The Center for Gulf Studies

Subbiya: Building Kuwait’s Second City

Part I: The Social and Cultural Implications

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait in cooperation with Arabana Project hosted a panel discussion entitled "Subbiya: Building Kuwait's Second City" to discuss the social and cultural dimensions associated with the development plan in the area of Subbiya. The discussion took place on Dec 20 and hosted a number of experts in architecture, archaeology, social geography, and tourism, to examine the various social and cultural aspects related to this project.

The discussion started with an introduction by Dr. Farah Al Nakib, the Director of the Center for Gulf Studies, about the Subbiya project and the proposed "Silk City" which the Kuwait Municipality is currently developing in cooperation with the private sector. Dr. Al Nakib pointed out that the Center for Gulf Studies wanted to raise awareness on significant national project, which unfortunately is not receiving enough media and public attention.

Dr. Derek Kennet, Senior Professor of Archeology at Durham University, who is conducting excavation work in Subbiya, commented on the historical aspects pertaining to area and the surrounding region. He described the rich archeological finds in Subbiya, which include among them some of the oldest representations of seafaring vessels ever found around the world. It was suggested that creating awareness of Subbiya's thriving past not only could contribute to developing a touristic aspect to the city, but could also help create identification with the area that was so successfully inhabited by Kuwait's ancient population.

As for the socio-geographic perspective of the project, Dr. Abdulrasool Al Mousa, Professor of Geography at Kuwait University, explained that the prospect of being removed from the congestion of the capital city might encourage Kuwaitis to look forward to the promising future of Subbiya. Although the new city would only be across a bridge passing over Kuwait Bay, the general idea of a new commercial, economic, recreational and residential city in itself makes it sound as though it is far and distant from the old city crowd. Dr. Al Mousa also raised several important questions on the issue, asking how Kuwaitis, the vast majority of whom work in the public sector, could be encouraged to relocate away from Kuwait City, and how the demographic nature of the new city would be managed.

In terms of tourism and recreation, Mr. Nabil Shashatari, the General Manager of Safir Hotels Group in Kuwait discussed the touristic aspect of the new city. He spoke about the Safir Heritage Village project in Failaka Island, which is a resort as well as an environmentally friendly village with many elements of attraction to the public and the tourists. He drew parallels between Failaka, as a local tourist
destination, and the potential for Subbiya which could also have great touristic potential.

During the event, several panelists and audience members expressed their concern over whether the failures of city planning in Kuwait City would be repeated in Subbiya, such as the construction of large, expensive villas that are increasingly unaffordable to the local population. Dr. Nasser Abulhasan, co-founder of AGi Architects in Kuwait, stressed the importance of policymakers engaging the public on plans for Subbiya before taking any action. He warned that a lack of transparency in the planning stages could lead to a failure to meet the needs and desires of Kuwait's population. The audience, for their part, remained engaged throughout the discussion, with several young Kuwaitis asking how they could get involved in the decision-making process. While many expressed skepticism, Dr. Abulhasan urged the public to approach the issue with optimism, saying that if the population is proactive about expressing how they envision the future city, there is great potential in creating a thriving residential community in Subbiya.

This event is the first of three panel discussions to be co-hosted by the AUK Center for Gulf Studies and The Arabana Project that will address the various impacts and implications of Subbiya's development. The second panel discussion will focus on the environmental implications of building in Subbiya, and the third will examine the economic and geo-strategic aspects. They are planned for January and February 2012, respectively. The aim is to increase public awareness of, discussion on, and participation in the current planning process, and to critically analyze the various issues that are at stake on the human, environmental, and strategic levels.

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait is a research center that 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.