



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 15

## **Society-State Relations in the Arab Gulf Region: Religion, Intellectuals and “New Media”**

Workshop Directors:

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### **Abstract**

The conventional analyses of society-state relations in the Arabian Gulf region easily lend themselves to the erroneous thesis that countries in this region are devoid of the modern political currents and counter currents that have shaped most contemporary societies in the world. For some analysts, the Arabian Gulf states are nothing but an extension of the “oriental despotic” cultural logic according to which the state is always perceived as strong, authoritarian and coercive, ruling through petro-economic means over a passive and weak society. For others, the state-society relation has been collapsed into a form of tribal nationalism in which government and society are aggregated into informal socio-political communities with no public institutions, citizenship, or rule of law. In contrast to these traditional approaches, this workshop seeks to broaden the discussion of society-state relations in the Arabian Gulf region to illustrate the dynamic and diverse features that characterize state-society formations in the region. Far from being monolithic, homogeneous and pre-modern, state-society relations in the Arabian Gulf region are, in fact, complex and multi-sided social/political formations which represent chiefly their domestic socio-political environment. Relying on interdisciplinary modes of analysis, this workshop will focus on three areas of research: religion and the state; intellectuals and social change; and “new media” and the state.

## Description and Rationale

Amidst a variety of conceptual perspectives on society-state relations in the Arab world in general and the Arabian Gulf region in particular, scholars in the field have generally converged around a common conclusion that societies in the Gulf region have become a pivotal site for shaping state policy, attitude and practices. Not only have social, civic and popular forces developed, expanded and assumed new forms, they have become a crucial source for state contestation, legitimacy and influence. However, and notwithstanding the new and emerging research on society and politics of the region, the literature on this topic remains predominantly state-centered with great focus on the regulative, extractive and distributive capacity of the state. Based on this analytical approach, the literature in the field has typically assumed a sharp epistemological distinction between state, culture and society in the region. Further complicating this analytical process of the region is the emergence and presence of a gap between Anglophone literature and Arabophone literature in the field. For some scholars and observers in the region, there have been diverging scholarly and research interests between the formal political and structural analysis (as expressed in some Eurocentric Anglophone literature) and the popular socio-political analysis that is captured in print media, new media, and blog narratives and often expressed in Arabic.

Dissatisfied with these analytical gaps and methodological disjunctures, this workshop focuses on more nuanced and more multifaceted conceptualizations of relations between state and society in the Arabian Gulf region. More specifically, the aim of this workshop is to examine the strategies and dynamics through which state-society relations in the Arabian Gulf region have been cultivated and to explore the alternative political, social, economic and popular changes that threaten those relations. More critically, the workshop seeks to understand how state sovereignty has been shifting to accommodate internal social, cultural, and intellectual forces and how these forces have been able to balance social and political powers in order to function within and co-exist alongside the state. While the field of society-state relations is a vast and multilayered research area, the workshop will primarily focus on the following three topics: religion and the state (formal and informal institutions, institutional religious scholars, popular religious personalities, and *Fatwa* discourse on public policy), the role of the intellectual, public discourse and the state (the role of the organic intellectual, traditional intellectual, and public intellectuals), and networked public sphere and state (youth culture, blogging, and gender movements).

The focus of this workshop extends the Gulf Research Meeting's discussion on the possibilities and limits of civil society in the Gulf region as well as the discussions on media and soft power in the Gulf, but goes beyond them in that it explicitly seeks interdisciplinary research from numerous fields that reveal critical aspects of state-society relations that cannot be fully identified by conventional approaches of the traditional state-society distinction.

## Objectives

The primary objectives in undertaking this workshop of state-society relations in the Arabian Gulf region are:

- To demonstrate how traditional approaches to state-society relations in the Arabian Gulf have proven increasingly inadequate to capture the realities of socio-political transformations in this region, and to transcend some of the conventional orientalist theories that have dominated those analyses.
- To provide the intellectual context necessary to understand more fully the interaction of society and the state in the Arabian Gulf region, and to demonstrate the active role of culture, broadly conceived, in the political process in this region.
- Furthermore, one of the crucial aims of this workshop is to advance the development of Gulf Studies as a field through utilizing an interdisciplinary methodology and introducing theoretical paradigms new to the analysis of the region, and thus providing innovative and original analyses.

## Anticipated Papers

The transformation of societies along with the changing role of the state in the Arabian Gulf region (from the emerging new middle class, to the emerging intellectual/*Ulama* class, to the effects of globalization, to the new state institutional formations, to the shift into post oil economies, to women's rights movements) have ultimately necessitated a broader re-conceptualization of society-state relations in the region. Paper proposals are invited that explore the comparative nature and outcomes of society-state transformations in the Arabian Gulf with particular emphasis on the following fields: religion and the state; intellectuals and social change; and networked public sphere and the state. While we welcome all paper proposals of relevance to state-society relations in the Arabian Gulf, we especially encourage submissions in the following areas:

- ❖ **Religion and the State.** In this area, the workshop is seeking literature that goes beyond the conventional narrative that approaches Islam in this region as fundamentally a political doctrine that dominates both state and society relations, or that the state manipulates religion (politically and ideologically) to advance and maintain its own survival. Rather, the workshop seeks papers that examine the diverse, dialectic, shifting and multi-layered dynamics of state-religion relations among societies in the Arabian Gulf region. Possible papers may include, but are not limited to:
  1. The presence and impact of transnational *Ulama* networks in the Arabian Gulf and the vital role of these networks in the formation and reformation of the modern nation-state in the region.
  2. The emergence of diverse and competing *Fatwa* narratives (formal and informal) in Arabian Gulf societies and their impact on public discourse, popular sentiment and state policies, especially after the "Arab Spring" movements.
  3. The role of religious figures in the establishment of the education system, judiciary system and other state institutions in the region.
  4. Local and regional religious movements in the Arabian Gulf and their impact on local, regional and international politics.

❖ **Intellectuals, Public Discourse and the State.** Possible papers may include, but are not limited to:

1. The role of public/traditional/organic intellectuals in social and cultural identities in the Arabian Gulf.
2. The role of liberal intellectuals in the “modernization projects” and reforms in the Arabian Gulf region.
3. What is the role of secular politics in the Arabian Gulf, and in what ways does it impact state practices?
4. The role of intellectual security policies on public discourse in the Arabian Gulf.
5. The role of competing public discourses (intellectual, state, religious, etc.) on citizenship in the Arabian Gulf.

❖ **The Networked Public Sphere and the State in the Arabian Gulf.** Possible papers may include, but are not limited to:

1. The role of youth culture, blogging, Facebook and gender movements in Arabian Gulf societies.
2. The state’s response to youth culture, blogging, Facebook and gender movements in the Arabian Gulf.
3. The impact of “globalization” on youth cultures in the Arabian Gulf and the response of the state through new cultural politics and policies.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Mazhar A. Al-Zo’by** is an Assistant Professor of development and politics in the Department of International Affairs at Qatar University. He received his B.A. and M.A. in International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies and his Ph.D. in Comparative Studies with focus on the Arab Middle East all from the University of Minnesota. His interests both in research and teaching focus principally on development, globalization, and social change: an area where economics, society and culture encounter historical transformation. While his work is comparative in nature, his current area of focus is the Arab world in general and the Arabian Gulf in particular. Among the critical issues on which his teaching and writing have concentrated are the role of natural resources in the production of globalization and social change; the role of nation-states in the world system; and the political economy of culture.

**Dr. Birol Baskan** is Visiting Assistant Professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. He received a B.A. in International Relations and in Economics from Koc University, Istanbul, Turkey in 1998 and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Northwestern University in 2006. Baskan taught at State University of New York-Fredonia in 2006-2007 and at Qatar University in 2007-2010. His research looks at the roles religion, religious institutions, and grassroots religious groups play in creating, maintaining, undermining and destroying political order in the Middle East. He recently completed a book manuscript contracted to Syracuse University Press, in which he challenges the dominant view on the relationship between the Turkish state and Islamic religious institutions. Currently, he is working on several

projects, one of which is a book project analyzing the role of religion in state and nation building in the Gulf. At SFS-Qatar, Baskan teaches courses on comparative politics, religion and politics and methodology. Baskan has published in *Politics and Religion*; *HAWWA: the Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World*; *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*; *Insight Turkey*, *Akademik Ortadogu*; *Arab Studies Quarterly* and *Comparative Political Systems* (forthcoming).

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