

ROUNDTABLE

Citizenship and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula

Gwenn Okruhlik*

Independent Scholar

*Corresponding author. E-mail: okruhlik@msn.com

This roundtable is an effort to challenge prevailing assumptions that have long dominated the general discourse about citizenship and belonging. We use the Arabian Peninsula as the site for our discussion. Our scope and purpose involve both theoretical innovation and empirical diversity. Participants are multidisciplinary and put forth ideas that move conversation on the politics of citizenship and belonging beyond the usual suspects: oil and arms, the rentier framework, social contracts that exchange welfare for loyalty, a simple state-centric lens, the primacy of tribal identities, the binary of local or foreign worker, and the binary of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or Yemen.

There are multiple shades and hues of citizenship and belonging, not absolutes. We hope to capture this nuance and complexity in the Arabian Peninsula. The precarity and vulnerability of citizenship and belonging are clear. This is why we focus on marginalized citizens and the ambiguities of belonging, to include citizens without belonging, belongings without citizenship, citizenship without rights, and citizenship outside of the state. All in all, these essays go far beyond legal definitions. They are about the realities of citizenship and belonging as they are experienced on the ground. Authors look at emergent citizenship, acts of citizenship, and, sadly, stripping citizenship. As elsewhere, the story of citizenship and belonging in the Arabian Peninsula is muddy and complicated.

The roundtable is large—by choice. Usually, analysis focuses on either the big state of Saudi Arabia or on the small states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE; or on Oman or on the rubric of the GCC or on Yemen. Rarely are they addressed together, even as they share the same space. We are particularly pleased that Yemen is represented in this discussion. Although scholarship on Yemen is superb, for far too long it has been analyzed separately and apart from the larger context in which it exists. Participants come from multiple disciplines: from politics, history, communications, geography, and anthropology. By mixing things up, we hope to enrich and complicate today's debate. We take seriously the space of the Arabian Peninsula as a geographic unit, without reifying its constructed yet permeable boundaries. And we take seriously multiple nodes of affiliation toward the Indian Ocean, East Africa, and South Asia.

Although they have different emphases, these eight essays all address the complexity and contestation of citizenship and belonging in the Arabian Peninsula. We share that analytical lens. Even more, we all chip away at the construct of “Gulf citizen.” There is liminality in all of us because there are very real consequences to difference. In a deeply personal essay, Noora Lori writes about the real stakes attached to how we empirically measure the boundaries of citizenship (UAE). In particular, she notes the importance of how we “count time.” Claire Beaugrand uses creative license to explore belonging and un-belonging in the case of the *bidūn* (Kuwait). She documents the imposition of unwanted identity and what she calls “the absurdity of the injunction to not belong,” as well as the political mobilization of those officially without nationality. Danya Al-Saleh and Neha Vora examine student protests and organizing in Education City (Qatar) and suggest that new forms of collective belonging are emerging among students as they navigate US imperialism. Marc Owen Jones probes the brief radical reimagining of citizenship via “liberation technology” that has since been severely circumscribed by the Al Khalifa (Bahrain). He calls this digital de-citizenship, and he talks about the parallels with the actual legal revocation of citizenship.

Rosie Bsheer carefully documents the limits of belonging in Saudi Arabia during King Salman's reign. Describing the country's emerging top-down entrepreneurial vision, she uses the naturalized robot citizen

named Sophia as the archetype of both the new Saudi Arabian citizen-subject as well as the elite global citizen for whom this new Saudi Arabia could be home. Stacey Philbrick Yadav highlights how local actors meet acute need during wartime with resilience and creativity, by building effective citizenship outside of the state (Yemen). This work outside the state promises to have significant implications for citizenship and belonging in any future Yemeni state(s). Crystal Ennis demonstrates many ways in which young citizens struggle to belong in the labor market, and the ways in which they contest economic space (Oman). Her point of view is counterintuitive to the usual expectations of pampered citizens. Zahra Babar delves into “the vagaries of the in-between” (Gulf-wide). She examines migrant worker activism and protests and argues that these workers are engaging in a specific display of contentious citizenship. For Babar, these acts of labor citizenship are manifestations of being marginalized and ignored, both by the states that host them as well as the states that sent them there.

In the end, the stressful and self-reflective context in which we wrote contributed, I think, to the poignancy of our analyses. I convened this roundtable just before the global Covid-19 pandemic that suddenly necessitated withdrawal from universities, remote teaching, home schooling of children, and social isolation; and amid the global protests for justice ignited by police brutality, the deaths of black citizens, and systemic and cultural racism in the United States. It is without doubt that access to occupational safeguards and to health care are racialized in the US and that the country has never dealt with its legacy of slavery. These realities, far beyond the Arabian Peninsula, demonstrate that how people experience citizenship and belonging are uneven and are deeply contested still.

Acknowledgments. This group of colleagues shared a spirit of collaboration, stimulation, and generosity I have not experienced before. It has been my honor to work with them. We thank Elizabeth Wanucha (Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University in Qatar) for her technical assistance during our Zoom workshops. We thank Joel Gordon for his careful reading of the essays.

Gwenn Okruhlik writes on intersections of political economy and social movements. She is the founder and past president of the Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies (AGAPS). She has been senior researcher at the National University of Singapore and taught at Qatar University.