



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 1

Gulf Cooperation Council Culture and Identities in the New Millennium: Resilience, Transformation, (Re)Creation and Diffusion

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Abstract

Studies on nation building in the Gulf states examine the ways in which societies across the Gulf have been mobilizing the idea of national belonging and formulating a *khaleeji* identity (Alsharekh and Springborg 2012; McKeown, Haji, and Ferguson 2016). The proposed workshop builds upon and contributes to this body of scholarship. In line with this literature, we interrogate the ways in which ways the processes of nation building and identity formation, so instrumental for the survival of Gulf monarchies, have been achieved. The discussion will highlight how Gulf states adopt different mechanism to strengthen citizen's loyalty and build a national identity within its polity in the new millenium (See Alsharekh and Springborg 2012; Cooke 2014; Dresch and Piscatori 2005) as well as the responses of various groups within the society.

The workshop expands and moves beyond the existing literature in four distinct ways: a) it emphasises the contributions and limitations of existing nation-building and identity

formation theories in the Gulf and beyond; b) it draws attention to the experiences of different groups and how they negotiate their place in these nation-building projects; c) it emphasises how the 'Khaliji identity' travels beyond the Gulf and influences identity formation and reformation in neighbouring non-Gulf societies; and d) it focuses specifically on the new millennium as an era of rapid transformation and greater maturity of the state building projects in the Gulf.

We invite qualitative and/or quantitative contributions that look at these concepts from a country or a comparative GCC-wide perspective and focus on the outcomes of these processes in the new millennium. These subjects have not been given a full academic attention despite their importance. It is the first workshop that seeks to provide this very timely analysis of these shifts from a holistic perspective.

Description and Rationale

Objective

The aim of this workshop is to provide a holistic overview of culture and identity of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). We aim at analyzing the changes to these concepts in the last decades of, on the one hand side, rapid development of the GCC economies and increased pace of globalization, and on the other hand, transformations of the notions of statehood and belonging in the Gulf. While, national identities in the Gulf have been gradually shaped and crystallized in their more inclusive or exclusive forms, the concept of *khaleeji*, a pan-Gulf identity, provides yet another dimension for analysis. Furthermore, apart from internal transformations, GCC culture has begun to reverberate outside of the Gulf.

Scope

Thanks to vast oil resources, the GCC region has evolved from sleepy outposts to world recognized centers of banking, tourism, trade, shopping, and more recently innovation and culture. The Gulf has put itself firmly on the world map as a place to be and to be seen with its glittering cities, extravagance of its urban projects and wealth on display. Behind the Oriental mask lies, however, a vibrant society that is young, cosmopolitan and dynamic. In addition, the Gulf has become a magnet for a large workforce, from unskilled workers to highly-skilled professionals, millions of tourists, businessmen, but also for international movie stars from Hollywood and Bollywood who spend their holidays in the Gulf and film there their new productions. Gulf citizens, on the other hand, are well-connected to the world through Internet, international travel and are better

and better educated. Their accomplishments in various fields are often celebrated in local media. It is a huge shift from the past generations. Globalization has opened up opportunities with international trade and travel, while the accrued wealth strengthened consumerism, but also investments in various projects such as education, economic diversification and preservation and showcasing of Gulf heritage. It is important then to analyze the interplay of these various factors on the Gulf identity and culture. Indeed, rather than obliterating the local culture and traditions, the Gulf has transformed, created or re-created its cultural acumen, and has entered the new millennium with a sense of pride in its recent achievements. In addition, thanks to multiple economic, social and cultural links, the Gulf culture has begun to make an impact in other parts of the world.

These developments have been parallel to nation-building projects in the GCC. Gulf nations are, for most, recent political creations. In addition, Gulf societies have been characterized by religious, ethnic, tribal, and settlement cleavages that cut through the populations and are often seen as a factor that makes identification, and hence loyalty, with structures other than the state more salient. As a result, formation of national identities in the Gulf and elsewhere in the Middle East has not been an easy project. Often, the structures of power kept in place determined exclusive national identity narratives and, as a result, strengthened other sub-national patterns of identification. It is important to analyze these patterns in light of the economic and demographic pressures laying ahead for the region as well as regional conflicts and rivalries. Unifying national identities are more and more needed as GCC countries have begun to abandon the rentier model and hence, ask new generations, both men and women, to actively contribute to their countries as citizens in various ways. Such contributions and sacrifices for a cause of the state occur in mostly non-participatory politics; as a result, strong identification with the state is a pre-requisite to citizens' commitment. In addition, the Gulf Cooperation Council, a political cooperation established in 1980, provided a platform for strengthening of a khaleji identity unifying the Gulf. Yet, recent events put more and more pressures on the GCC. The Arab uprisings, military intervention in Yemen and a diplomatic row with Qatar prove that challenges abound. They put strain on the political and economic performance of the GCC countries but they also affect patterns of social identification. Consequently, the state of national identity building projects and khaleji identity require careful assessment.

This workshop sets an ambitious goal of looking at the questions of GCC identity and culture from multiple perspectives and through various lenses. We aim at creating a platform for discussion and publishing a comprehensive volume that would constitute a reference on the subject.

Expansion of Gulf Studies

Studies on nation building in the Gulf states examine the ways in which societies have been mobilizing the idea of national belonging and formulating a Khaliji identity (Alsharekh and Springborg 2012; McKeown, Haji, and Ferguson 2016). Scholars within this tradition emphasise the deliberate character and instrumental function of this process of identity formation. It, they argue, is central to the ongoing project of nation-building in Gulf states. Similar to other nation-building projects, the process, scholars argue, is largely articulated by political elites; it is viewed as instrumental in sustaining their national legitimacy and international image amid growing national and regional challenges (Cooke 2014; Dresch and Piscatori 2005; Herb 1999). Among the salient challenges identified in the literature are: globalization; austerity measures, political turmoil, social movements for reform; and anxiety over the overwhelming presence of non-nationals (Fox, Sabbah, and Mutawa 2006). To address these challenges, Gulf States are increasingly resorting to reconceptualising national identity through different tangible and intangible mechanisms. These mechanisms vary from rewriting historical narratives and common traditions to appropriating arts, sports, and architects (See Erskine-Loftus, Al-Mulla, and Hightower 2016; Keshmirshakan 2015). Studies on the region underscore the centrality of these projects in charting the contours of the Gulf society and its modern nation-building process (Alsharekh and Springborg 2012; Cooke 2014; McKeown, Haji, and Ferguson 2016).

The proposed workshop builds upon and contributes to this body of scholarship. In line with this literature, we interrogate the ways in which the process of nation building and identity formation is instrumental for the survival of Gulf monarchies, and emphasise the different mechanisms appropriated across its societies. In addition, we investigate the ways in which Gulf Millennials generation negotiates their identity in light of increased globalization. As a result, we look at the top-down but also at the processes on the grassroots level. The workshop expands and moves beyond the existing literature in three distinct ways: a) it emphasises the contributions and limitations of existing nation-building and identity formation theories; b) it draws attention to the experiences of different groups and how they negotiate their role in these nation-building projects; and c) it emphasises the flow of social remittances and the formation of the *khaleeji* identity and investigates how it travels beyond the Gulf and influences non-Gulf societies in various ways

First, unlike the existing scholarship, the analysis presented identifies convergence and divergence between old models of nation-building and theories of identity formation largely formulated in the West and the emerging forms of nation building carried out in

the Gulf. In so doing, we expand the contours of this literature and encourage comparative studies among different regions.

Second, the workshop further problematizes the literature tendency to study nation-building as a top-down process; the implication of this top-down approach is erasing the agency of different groups in society. While it is true that the process is largely channeled by elites in the society, we examine how citizens interpret this process, negotiate their place in it, and push against some of its manifestations (Al-Rasheed and Vitalis 2004). The analysis also provides further insight into the limited -yet currently expanding body of literature- on how different groups' experience and participation in this project is mediated by their class, religion, gender and ethnicity (Bristol-Rhys 2010; Potter 2014; Fargues 2011). In so doing, the workshop will contribute to unpacking the ambiguities and contradiction surrounding these projects of identity formations.

Finally, the workshop will contribute to emphasising the ways in which this process of identity formation has its implications on non-Gulf societies as well. Gulf migrants, we hold in line with sociological and psychological studies, transpire "social remittances" (Levitt 1998) and introduces new values and modes of representation to their home countries. Several studies on migration to GCC societies looked at some of these ideas and their influence on gender relations, cultural exchanges, and religious practices in migrants' home countries (See Babar 2017; Christiansen 2012; Gruntz and El-Karoui 2013; Mukherjee 2017; Oommen 2015; Zohry 2017). With the exemption of these studies, the topic remains largely under-researched. The Khaliji identity, we further maintain, travels not only through migration movement, but through the new and expanding methods of communications that increased the interconnectedness between different Arab societies. The workshop thus promises to contribute to existing literature on nation building and identity formation in Gulf societies and introduces new areas that are worth further investigations.

Anticipated Participants

We are seeking papers that deal, not exclusively, with the following areas and focus specifically at the outcomes of these processes in the new millenium:

- Interplay of globalization, expatriate workforce and multiple identities
- Generational change and questions of identity in GCC
- Gulf Millennials and globalization
- Preservation and (re)creation of GCC heritage
- Gulf cities and their identities

- Identity and architecture
- Linguistic change; local Gulf dialects
- Artistic production in the Gulf and its role in identity building
- Promotion of GCC nationals and their achievements
- Pan-Gulf Cooperation and khaleeji identity
- Recent events, for instance, a diplomatic spat with Qatar, and their effects on identity
- GCC, gender and female identities
- National identity projects and their results
- Religious, ethnic, etc. subnational identities vs. mainstream identities
- Social media and their role in identity creation and/or strengthening
- Diffusion of GCC culture abroad through various means
- The social remittance and the implications of these new identities on non-Gulf societies: how and which norms and values travel beyond the Gulf through migrant workers?

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Nermin Allam is an Assistant Professor of Politics at Rutgers University-Newark, United States. Allam holds a Doctorate of Philosophy in International Relations and Comparative Politics from the University of Alberta. She has held a Social Science and Humanities Research Council postdoctoral fellow and visiting scholar at Princeton University. Her fieldwork and doctoral research are funded by the International Development Research Centre, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Allam's areas of research interest include: social movements; gender politics; democratic transition; Middle Eastern and North African studies; and political Islam. Her contributions appeared at the Oxford Encyclopaedia on Islam and Politics, Oxford Encyclopaedia on Women's and Politics, International Journal of Communication, and Sociology of Islam. Allam's current book, "Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings" is under contract with Cambridge University Press.

Dr. Magdalena Karolak (Ph.D. in Linguistics, University of Silesia, Poland) is Associate Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, UAE. Her research interests include transformations of societies in the Arabian Gulf and comparative linguistics. Dr. Karolak has published more than 30 journal articles and book chapters on the shifting gender relations, social media, culture and identity and political system transformations in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. She is the author of a monograph "The Past Tense in Polish and French: A Semantic Approach to Translation"

(Peter Lang, 2013) and "Social Media Wars: Sunni and Shia Identity Conflicts in the Age of Web 2.0" (Academica, 2013).

Selected Readings

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