CGS Lecture: Why the Gulf Needs Palestine – part of CGS’s Kuwait-Palestine Series, by Salman Abu Sitta

Palestine and the Gulf: The Common Path

On September 24, 2013, the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted a lecture by Dr. Salmaan Abu Sitta entitled, “Palestine and the Gulf: The Common Path.” This lecture was part of the Kuwait-Palestine series, a CGS initiative encouraging an open-ended discussion of the various facets of the history between Kuwait and Palestine and the importance of this relationship for both. Dr. Abu Sitta’s talk outlined the rich and deeply rooted relationship that exists between Palestine and Kuwait through a historical analysis of the Gulf region between the seventh century and the present. Beginning with the founding of Islam, Dr. Abu Sitta explained the common history of the Arab world, including a shared language and a unified geography which has repeatedly faced division caused by both internal and external factors. Dr. Abu Sitta then went on to discuss the implications of Western colonization of the Levant, detailing the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire and the effects of the 1948 Palestinian Exodus still felt today. Tracing the relationship between Kuwait and Palestine back to this period, Dr. Abu Sitta described the development of this relationship and its continual relevance on the struggle for an independent Palestinian state. Finally, after exploring more recent history, including the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and current U.S. policies towards Israel, Dr. Abu Sitta concluded his discussion with an optimistic call to action for all Arab people around the world to unite under their common experiences and stand together for the realization of a free Palestinian state.

Dr. Abu Sitta explained how the entirety of the Arab world is united under a common geography, history, and language. After discussing the various geographic and political changes experienced in the Middle East between the first caliphate and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Dr. Abu Sitta detailed early Western exploitation of Palestine and British plans to establish a Zionist-state which would be the center of Western power in the region. He then described the state of Palestine prior to the expulsion of millions and the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages during the exodus of 1948, referring to the residual implications of al-Nakba as the largest planned and sustained ethnic cleansing in modern history.

Turning to Kuwait, Dr. Abu Sitta explored the early relationship between Kuwait and Palestine. Beginning with missionary scholars that traveled to and from Kuwait at the start of the 20th century, the presence of Palestinians living in Kuwait was fortified when Kuwait openly accepted Palestinian refugees during the exodus of 1948. These early sojourners said Abu Sitta assisted the development of Kuwait with their education and various other skills useful in industries such as urban planning, education and architecture, aiding in Kuwait’s early transformation into a modernized metropolis, and their descendants would later go on to be the first of many Kuwait-born Palestinians. Dr. Abu Sitta described how Kuwait continues to extend hospitality towards Palestinians residing within its borders, offering all possible resources to aid in the independence of the Palestinian people. He then expanded on how U.S. support of Israel has exacerbated tensions among Arab states, and how self-interest on part of the West has continuously exposed vulnerabilities within the fragile geopolitical fabric of the Middle East.
After describing how the events of the Arab Spring have aroused internal conflict among Arabs, Dr. Abu Sitta recommended that attention be refocused toward the more looming threat of Western support of Israeli dominance. He concluded by explaining how Palestine should be a symbol of hope and unity for the entire Arab world—though the Palestinian people have yet to achieve true liberation, the fight for independence remains optimistic in the face of adversity. Finally, calling upon all Arab people to cease fighting among one another, Dr. Abu Sitta emphasized the importance of removing the final vestiges of Western influence that exist in Israel so that a united and free Arab world may once again emerge. Following his talk, Dr. Abu Sitta answered questions posed by audience members regarding his opinion on a variety of topics. Some asked his opinion of notions such as a singular Arab state or the redrawing of state boundaries between Arab nations, while another asked Dr. Abu Sitta about his message to the Palestinian youth of the world. Dr. Abu Sitta answered each question thoughtfully and thoroughly, challenging audience members to consider the implications of their actions on the future of the entire Arab world. In his final remark, Dr. Abu Sitta reaffirmed his optimism for the independence of Palestine, and called upon the youth of the world to join together in the struggle to realize a more peaceful, verdant Arab world.