

“A Reawakened Rivalry: the GCC vs. Iran”
Middle East Policy Council
Rayburn House Office Building, Room B360
Friday, October 7th, 2011, 9:30 am -12:00 pm

On Friday, the Middle East Policy Council hosted an event entitled "A Reawakened Rivalry: the GCC vs. Iran." The panel was moderated by **Omar Kader**, Chairman of the board at the Middle East Policy Council, and featured **Thomas Lippman**, former reporter, editor, and Middle East correspondent at the *Washington Post*, **Thomas R. Mattair**, executive director at the Middle East Policy Council, and **Alex Vatanka**, a scholar at the Middle East Institute.

Omar Kader started the discussion by noting it was a critical time in the Middle East, and stated that many people are saying this is the beginning of the end for American power in the region. **Thomas Lippman** began by stating he does not know who is making the decisions in Saudi Arabia and Iran. He gave the example of the decision made by Saudi to put troops in Bahrain. Lippman stated “there is a lot we don’t know...a lot of speculation.” He then discussed the recent wave of unrest of Shi’as in Saudi’s Eastern province, and noted how Saudi blamed it on a foreign power, alluding to Iran. Lippman moved on to discuss Saudi’s fear of a “Shi’a resurgence,” especially in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq. He notes how the Saudi’s feel this uprising is backed by Iran, leading to a regional power struggle between Saudi and the Shi’a. However, Lippman stated the Saudis do not want an armed struggle, and that the rivalry is “a manageable rivalry rather than a hostile one,” as Iran and Saudi have many mutual interests including OPEC, keeping the Gulf shipping lanes open, and a shared dislike of Al-Qaeda. Lippman ended by discussing the recent deteriorated of U.S.-Saudi relations regarding Mubarak and Bahrain, but American security role in the region will remain.

Alex Vatanka started by saying what is going on in Bahrain is not causing the rivalry between the GCC and Iran, but has been going on since 1981, when the GCC was formed in response to the 1979 revolution in Iran. He went further to say the rivalry really exists between Saudi and Iran, as Iran sees Saudi as the biggest player in the GCC. Tensions have been exacerbated when **Saddam Hussein** was ousted in 2003, as Saudi was worried about Iran’s influence in Iraq. Iran’s nuclear ambitions and the arrival of **Mahmoud Ahmedi-njad** have also increased tensions. The recent conflict in Bahrain has put the tensions and rivalry between Saudi and Iran in the forefront. Vatanka also noted on the Sunni Shi’a division in the Arab world, and discussed the rhetoric of forming a Sunni alliance to combat the Shi’a resurgence. The implications of a religious war would be tremendous and that the U.S. would have to step in some how. He stated that decision-making in Tehran is fragmented, and the leadership in Iran do not see “eye to eye.” Vatanka concluded that Iran will continue to act as opportunistic, many people in the GCC do not see the Iranian model as ideal, and Iran will keep up their rhetoric against the GCC to keep them disunited, but Iran’s policy is not effective.

Thomas R. Mattair talked about GCC concerns of Iran before and after the Arab Spring. He noted that Iran has been on a course of isolation from the GCC and that the prospects

of improvement were not optimistic, which is especially true after the Arab Spring. Mattair noted that the GCC was very concerned about Iran's influence in Iraq, as Iran elevated the Shi'a in Iraq, and incited a civil war that could have spread to the GCC. The GCC states have also been concerned with Iran's influence in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine as well as Afghanistan. These concerns are elevated by Iran's military and nuclear ambitions. Mattair also stated that by solving the Arab-Israeli crisis is a means to cut Iran's power and influence in the region. The GCC has taken measures to limit Iran's power, most notably by forging relationships with various entities and nations in the region. Mattair then moved onto the rivalry in the wake of the Arab Spring, especially Bahrain. He noted that the many of the wealthier GCC states gave economic aid to Bahrain, and Saudi provided troops. Their thinking was that they did not want Iran to establish power in Bahrain, and Saudi did not want to see the uprising in Bahrain inspire a Shi'a uprising in Saudi. Mattair argued that reforms should be introduced in Bahrain, and that these reforms would curb Iranian influence in Bahrain. He concluded by saying many GCC states are playing a more assertive role in the region, in part of limiting Iranian and Al-Qaeda's influence, and that many of the new governments forming in the region will have more in common with the GCC rather than Iran.