



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 5

Yemen and the GCC: Future Relations

Workshop Directors:

Daniel Martin Varisco
President, American Institute for
Yemeni Studies /
Research Professor, Center for
Humanities and Social Sciences /
Member of Gulf Studies Program,
Qatar University
Email: dvarisco@qu.edu.qa

Helen Lackner
British-Yemeni Society
2016 Sir William Luce Fellow,
Durham University
United Kingdom
Email: helenlackner@gmx.com

Abstract

The GCC has a long standing relationship with Yemen, which borders both Saudi Arabia and Oman. Whatever the outcome of the current political conflict in Yemen, the future of Yemen will be a significant issue in Gulf Studies. This workshop will bring together scholars to assess the future of Yemen in relation to the Gulf States. The issues to be addressed include the factors leading to the recent campaign in Yemen, the nature of the various factions and sects in Yemen, the role of humanitarian and development aid to rebuild Yemen, and the potential for economic viability in a future Yemeni state. It is important to treat Yemen as part of Gulf Studies research and to encourage younger scholars in the social sciences to pursue interdisciplinary research on relations between the GCC and Yemen.

Description and Rationale

This workshop will be devoted to analysis of the future of Yemen as a viable state in relation to the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and Oman which share borders with Yemen. There is a long history of political, cultural and humanitarian relations between Yemen and the Gulf States. The crisis that began in Yemen after the transition from three decades of rule by Ali Abdullah Salih, a brokered National Dialogue Conference and finally an open war in Yemen has major repercussions for the stability of the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. Whatever the final result of this military intervention, the future of Yemen as a state cannot be separated from the political agenda of the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia. The major objective of this workshop is to bring together a range of scholars to assess the relevant factors for the restoration of stability in Yemen and its future relations with the Gulf States. The future of Yemen will be determined by its relations with the GCC more than any other external factor.

A number of factors have led to the current crisis. It is important to address the history of political and cultural relations between Yemen and the Gulf States, including labor migration from Yemen, previous development and humanitarian aid to Yemen, border disputes, sectarian conflict, disagreement over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, brokering of the transitional government after the Arab Spring, and tribal connections. Such a broad context provides an opportunity to discuss the recent military campaign against the backdrop of previous interactions between Yemen and the Gulf States. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen were tense throughout the 20th century, stemming back to the disagreement between Imam Yahya and Ibn Sa'ud in 1934 over Najran and the Asir region, followed in the 1960s with the Saudi support for the deposed Imam Badr in the north. After reconciliation in the north, Saudi Arabia provided large amounts of aid to North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic), especially for the Ministry of Education. The Saudi relationship with the former PDRY in the South is also an important factor for assessing the current situation. Ranging from open hostility to reluctant acceptance under the different leaders, Saudi views of the secessionist movement are important to analyze.

Another important issue to address is the tension between Sunni and Shia in the Arabian Peninsula and its impact on the recent conflict in Yemen. Before 1980, the main religious sects within Yemen included: the Zaydis in the north, the Shafi'i in the south and coast, and a small Ismaili community in the central highlands. For the most part, there was little sectarian violence, despite the political creation of a republic in the north and a socialist regime in the south. Since the 1980s, there has been a major increase in Salafi and Brotherhood influence, creating tensions with the traditional Zaydi perspective in the north and Shafi'i perspectives in the south. The current conflict with the Houthi/Salih

alliance needs to be examined in light of the earlier Houthi rebellion in Yemen's north, which included a Houthi incursion into Saudi Arabia in 2009, the role of Iranian support, and the expanded influence of al-Qaeda/Ansar Shariah in the south.

The future of relations between Sanaa and the Gulf States will relate to the rebuilding of Yemen, the poorest state on the Peninsula, especially after the current civil strife. In the past, Yemen provided migrant labor to the Gulf States, but many of these workers returned to Yemen after the first Gulf War and substantial numbers have returned in the last decade. Several major development projects have been sponsored by the Gulf States, including the new Marib Dam, built with funding from Shaikh Zayed of the UAE and inaugurated in 1986. In addition to the humanitarian aid already promised, there is also a potential to restore Yemen's rich Islamic heritage, including major mosques from the Rasulid era.

Contribution to the Future of Gulf Studies

A major goal of the workshop is to draw attention to the need to include Yemen as an important part of Gulf Studies, even if it is on the 'other side' of the Arabian Peninsula. Given its borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, the political and development context within Yemen necessarily relates to these important members of the GCC. The future of security arrangements in the Gulf will include the entire Arabian Peninsula, especially given the strategic importance of Bab al-Mandib at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. Oil and gas fields also straddle traditional borders. There is region-wide interest in the future of Yemen regarding future development of the port of Aden and a questionable proposal for a long canal from the Arab Gulf directly through the Empty Quarter and Yemen to the Gulf of Aden.

This workshop is intended to encourage younger scholars to look at relations between the GCC and other countries or regions, as well as discover the reality of life in the poorest country of the Peninsula. Given the extent to which GCC states have increased their soft power and investments outside their own countries, how will this influence the future of a Yemeni state? It is important to stress that "Gulf Studies" are not only concerned with issues within the GCC states, but also their extensive political, economic, and cultural relations with other countries. Yemen is a case in point. Bringing together scholars who focus on Yemen with those who work primarily on Gulf issues would contribute to the expansion of Gulf Studies as an interdisciplinary research focus.

Anticipated Participants

The future of Yemen is an open issue, whether or not the military intervention ends before the Gulf Research Meeting (GRM). There are a number of internal political and

sectarian factions within Yemen; their grievances are not likely to disappear after an extended conflict that has inflicted casualties on all sides. The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen is unique in the history of Gulf relations and deserves careful analysis. For this workshop, it is important to assess the future of Yemen as a state based on the factors that led to the present crisis. The future of Yemen depends on re-establishing its economy, which has been in virtual free fall even before the recent fighting, and addressing the recognized needs for humanitarian aid.

This workshop will appeal to scholars in the social sciences, especially anthropology, political science, and economics, as it seeks to provide an interdisciplinary forum for discussing the future of Yemen vis-a-vis its relations to the Gulf States. The kinds of papers that may be presented fall into several themes, as follows:

The Political and Security Context:

- Relevance of previous or any future National Dialogue Conference
- Reconstruction of Yemen's military, given the extent of damage inflicted by the war, the loyalty of army units to former President Salih, and the competing tribal and sectarian militias
- Future role of the indigenous political forces and parties, including tribes
- Future role of Oman as the single GCC state that did not support the campaign and has fostered negotiations during the conflict
- Future role of US counterterrorism assistance for a new Yemeni government

The Economic and Humanitarian Context:

- Potential for effective post-war development aid from the GCC, including diverse visions of development
- Natural resources and Yemen's future economic development
- Future of Aden in the national economy
- Future negotiations over oil and gas production and transport
- Addressing the unemployment problem facing Yemen's youth
- The future role of agriculture in a viable economic system in Yemen
- Constraints on development of a modern economy

The Cultural and Religious Context:

- Changing nature of Zaydi Islam due to the Houthi rebellion and its impact on the future of a Yemeni state
- Nature and extent of Iranian support to the Houthi/Salih alliance and future political relations between Yemen and Iran
- The GCC, Iran and Yemen: what future relations can be envisaged?
- Future impact of sectarian Sunni/Shia conflict in Yemen due to recent developments

- Potential of local forms of mediation for resolving future internal conflict
- GCC perspectives about the secessionist movement (Hiraak) in southern Yemen
- Continuing impact of al-Qaeda and Ansar Shariah given their presence in many parts of the country.

Workshop Director Profiles

Helen Lackner studied social anthropology and social development. She has worked in Yemen for over 15 years from 1973, living for five years in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and the rest in the Yemen Arab Republic and the Republic of Yemen. As a rural development worker she has experience in over 30 countries. Currently she is refocusing her activities on analysis and writing with the objective of ensuring that younger generations benefit from her long experience in the development field and her intimate knowledge of many aspects of Yemeni society, politics, and development. She has edited two books on Yemen and authored a book on the PDRY and another one on Saudi Arabia.

Daniel Martin Varisco is an anthropologist and historian with ethnographic, development, and historical research experience in Yemen since 1978. He has written about the recent crisis in Yemen in several online forums in addition to previous research on Yemen's culture, agriculture, and water resource use, almanac tradition, development and history of the Rasulid period. In 2005, he helped coordinate the Yemen Country Social Analysis for the World Bank.

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