associate adjunct professor in the Center for Contemporary Studies at Georgetown University, pointed out that sectarianism is a far more complex issue than the general wisdom holds it to be. While agreeing with Stork's analysis, Anthony

pointed out that sectarianism is also related to a form of racism. Part of the solution to remedying sectarianism, then, is to implement legal protections against discrimination. However even legal remedies are not enough, at least not initially, to combat the “otherness” and estrangement through which members of each party view each other. Anthony noted that the sense of otherness is compounded by the fear of the numerical presence of Shi’ites in roughly half of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Those three, plus the UAE, Oman, and now Qatar, he said, have serious lack of trust and confidence in their Shi’ite population. A large part of this fear relates to Iran and the perennial concern that the Shi’ite minority or, in the case of Bahrain and Iraq, majority is essentially doing Iran’s bidding. This fear and distrust is by no means eased by multiple examples over the last 25 years where Iranian agents have tried to sabotage or provoke clashes. Iran is a constant concern and dynamic among the GCC countries. With Iraq neutralized as a counterweight and Iran emboldened, the uncritical and unfair assumption that all Shi’ites are tied to Iran has become increasingly explicit in the rhetoric of Arab leaders.

The picture changes, Anthony argues, at the geo-political level. In fact, Saudi Arabia has been comfortable in dealing with the Shi’ite Islah party in Yemen and even with Iran. Political needs and geo-strategic factors are far more important than simply lining up friends and foes based on sectarian affiliation.

The panel was sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), an organization dedicated to examining the impact of U.S. policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. It was moderated by Lauren Torbett, a joint J.D. / M.A. in Arab Studies candidate who is an Associate and Treasurer of the Project on Middle East Democracy. “Sectarianism or Civil Rights: Reform in the Gulf” was POMED’s seventh panel discussion in Washington since spring 2005.