



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 4

Domestic Policy Making and Governance in Saudi Arabia

Workshop Directors:

Dr. Mark C. Thompson

Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies

King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals; Senior Associate Fellow, King Faisal Centre for Research & Islamic Studies
Saudi Arabia
Email: markt@kfupm.edu.sa

Dr. Neil Quilliam

Project Director, Future Dynamics in the Gulf

Senior Research Fellow
Chatham House
United Kingdom
Email: nquilliam@chathamhouse.org

Abstract

The following workshop tries to reach a better and more balanced understanding of the contemporary processes of domestic policy making and governance in Saudi Arabia. Comprehension of these two areas is particularly pertinent given the importance of the National Transformation Plan 2020 and Saudi Vision 2030.

The term governance specifically as related to domestic policy making has increased in usage as evidence mounts on the critical role it plays in determining societal well-being. As Graham et al (2003) argue *governance is not synonymous with government* and indeed, this confusion of terms can have unfortunate consequences. Rather governance is about how governments and other social organizations interact, how these relate to citizen concerns and aspirations, and how decisions are taken in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Thus governance as related to domestic policy making is a process whereby societies, institutions and/or organizations make important decisions, determine whom they involve in the process and how they render account. Indeed, Bevir (2011) argues that governance poses dilemmas that require new governing strategies that span jurisdictions, link people

across levels of government and civil society as well as mobilizing a variety of stakeholders. Furthermore, governance arrangements are often hybrid practices combining public-private sectors and individuals and institutions across different policy fields. In fact, effective governance is fundamental on all domestic levels, whether local, regional or national, but in today's rapidly changing and developing socio-economic and socio-cultural environments necessitates new ways of thinking and working together.

Drawing on the comparative experience of academics, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners with knowledge and experience of domestic policy making and governance in a) Saudi Arabia, b) the region c) relevant expertise in policy making and governance issues and d) from a theoretical perspective, the workshop will analyse the factors that either currently facilitate or constrain effective and viable domestic policy making and governance issues. Academics and practitioners would be drawn from a wide-range of backgrounds and institutions with the aim of not only comparing and capturing experiences, but also seeking ways in which to enhance, support and underpin a more effective way of comprehending domestic policy making and governance in Saudi Arabia.

Description and Rationale

Background

It is our strong belief that we cannot understand a state without studying its society or in the case of Saudi Arabia diverse societies sometimes with differing norms spread over a wide geographic area. However, much of the literature, analysis and reportage on Saudi Arabia focuses on areas of 'high politics' such as foreign policy whilst disregarding the less 'glamorous' area of 'low politics'. Yet, young people are the key to Saudi Arabia's future prosperity, and this necessitates studying the issues—many in the area of 'low politics'—that they believe are important such as employment, housing, and the rising cost of living; all of which in turn affect getting married and starting a family. Indeed, the Kingdom's demographics are vital to understanding challenges facing Saudi Arabia. At least 60 per cent of the total population is less than 30 years old. Moreover, improved educational standards, the impact of online public opinion and demands for greater government transparency via increased social media usage have raised expectations of more government accountability as well as increased participation in decision-making processes.

That said the Saudi government understands the need to address societal needs and concerns. As part of the National Transformation Plan 2020 and Saudi Vision 2030 domestic institutions have been established that deal with domestic policy making and governance issues. These include, for example, King Salman Center for Local Governance, King Salman Youth Center, the Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority and General Authority for Entertainment. Furthermore, most Saudi ministries have implemented e-government services and opened social media accounts to narrow the gap between government bureaucracy and the public.

Workshop goals

The overall goal of the workshop is to encourage scholars and practitioners to better understand the complexity of Saudi domestic policy making and governance. The workshop focusses on both challenges and opportunities present in the contemporary socio-economic and cultural spheres as well as ways and means by which these can be addressed.

Therefore, the questions animating this workshop could include:

1. Why is good governance important and why is there a need for good governance?
2. To what extent should the views and concerns of Saudi Arabia's diverse societies inform domestic policy making? What are the most effective ways of accommodating such views and concerns, especially at a local level?
3. What can Saudi Arabia learn from the governance models of other states and/or regional groupings?
4. To what extent have e-government and ministerial social media accounts narrowed the gap between bureaucracy and the public? How can we measure this? Can this be measured accurately and if so, what conclusions can be drawn?
5. How can we define and understand governance hybrids in Saudi Arabia? To what extent do public-private policy domains overlap? What lessons can be drawn from experiences in other countries under transformation?
6. How can Saudi Arabia maximise its demographic dividend, namely its youthful population? What policies should be implemented and in which sectors?
7. Skills for our tomorrow: are we educating young people for the jobs of today or the jobs of the future? For example, to what extent will automation and artificial intelligence (AI) affect the Saudi labour market? What are the implications for education and employment policies?
8. How do you put in place new and inclusive governing structures that facilitate, support and sustain transformational change?
9. How can Saudi Arabia's youthful population contribute meaningfully to the decision-making processes and help align new policies with aspirations?
10. How do the World Bank and other international organisations' definitions and operationalization of governance—and good governance—conform to Saudi Arabia's contemporary models of governance? How will those governance models be required to change to accommodate the kingdom's transformation?
11. What role can Saudi Arabia's youth play in helping transform the kingdom's bureaucracy, making leading institutions more efficient and customer-oriented?
12. How can Saudi youth contribute towards the governance of the non-profit sector, as it expands to support fulfil aspects Vision 2030 and furthers the advance of volunteerism?

Workshop Scope and Proposed Topics

The following are some proposed themes for the papers, but other relevant topics will also be welcomed. As previously mentioned, it is hoped that the workshop will attract a wide variety of papers from both academic and practitioners with an interest in

domestic policy making and governance. This interest and experience does not need to be limited to Saudi Arabia alone, as knowledge and familiarity with the theoretical background of domestic policy making and governance as well as comparative perspectives from the Gulf and beyond could inform analysis and discussion of Saudi Arabia's specific domestic policy and governance issues. Indeed, papers presented at the workshop will permit discussion and analysis of ideas and methods that can help facilitate a better understanding, and even implementation of policy, as related to Saudi domestic policy and governance.

This topic remains an extremely under-researched area; hence, the workshop's scope will be necessarily broad in order to include contemporary political, economic, social and cultural issues as well as their impact on Saudi domestic policymaking and governance. Therefore, a variety of perspectives from academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike are invited. These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- Policy making at national/macro level for context;
- Mapping the Saudi domestic policy making and governance sector: who are the principal actors? How do they engage with the central government/ministries and indeed, themselves? In sum, how does local governance work?
- Public-private sector hybrids;
- Governance and Institution-building: state and non-state;
- New forms of taxation and subsidy reform;
- Oil, petro-chemicals, energy, renewables and consumption habits;
- Social policy areas such as housing, healthcare, education, leadership and skills development and the environment;
- Employment/unemployment/underemployment: for example, the future of the labour market, entrepreneurship, volunteering, the role of SMEs, automation, AI etc. Are today's students being trained for the jobs of tomorrow?
- Sport and entertainment: promoting healthy attitudes and lifestyles;
- The role of consultancies such as McKinsey and Strategic Gears;
- Economic cities/new cities, Neom;
- Urbanization, urban renewal and the quality of urban life;
- The role of non-profit organizations in policy making such as charities;
- The role of multilateral institution such as the World Bank in domestic Saudi policy making.

Edited Book

Another aim of this workshop is to publish an edited book based on the individual papers presented. It is hoped that this volume will fill a gap in the relatively thin literature on domestic policy making and governance issues in Saudi Arabia.

Potential Solutions and Recommendations

We believe this proposed multi-disciplinary workshop will attract new research that reveals more domestic policy making and governance issues in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the workshop will contribute to the expansion of Saudi/Gulf Studies and beyond by first bringing together scholars and practitioners with first-hand knowledge and experience from a range of social, political, economic and cultural experiences with

knowledge of the fields of domestic policy making and governance. We hope that the workshop and subsequent edited volume and/or academic/policy journal papers provide an important and relevant resource for academics and policy makers as well as those involved in governance issues.

Anticipated Papers

These could include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

- **Case studies**
States or government policies; governance issues, challenges and opportunities.
- **From theory to practice**
Examples of proven success stories that demonstrate how theory can inform practice.
- **Methods, approaches and examples of domestic policy making and governance**
Review of theory and praxis drawing on handbooks on governance supported by international organisations and experience in the field.
- **Public-private sector hybrid collaborations or projects**
Lessons learned from other jurisdictions and inside the kingdom to better support future endeavours.
- **Multilateral contributions to domestic policy making and governance**
What can we learn from these?

Anticipated Participants

We encourage papers from socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural academics, researchers and practitioners with Saudi/Gulf experience (both native and non-native) as well as academics, researchers and practitioners with a strong knowledge of the theoretical background of domestic policy making and governance. In addition, the workshop is also open to policy makers and representatives of NGOs, governments, and think tanks. The papers could be individual, co-authored or small group contributions depending on the topic and/or institution. In sum, the aim of the workshop is to facilitate the sharing of ideas and to contribute to building a body of knowledge on this topic, based on real-life experiences in order to represent the broadest range of perspectives possible.

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Mark C. Thompson is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where he has been teaching undergraduate courses in International Relations and Globalization since 2012. He is also Senior Associate Fellow at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) and Research Fellow at King Salman Center for Local Governance (KSCLG) in Riyadh. Mark has lived and worked in Saudi Arabia since 2001 for diverse institutions such as Saudi Arabian Airlines, the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and Prince Sultan University. Mark holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK. His principal research areas are Saudi socio-political development and societal transformation and he has published on topics such as Saudi youth issues and challenges facing Saudi women leaders in publications such as the *Journal of Arabian Studies*; *Asian Affairs*; *Middle Eastern Studies*; *Middle East Policy and Gulf Affairs*. In addition, he published a book with I.B. Tauris “*Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society*” (2014). Mark is also the co-editor of the IB Tauris book entitled “*Policy-Making in the GCC: State, Citizens and Institutions*” (2017) with Dr. Neil Quilliam from Chatham House based on their Gulf Research Meeting workshop in 2015 as well as providing a chapters on Saudi Arabia for edited books such as “*Public Brain Power: Civil Society and Resource Management*” Palgrave Macmillan (2017). Mark has recently completed a book for Cambridge University Press “*Being Young Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom*” about societal issues and change from the perspective of young Saudi men. Mark makes numerous presentations at international conferences, workshops and seminars.

Dr. Neil Quilliam is a Neil Quilliam is a Senior Research Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at Chatham House. He is Director of Chatham House’s Future Dynamics in the Gulf project and previously directed its Syria and Its Neighbours policy initiative (2015-2017). Before joining Chatham House 2014, Neil served as Senior MENA Energy Adviser at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Senior Analyst at Control Risks, London, and Senior Programme Officer at the United Nations University, Amman. Neil has lived in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, and has travelled extensively around the MENA region, working on a variety of development, education and research projects. He has published a number of books and articles on international relations and political economy of Syria, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Neil was the first recipient of the Prince of Wales and King Faisal Foundation Scholarship in 1998. He received his PhD in International Relations from the University of Durham in 1997.

Selected Readings

Publications examining Saudi domestic policy making, domestic issues and governance are very few, but the following list provides some background to the topic.

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