Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

Workshop 10

Boundaries and Territory in the Gulf Region

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Abstract

The purpose is to convene a multidisciplinary workshop to review how boundary and territorial questions continue to figure prominently in the conduct of regional relations but also how this is being reflected in academic research. The constituent disciplines that comprise boundary studies need to speak to each other more closely for us to improve our coverage of Gulf boundary questions. Here we require interaction between academics, lawyers, technicians, oil company representatives, policy makers and other interested parties. We need to locate the current legal status of boundaries on land and sea in their appropriate (and often complex) political, historical and geographical context but to do so in a way that connects the technicalities with the driving force behind disputes. It is some time now since a major event dedicated to this subject was convened. Recent developments in the region and advances made in academic approaches to the study of boundaries suggest that the time is right to convene such a session.

Description and Rationale

While the acute focus on aspects of territorial definition that followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait two decades back does not exist now, regional boundary questions do retain great importance on several, inter-related levels in the conduct of inter-state and regional relations. There is nothing particularly new in the following broad developments:

- **pragmatically**, there remains a need to finalize boundary definition, especially offshore, before ambitious resource development and (in the northern Gulf) regional reconstruction plans can proceed fully;
- **symbolically**, the region's major unresolved territorial disputes continue – to varying degrees – to reflect political rivalries, be these Arab-Persian (Abu Musa and the Tunbs) or within the peninsula itself (Saudi Arabia-UAE);
- in terms of regional and international **security**, the regulation of certain maritime jurisdictional issues in international law, such as the regime of passage through the Strait of Hormuz and the claims of states to various maritime zones;
- the continuing efforts, at the regional **institutional** level, of the GCC to regulate the framework of state territory and promote a cooperative approach to finalizing the offshore political map and to managing remaining land boundary questions.

Within such a framework there have been some notable developments and discernible trends worthy of attention – phenomena observable in the last decade or so that have generally escaped detailed scrutiny in the published literature:

- New patterns in the conduct of boundary and territorial disputes, for instance, the use of maps (Iran/Iraq, Bahrain/Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE);
- The reception lent to, and implementation and results of major dispute settlement (Saudi Arabia/Yemen [2000], Bahrain/Qatar [2001]);
- Access, communications, regional development and boundary definition – the massive re-development of Iraq's southern trans-boundary fields is inevitably

raising questions surrounding the definition, status and regulation of international boundaries (Iran/Iraq/Kuwait in the northern Gulf and Qatar/Saudi Arabia/UAE in the southern Gulf);

- The regional use and regulation of islands (natural and artificial).

An informed, analytical overview of such broad dynamics and emergent trends is long overdue. This workshop director convened a major conference, *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States* at SOAS over two decades ago but is unaware of many other dedicated events that have been convened to concentrate solely on territorial themes. The GRM Cambridge workshops provide the ideal context and setting for informed discussion by academics, legal and technical specialists, policy-makers and other interested generalists. Their format invariably delivers lively, focused, informal and constructive discussion – something that is particularly valuable here since we are dealing with themes and questions that remain sensitive and less conducive to more formal and structured modes of delivery.

A lot of the political, geographical and historical research of two decades previous (and before) acknowledged the fact that international boundaries were live questions being negotiated and resolved in international law. The status of some, as in the northern Gulf, had a proven link with conflict. For a political geographer, interest in the emerging territorial map (and territorialities) of the region was a given – for nowhere else in the world is the Gulf's unique geopolitical character even remotely replicated – as the world's most important source of hydrocarbons, with the most obvious concentration of microstates, all within the semi-enclosed body of water that is the Gulf.

The significant number of individual and collective regional territorial histories that appeared around two decades ago reflected not only an apparent connection between security and territorial definition but also the reality that Arabia was still an essentially youthful part of the world in terms of independent statehood that was inevitably still in the process of territorializing. Between 1968 and 1971, Britain had tried hard to square some of the thornier circles it would bequeath to the region in the form of major, unresolved disputes. As such the public release at the National Archives in Kew of the

essential documentary record it maintained for those years still provides a very rich research resource – that is where materials have not been held back or redacted!

But the essential point here is that once Britain's formal imperial presence came to an end, the nature of the primary record at Kew obviously changed – from one (in our chosen context) of boundary-drawer to that of a well informed and well-connected observer. While the comments of its remaining officials would thereafter frequently be more candid, their legal significance was considerably lessened – as, inevitably, was the totality of documentation made available to the public each year under its 30-year release regulations.

For the more significant regional territorial developments of the 1970s therefore – and one thinks here of the 1975 Iran/Iraq settlement, as well as the bizarre Saudi-UAE boundary agreement concluded the year before – the British record is not the resource it was for previous decades. This presents an obvious challenge to students of the region's territorial history.

For these reasons – the progressive finalization of the Arabian political map and the lack of a uniformly reliable primary resource base in the post 1971 period – we are today witnessing comparably less academic research that aims to establish the essential materialities of boundary evolution. While there is still work to be done here – particularly in tracing more accurately the crucial treatment of disputes during Britain's decolonization at the turn of the 1970s, there have been some discernible attempts to move studies away from the colonial powers' state actions in the independent period to narratives based more on local experiences and regional identities.

To a degree, these tie in with the manner in which critical studies in the social sciences and humanities has embraced the study of boundaries and borders in the last one and half decades. Usually in poststructuralist/postcolonial veins, derived from the power and knowledge nexi developed by Said and Foucault, border studies has come to be more about the social practices of bounding and bordering and individual/group responses to the misappropriation and inequalities of power, with a pronounced emphasis on ethics

and identity. Where border studies, as so defined, has been successful is in guiding us past the centrality of the state in how we regard boundaries, borderlands and borderscapes. Yet there are areas that this developing critical project cannot usefully embrace or areas with which it prefers not to engage – such as the conduct of international boundary disputes, particularly those at sea. These are areas of obvious and continuing centrality to the subject and region under review.

This workshop posits that boundary and territorial questions in the Gulf need to be viewed multi-disciplinarily and that any intelligent reading of boundaries in a regional context must implicitly be so in any case. Boundary studies should be able to locate the technical and legal challenges of dealing with disputes in their individual (and often complex) historical, political and geographic context. All too often lawyers, technicians and academics work closely and effectively together in boundary cases that go before the International Court of Justice or Permanent Court of Arbitration, only for their constituent sub-disciplines to work essentially in parallel, with no demonstrable strides made towards genuine inter-disciplinarity. For instance, Law of the Sea experts and technicians invariably get frustrated when social scientists use terminology sloppily, just as academics raise their eyebrows when maritime boundary drawing is sometimes seen as a science bereft of a political and human context. There can be a similar frustration when the basic geography of disputes appears to be underappreciated by other disciplines, similarly when international law tends to regard a boundary problem solved as a regional problem removed. These sub-disciplines need to converse more, so that any characterization of a dispute's status can be squared with its essential driving forces. For that reason, we need not just academics at the proposed workshop but lawyers, technicians, oil company representatives and policy-makers.

Anticipated Papers

While a number of important studies have addressed individual boundary questions and territorial disputes in the last couple of decades, usually their history, the time is right for a review of developments, events and processes that have occurred since 1991. This suggests not only a review of traditional concerns, such as the degree to which the

political map has been finalized and the study of disputes and the actors and agency that lie behind them. We need also to acknowledge the territorial questions that need to be broached in the infrastructural and developmental transformation that is being witnessed in many areas of the Gulf's western and southern shorelines and also to address the relevance of international boundaries in everyday life for individuals in a region that is deterritorialising in many respects.

As explained earlier, we need to integrate more closely individual disciplinary perspectives – established and emerging – to do Gulf boundary studies better. Therefore, a variety of perspectives from a multidisciplinary constituency are invited:

- Cooperative structures for resource development along disputed boundaries on land and sea
- Territorial disputes as symbols of regional and national rivalries
- The post-settlement experience of living with boundary decisions
- Britain's treatment of boundaries and territory during decolonization, 1968-1971
- The emergence of human borderscapes in an Arabian context
- Revising and rewriting regional boundary histories
- Ideas for managing the "usual suspects", i.e., Arab-Iranian disputes (Abu Musa and the Tunbs, Shatt al-Arab)
- Boundary disputes and regional development in the northern Gulf
- The ethics and meaning of boundaries in an Arabian context
- Human territoriality and the waters of the Gulf
- Mapping territorial definition in the Gulf and the role of mapping in the conduct of disputes

Workshop Director Profiles

Richard Schofield studied geography and the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies and the University of Durham. In the early 1980s, he worked as a Senior Research Assistant in Durham University's Geography Department and collaborated with Dr Gerald Blake in a major archival research project on Arabian Boundaries, the success of which allowed for the institution of Durham's International Boundaries Research Unit in 1989.

Following his well-received book on Kuwait-Iraq disputes, Schofield joined the SOAS geography department as a part-time Research Fellow, acting as Deputy Director of its active Geopolitics Research Centre. After the launch of SOAS's MA programme in International Boundary Studies in 1997, he took up a lecturing post in the Geography Department to convene the program. A year earlier he had founded the triannual journal, Geopolitics (formerly Geopolitics and international Boundaries), published today by Taylor and Francis but originally by Frank Cass. He and the International Boundary Studies masters program made the short hop down to the Strand in 2001 with the merger of the SOAS and King's geography departments.

Schofield edited Arabian Boundaries 1966-1971, recently published by the Cambridge University Press. The product of a four-year research effort, it covers in vivid detail the most tumultuous decade in the territorial evolution of the Arabian peninsular states, one that was dominated by Britain's departure as protecting power from the region in the 1967-71 period.

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