

## GULF ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

## PARTICIPATING SCHOLAR

Stéphane Lacroix is a post-doctoral fellow and a lecturer at Sciences Po in Paris, where he also supervises the Kuwait Program of Gulf Studies. He has published articles on Saudi Arabia and Islamism in journals such as the Middle East Journal and the International Journal of Middle East Studies. He is also a former consultant on Saudi Arabia for the International Crisis Group (ICG). His forthcoming book *Awakening Islam: A History of Islamism in Saudi Arabia*, based on extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, will be published by the Presses Universitaires de France in Autumn 2008, with an English translation available in Spring 2009. Dr. Lacroix holds an M.A. in Middle East Studies and Arabic Language from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris, as well as an M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from Sciences Po. ■

## Fundamentalist Islam at a Crossroads: 9/11, Iraq, and the Saudi religious debate

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“The split between the Muslim Brothers and the Wahhabis is now at the center of all Islamist debates” in Saudi Arabia stated Stéphane Lacroix, a post-doctoral fellow and a lecturer at Sciences Po in Paris. Emerging splits within the Sahwa Islamiya (Islamic Awakening) movement in Saudi Arabia are particularly salient because the movement is a powerful religious force and the only group capable of effectively mobilizing supporters in the Kingdom. Lacroix examined the history and challenges ahead for the Saudi sahwa at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable on May 29, 2008.

Lacroix described the sahwa movement as an amalgam of traditional Saudi religious thinking and the philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood to produce a movement that is politically aware, religiously orthodox, and well organized. The movement emerged in the Kingdom in the late 1960s, as the Arab cold war grew between Saudi Arabia’s King Faisal and Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser. Faisal opened his doors to refugees from the revolutionary secular regimes of the Levant, and these new arrivals to Saudi Arabia were almost immediately influential in their new home. They had significantly more education and experience than their Saudi hosts, and they supplied much of the know-how for the kingdom’s modernization efforts. Most importantly for the Muslim Brotherhood, their adherents helped build much of Saudi Arabia’s education system and thus shaped the Kingdom’s modern curriculum, which has ensured a steady stream of sahwa-influenced adherents ever since. To this day, campus networks play a vital role promulgating sahwa ideology and winning adherents to the cause.

To a large degree, the sahwa has a monopoly on religious activism in the Kingdom. The regime clerics have limited appeal, and many in the sahwa leadership rule on issues which are seen as more pressing and more relevant to the general public than their more official counterparts. Its key competition is not another activist strain of religious orthodoxy, but rather orthodox quietists who seek to withdraw from politics.

Lacroix argued that when the newly arriving Muslim Brothers and the existing Wahhabi establishment first mixed in the late 1950s, it was not obvious that a common project would emerge. He said that a group of ideologues, led at first by Muhammad Qutb, stitched together a patchwork of similarities between the two intellectual trends of orthodox Islam.

### THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable 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, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling 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 role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

Qutb was the brother of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Islamist who was executed in 1966 for his opposition to the Egyptian regime. Sayyid Qutb's analysis was predicated on the idea that the world had devolved into a state of pre-Islamic ignorance, or jahiliyya, and that it was permissible to fight governments in Muslim countries because they were un-Islamic. Muhammad Qutb's theology linked the central pillar of Wahhabi thought, tawhid, or unity of God, with the central pillar of Brotherhood thought, hakimiya, or rule of God. He further connected Wahhabi exclusivism with

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Brotherhood opposition to secular regimes, and the blend resulted in an ideology that rejected both non-orthodox Muslims and Muslim regimes - except for the Saudi regime, which the Sahwa considered as representing the only pure Islamic state in the Middle East.

From the beginning, there were competing trends within the sahwa movement. The traditional Saudi trend was to fight Muslims they saw as unorthodox—Shi'a, spiritualist Sufis, and others—in order to purify the faith. The Muslim Brotherhood had traditionally downplayed differences within the Muslim community, seeking more allies in a fight against corrupt Muslim regimes and against Western influence. It was easy to paper over these differences in the early years, and following the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by a puritanical religious group, the Saudi government ensured that the movement was flush with cash.

The movement's first crisis arose after the Kingdom welcomed foreign forces in 1990 to help defend the country from Saddam Hussein. To some sahwa adherents, the Saudi royal family's actions suggested that the Kingdom was no different from any other worldly regime, and therefore it was un-Islamic as well. They began to speak out against the Saudi monarchy. The Saudi government responded by cracking down on the sahwa movement in 1994 and imprisoning many of its leaders. After five years of imprisonment, then-Crown Prince Abdallah arranged for their release after winning the promise that henceforth they would engage only in social activism and steer clear of politics.

For Abdallah, the action helped secure his positive relationship with the sahwa movement, a relationship that has long been smoothed by his reputation for probity and personal piety. Lacroix argued that Abdallah's longstanding and positive relations with the sahwa's sheikhs have allowed him to pursue a liberal social agenda within the kingdom since he ascended to the throne in 2005, despite the opposition of this important segment of the religious community.

But while the sahwa has improved its relationship with the Saudi monarchy since the crackdowns of the 1990s, it now faces its

own internal divisions. Recent events within the Islamic world have provoked a reprise of the original debates between the Muslim Brothers and Wahhabis over the sahwa's strategic direction. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have opened two new potential grounds for jihad, and rising Sunni-Shi'a tensions have reignited the argument over whether the key targets of actions should be to purify Islam from within or defend Islam from without. Lacroix pointed to a November 2004 religious ruling as a turning point in these debates. Known as the "Fatwa of the 26," a group of

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leading sahwa clerics ruled that jihad in Iraq was both legitimate and required the participation of Saudis in any way possible. The ruling embarrassed the Saudi regime, which has been at pains to distance itself from the image of being a source of religious inspired foreign fighters. Equally importantly, however, the fatwa split the sahwa movement into two groups. Some, such as Safar al-Hawali, argued that the Shi'a in Iraq should be the main targets of jihad. Others, such as Salman al-Awda and Awad al-Qarni, argued that it was important to work with Shi'a on common objectives and to support Iraqi unity. Similarly, during the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, some cheered for Hezbollah's attacks on Israel, while others derided Hezbollah's actions as part of a larger Shi'a conspiracy to undermine Sunni interests and destroy Saudi Arabia.

Lacroix sees the disparity between these trends both as widening and ultimately irreconcilable, building on the innate contradictions of the sahwa movement itself. ■

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