The Center for Gulf Studies

“Memory, Identity, Forgiveness: New Perspectives on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait.”

On November 13, 2012, the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted a panel discussion entitled, “Memory, Identity, Forgiveness: New Perspectives on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait.” Research by the panelists was conducted primarily through the collection of oral history accounts of the invasion and liberation of Kuwait, providing a unique and innovative approach to analyzing the events of 1990 and 1991. The panelists included:

- Dr. Christopher Ohan (speaker), Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Department of International Relations at AUK.
- Dr. Nicholas Scull (speaker), Assistant Professor of Psychology at AUK.
- Dr. Ildiko Kaposi (speaker), Assistant Professor of Communications and Media at AUK.
- Dr. Farah Al Nakib (moderator), Assistant Professor of History at AUK and Director of the Center for Gulf Studies.

In her opening for the talk, Dr. Al Nakib first addressed the issue of how a panel examining different aspects of the invasion of Kuwait did not include any Kuwaiti citizens. She explained that upon announcing the event publically, she received a backlash from some locals who were skeptical of the ability of a panel composed of non-Kuwaitis to accurately analyze what they regarded as “our experience.” Al Nakib responded by saying that recent research on the Kuwait invasion has been scarce and that no local academics who are conducting research on the invasion in new and creative ways could be found. This, Al Nakib described, is telling of present mainstream attitudes towards the invasion by Kuwaitis, who in the last decade have begun a process of “purging” the event from their memories, removing it from school textbooks and taking down commemorative monuments. Furthermore, the panelists’ research was based primarily on the memories, testimonies, and experiences of Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti residents who lived through the invasion.

For her talk, Dr. Kaposi explored the connections between media and memory in the context of the 1990 invasion and 1991 liberation of Kuwait. According to Dr. Kaposi, the first Gulf War can be characterized as the first war that was televised live to a global audience. This, she describes, created a sense of surrealism towards the war among those living outside Kuwait. To some, it seemed to be taking place on the TV screens rather than on the ground, and was regarded as more of a media spectacle than an actual war. This, along with the mainstream global media’s need to provide a simplified narrative suitable for mass consumption, contrasted sharply with local memories of the conflict, which often contained multiple differing accounts and perceptions of the events that took place. The media emerged as a powerful force in shaping Kuwaiti memories, along with interpersonal interactions and oral communication. For example, much of the experiences that people ‘remember’ about the invasion were not experienced firsthand, but rather, were described as common knowledge among Kuwaitis. So while those outside of Kuwait experienced the invasion purely as a media spectacle, those inside were able to draw on both global media and local experiences to form their memories.
Dr. Ohan began his talk by explaining that common identity is often produced by shared experiences and that in most cases, a collective traumatic experience produces unity. In Kuwait, however, the invasion did not produce a unified experience, but instead, it served to increase distinction between Kuwaitis and ‘the other.’ For many expatriates living in Kuwait at the time, such as Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese who had grown up in Kuwait, the invasion diminished their sense of belonging in the country.

During his talk, Dr. Scull explored the idea of forgiveness and the role of Islam in mediating forgiveness. Dr. Scull attempted to ascertain whether forgiving those who have transgressed, such as those who have experienced trauma in Kuwait at the hands of the Iraqi army during the invasion, actually bolsters the mental health of those involved. His results revealed that people who had forgiven those who had wronged them and had less vengeful sentiments experienced lower rates of depression and greater psychological well-being. Regarding the role of Islam, Dr. Scull noted that those who were more religious tended to be less forgiving. This, he claimed, is consistent with trends for other religions that he researched in the past. Most importantly, however, was the realization by Dr. Scull that those who emphasized the role of Islam as a means of forgiveness tended to be the most forgiving. This means that, among adherents to Islam, simple devotion to the religion along with the practices of the pillars, etc. did not produce high levels of forgiveness. However, people who are conscious of Islam’s favorability towards forgiveness are likely to forgive those who have wronged them. This is important in that it emphasizes the need for educating children on the value Islam places on forgiving others.

After the talk, members of the audience began asking questions. Some members of the audience asked questions directly about Palestinians, why they were labeled so harshly, why other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were not similarly singled out, and why reconciliation (such as those that have taken place in South Africa) has not taken place. In terms of harsh labeling, Dr. Ohan and Dr. Al Nakib commented that a mixture of factors such as the official position of the Palestine Liberation Organization in supporting Iraq’s invasion, the propaganda footage aired on Iraqi controlled media, as well isolated incidents that were witnessed by some, created a negative perception of Palestinians that spread throughout the Kuwaiti community orally, despite not being supported by firsthand experience. As to why other groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, weren’t singled out, Dr. Ohan responded that since none of those interviewed ever mentioned them, one can assume that few regarded it as a significant memory. Regarding reconciliation, Dr. Scull expressed regret that this has not occurred in Kuwait. He also noted that his research shows that most Kuwaitis have not forgiven yet, and that rates of forgiveness among Kuwaitis are much lower than those surveyed in South Africa or Northern Ireland. This, he claimed, was a major problem for the country. Another audience member asked whether social media today is destroying memory. Dr. Kaposi responded by saying that she doesn’t believe any media form can destroy memory, and that digital forms of media and communication are shaping how we form memories, rather than destroying them.

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait aims to promote greater cultural understanding of and increased intellectual interest in the Gulf, by facilitating free and open academic discourse on a range of issues that both shape and challenge this critical region of the world. The goal of CGS is to enable scholars as well as political and civil society actors both within and outside the region to contribute and add value to the burgeoning field of Gulf Studies, while at the same time informing and
engaging the general public. To this end, the CGS encourages, supports, and cultivates interesting and original research on the Gulf, while regularly organizing a variety of public academic events such as lectures, roundtable discussions, and conferences.