



University of Exeter

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies

Centre for Gulf Studies

Virtual Seminar Series

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To Perform a Paradox: Checkpoints and Political Authority in Baghdad

For the better and worse part of two decades, checkpoints have been an inescapable imposition in and on Baghdad. These installations were placed and populated in 2003 first by occupying US soldiers, and soon thereafter by a collection of Iraqi security forces—to say nothing of the militants and militias who once operated their own. In 2010, close to 1,500 Iraqi security checkpoints dotted the capital. Most residents have long lamented these ubiquitous sites as incapable of engendering urban stability; senior Iraqi police and military commanders have also doubted their utility. Yet checkpoints persisted and still do today, though in vastly reduced numbers. Why? What effects do they generate if not security?

Animated by these central questions, this talk explores Baghdad's checkpoints by way of their performative functions, and the paradoxical conditions these sites at once represent and produce. Baghdad's checkpoints play host to performative security routines, both in the theatrical and iterative sense, in turn helping manifest the political authority emplacing them. That these installations appear to effect the state as such, even as 'its' purported security provisions are widely bemoaned as amounting to little, suggests everyday paradoxes of power may be as productive as they are puzzling. After all, amidst sweeping condemnations of checkpoints, there is at times consternation for what their removal may portend for city and country. If checkpoints are paradoxically productive, so too are the conflicting sentiments they help provoke. This talk explores how and why that can be, and the implications for the formation of political authority, in Baghdad and beyond.



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