On Wednesday, March 21, 2012, the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted Dr. Mai Al-Nakib, Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature at Kuwait University for her talk titled: “The People Are Missing: Palestinians in Kuwait”. Dr. Al-Nakib based her theoretical argument on the concept of the “missing people” by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and Edward Said’s notion of “overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences.” Her main claim is that the expulsion of Palestinians after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 has had wider social and ethical consequences on the Kuwaiti population and state than have been recognized.

Prior to the Iraqi invasion, Palestinians comprised the oldest and largest expatriate community in Kuwait, numbering approximately 380,000. Their presence in substantial numbers dates at least as far back as 1948, coinciding with their expulsion from Palestine as a result of the Nakba. In the decades that followed, Kuwait’s government and population were characterized by a strong pro-Palestinian position, contributing both politically and financially to the Palestinian cause. They also provided Palestinians within Kuwait with a large measure of economic, social and political stability. The Palestinian community—a highly educated and skilled segment of society—contributed greatly to all aspects of Kuwait’s development.

The expulsion of the Palestinian community from Kuwait, Dr. Al-Nakib notes, was unjust and based on exaggerated claims of collusion with the invading Iraqi military. In fact, Dr. Al-Nakib suggests that most Palestinians living in Kuwait were against the invasion, in contrast to the position of the PLO. Dr. Al-Nakib demonstrated how the expulsion of Palestinians has led to: 1) a reduction in the diversity of Kuwait and the acceptance of plurality and difference, 2) a loss in ethical standing among non-Gulf Arab neighbors, 3) a general Kuwaiti amnesia about the historical contributions of Palestinians to Kuwaiti society.

“While the devastating ramifications of these events on the marginalized and vulnerable Palestinians in Kuwait are easy enough to identify, the effects of this disappearance on Kuwait and its citizens are generally not recognized as worthy of investigation.” This elision by the Kuwaiti population and the passive acceptance of a highly partisan narrative of these events keep Kuwait at a crippling impasse, according to Dr. Al-Nakib. She argues that acknowledging the injustices committed against the Palestinian population of Kuwait would mark a critical step towards creating a more open and ethical Kuwaiti society.

When asked by the audience why, eighteen years after their expulsion, this talk should be relevant now, Dr. Al-Nakib responded that the increasing lack of tolerance and acceptance of diversity in Kuwaiti society today necessitates it. She sees a link between Kuwait’s rigidity today and the expulsion of the Palestinian community in 1991 and the easy forgetting of their contributions to the country. She has been working on this issue for a number of years.
Another audience member suggested that granting citizenship to Palestinians based on the length of time they had been in Kuwait and their level of integration and contribution to Kuwaiti society could have led to other communities asking for the same treatment, thus making Kuwaitis a minority in their own country. Dr. Al-Nakib answered that one should, perhaps, view citizenship as a two-way street rather than a one-way street, as it generally is in Kuwait. Instead of understanding citizenship exclusively as a right to privileges from the government, it could be seen instead as a way to contribute to the state and to the community. From this perspective, granting citizenship on the basis of merit, social, economic, and cultural contributions, and loyalty can be justified. Furthermore, Kuwaitis would not become a minority in their own country since those granted citizenship, regardless of their ethnic, national, or religious origin, would be Kuwaitis and not “outsiders” who don’t belong. The talk by Dr. Al-Nakib aimed to challenge Kuwaitis to think critically about their own history and the impact collective memory and forgetting have on society as a whole.

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.