By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: An interdisciplinary panel at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) yesterday discussed how the historical presence of Palestinians in Kuwait constitutes a forgotten legacy, and how this is symptomatic of a wider form of amnesia prevalent in the community.

The beginnings

Prof. Shafeya Ghabra of the Department of Political Science at Kuwait University talked about how the Palestinians came to Kuwait and what they have accomplished. “The first Palestinian Arab emigrants to Kuwait arrived in 1939 at the invitation of its ruler Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the positive impression they made inclined Kuwait to accept further workers, including many displaced by the 1948 war. Between 1948 and 1960, tens of thousands of refugee and non-refugee Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza arrived in Kuwait while the oil industry was still a British protectorate, “ he said.

Ghabra said.

Kuwait’s development

Ghabra said the Palestinians helped shape Kuwait’s social, economic, and political development. They came to play a formative role in the development of Kuwait - the length of their residence, the size of the community, their dedication to work in both the public and private sectors and their consequent entrenchment in the bureaucracy, economy, professions and the media enabled the Palestinians in Kuwait to develop into one of the most cohesive and active communities in the diaspora.

Kuwait’s Palestinian population has dwindled from a pre-invasion strength of 350,000 to approximately 150,000 today.

The panel also discussed Palestinian literature, Palestinian national and resistance literature, and the Palestinian diaspora. Ghabra added that approximately 160,000-200,000 Palestinians who had fled Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation were not permitted to return. Kuwait’s Palestinian population has declined from a pre-invasion strength of 350,000 to approximately 150,000 today.

The seminar was organized by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at GUST and Saleh Al-Naqeeb, Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature at Kuwait University, discussed Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani’s life in Kuwait. She said that the trope of Kuwait runs through numerous stories by the Kanafani, including his well-known novella “We’re in the Sun”.

By focusing on Kanafani’s work, she brought to the fore his actual presence in Kuwait in the second half of the 1950s and the development of Kuwait - the length of his residence, the size of the community, their dedication to work in both the public and private sectors and their consequent entrenchment in the bureaucracy, economy, professions and the media enabled the Palestinians in Kuwait to develop into one of the most cohesive and active communities in the diaspora.

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