

KUWAIT'S POLITICAL STABILITY: Dependence on Identity



The building that houses the Kuwaiti National Assembly.

Despite encroaching influence from the West and the impact of globalization, the ruling al-Sabah family of Kuwait has faced few real threats to the endurance of their monarchical regime. Even with a democratically elected National Assembly, the executive branch of Kuwait is still dominated by the al-Sabah family. As a historically power-sharing and seminomadic society has begun settling into permanent residences, Kuwait's urbanization has led many to question the al-Sabah family's monopoly on power. The rule of the al-Sabah contrasts sharply with the democratic nature of Kuwait's National Assembly. Though the National Assembly is held accountable through elections, its power is fairly artificial and often undermined by the Emir, or "ruler." Thus the term "democracy" inaccurately describes the government of Kuwait.

In reality, an elite group of Kuwaiti citizens who fear losing their status refrain from political engagement while everyday Kuwaitis' fear of the Emir, prevents them from voicing any concerns. While many

complain about the National Assembly's inefficiency, they still have pride in their democracy, indicating a tear between the ruling family and the citizenry. It is this developing Kuwaiti identity that will be further analyzed: including threats to the defined citizen-identity, whether the state or the Islamist opposition will be able to preserve Kuwait's national and ethnic integrity, and which will best appeal to Kuwaiti citizens.

Identity: Citizen-Defined

The Kuwaiti identity has formed through a gradual process, beginning with Kuwait's sporadic history of accepting foreigners. A significant starting point in the formation of a distinct Kuwaiti identity began at the turn of the 20th century. Prior to this time, Jews were extremely well integrated into Kuwaiti society; however, beginning in the 1930s they were forced to leave through state and cultural means.¹ This in turn led to a cultural shift insofar as Kuwaitis began to see themselves as Arabs and Muslims, rather than solely members of their respective tribes. The

Muslim aspect of their identity shows through Islam's presence in everyday Kuwaiti life. Even access to citizenship is restricted to only Muslims, as stated by the 1981 amendment to Kuwait's 1959 Nationality Law.² The teaching of the Arabic language is also a primary unifying aspect of Kuwaiti identity. Historian Albert Hourani argued that due to the expansiveness of Arabic education, Arabic became how these university graduates saw the world, strengthening "the consciousness of a common culture shared by all who spoke Arabic."³ The cohesiveness created by the Arabic language continues to connect different tribes through a common language. Kuwaitis are eager to preserve this identity and linguistic marker, with mothers becoming increasingly vocal of their suspicion of non-Kuwaitis teaching their children.

Despite these unifying forces, many young Kuwaitis still view their primary identity as Arab more so than Kuwaiti. As a result, high school students often express a keen interest in leaving Kuwait to study and live abroad, and university students often leave the country. This emigration has led to a "brain drain," wherein the brightest minds of the country leave to live and work elsewhere. Dr. Narwah noted the gradual nature of this phenomenon and alluded to the Arab Spring as a starting point for the increase in those leaving Kuwait: young people are concerned with progress, and Kuwait may be too stagnant for many of them. Given that many Kuwaitis actually move outside the country for a large part of their lives, their tie to the specific land of Kuwait is somewhat precarious.

In recent years, Kuwaitis have become more and more hesitant to accept outside groups into the increasingly restrictive circle of the Kuwaiti elite. Dr. Narwah noted, "I saw the shrinkage of the percentage of Kuwaitis of the population...I've seen it shrink from fifty percent to thirty percent."⁴ The influx of migrant workers has also affected Kuwaitis' presence in the public sphere, as well as their familial, personal, and civic

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lives. The government has reacted to the population change by restricting official terminology for what it means to be Kuwaiti, but societal interpretations of identity play an even more significant role. If citizens feel connected to the state, they are more likely to value the state; contrastingly, the citizen-defined Kuwaiti identity pulls away from the state, decreasing the state's legitimacy.

Threats to Identity

Civil society since the advent of oil revenues and the creation of the welfare state has undergone a significant change. Family has become less important due to the government's growing role in providing the goods and services families need, creating more disengagement among families and people.⁵ A group of Kuwaiti women studying at the American University of Kuwait demonstrated the shift in family identity. One noted, "I wanted to study elsewhere, because Kuwait is too small. Everyone knows everyone and will report to my parents!" The others agreed, but when questioned as to why they chose to study in Kuwait, each had the same answer: their father would be too upset if they left home. This casual exchange, common among young Kuwaitis, sheds light on the generational disconnect. The grandparents of these young women depended completely on the family unit during the 1920s and 1930s. Recently, this traditional notion of family is threatened by the automatic wealth and financial independence brought on by oil, creating a shift in how young Kuwaitis view the role of family.

A lack of civic engagement in Kuwait suggests that many of the aspects that enable a democracy to move forward, such as public debate and movement on issues of social justice, may never occur in Kuwait. This lack of engagement is interesting because it is not necessarily facilitated by the regime. Whereas in many Arab states political opposition is severely restricted, it is seen as an honor in Kuwait. Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Anh Nga Longva, noted, "To Kuwaitis, the *raison d'être* of the National Assembly is not so much to legislate as to oppose the ruling family..."⁶ Though citizens remain disengaged, the National Assembly opposition has grown more successful in its role. In 2013, leaders of various opposition groups formed a general coalition in order to write down their demands for constitutional change, including the removal of Shari'a as the sole source of law. The document argued, "Society is divided, Kuwait's oil wealth has been pillaged thanks to



The Kuwaiti National Assembly in session

corruption, the justice system is unfair, and human rights are neglected.”⁷ Even the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Constitution Movement, proved willing to accept an amended Constitution. Though opposition leadership is willing to make changes in Kuwait, this involvement has not spread to the populace at large.

Fluctuating Regime Stability

The Arab Spring sparked a wave of fear in Gulf monarchies. The outdated form of democracy in Kuwait is feeble at best, as most citizens have little faith in the power of the National Assembly; the population is aware that real power is concentrated in the unelected Emir and his council. Moreover, most groups in Kuwait are considered subordinate to the elite class, including Shi’a and women. The *Bidun* population, residing primarily in Iraq and Kuwait, is deprived of citizenship all together. All of these political inequalities create potential sparks for a coup or uprising. “Regime stability” in this context therefore refers to the ability of the al-Sabah family to continue to keep a lid on political dissent and to enforce its rule over the citizens.

Daniel Byman, a professor at Georgetown

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University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Jerrold Green, the President of the Pacific Council on International Policy, suggest that an illusion of political participation may be almost as effective at countering political dissent. They argue that representative institutions, even where they are weak, “suggest that the ruling families are willing to go outside their own ranks when weighing decisions....”⁸ Though the Emir’s distance from the public has been positively perceived by the public, conversations with local citizens have disproven Byman and Green’s thesis. Such interviews suggest that while Kuwaitis support the National Assembly, they are frustrated by its lack of legislative action and legitimacy. Byman and Green also point to the economic dependence of Gulf citizens on their



Sheikh Sabah IV Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

respective states as a potential conflict area. Citizens have become so accustomed to the welfare state system that any decrease in social safety nets will be seen as a failure of the government. Kuwait’s Sovereign Wealth Fund, which receives twenty percent of oil revenues, faces the possibility of an eventual end of its funds.⁹ This would result in a disaster for Kuwait, whose economy is primarily dependent on oil exports. In such an event, the feeble legitimacy given by the people to the Kuwaiti state would evaporate.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama notes that the major deficit of developing countries is their weak usage of law as the governing principle of society.¹⁰ Kuwait’s economy is by no means “developing,” but its democracy faces gradual development where legitimacy and accountability are slowly on the rise. While the National Assembly is an impressive hallmark of democracy in an otherwise autocratic Gulf, there are significant problems with the Kuwaiti government’s legitimacy in the eyes of its citizenry. Kuwait has long been heralded as the sole democracy in the Gulf; however, this legislature lacks any substantial legal standing, as the Emir has a final veto on all legislative matters. Institutionalization of the rule

of law, as well as increased incorporation of civil society, would strengthen the democratic nature of Kuwait, rendering political accountability more than a mere illusion.

Unfortunately, actions by the Emir have continued to decrease hope for democratic growth in Kuwait. For example, the financial constraints encountered as a result of the Iraqi invasion in 1990 led Kuwaiti citizens to question the al-Sabahs, who had lived out the invasion at a hotel in Saudi Arabia. Citizens who lived through the invasion expected financial sacrifice on the part of the royal family. Although a resultant series of financial scandals in 1992 delegitimized the royal family to an extent, pressure from Washington was needed in order for the al-Sabah family to restore the National Assembly. Elections further proved the Emir’s hold on power when it chose to once again shut down the National Assembly and increase censorship of the press.

Urbanization or Desertization

Professor Shafeeq Ghabra of the Kuwait University pointed out the most basic flaws in a system without rule of law—when decision-making is concentrated in one person’s hands, mistakes can have long-lasting consequences. After elections were suspended in 1986, the Emir decided to co-

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opt Islamic groups, creating a Muslim dominated National Assembly. Civil society activity surrounded Islamic groups, whose message of equality challenged government corruption. The population recognized Islamic groups as anti-corruption institutions and coalesced around them. Despite obstacles facing the National Assembly’s legitimacy, inclusion of Islamic groups has led to an increase in political inclusion, decreasing political violence.¹¹ Though inconsistent with Western democratic notions, this attempt to establish Shari’a law represents movement towards establishing a rule of law whereby even the Emir

may be subject to the specific mandates of Shari'a. The implementation of Shari'a may be "the only way to solve moral degeneration in Kuwait."¹² Islamic groups seem to be moving Kuwait towards further democratization.

While viewed as positive in one light, the prevalence of Islamic groups and the movement of Bedouins to urban areas have spurred the term "desertization."¹³ Desertization is the process by which previously nomadic Bedouin groups settle in the urban areas of Kuwait, bringing with them conservative desert values. As the National Assembly has become more representative of Kuwait, it has grown to reflect the prevalence of Bedouin conservatism.¹⁴ Without formal political parties, Kuwaitis are left to vote along tribal and family-related lines.

Since the al-Sabah family falls along liberal ideals common to the Hadhar identity, the Emir has begun vetoing more legislation issued by the growing conservative National Assembly. This progression concentrates power further within the Emir's hands, undermining legislative authority. For example, the National Assembly recently debated a proposal that would ban certain types of commentary on social media outlets. The more urbanized, elite Members of Parliament fought for a ban, and extended the discussion to say that the law challenged Kuwait's identity as a democracy, while the conservative members advocated strongly for the law.

Battling Extremism

Professor of International Affairs, F. Gregory Gause III, noted that pan-Arab identities have had a significant effect on political stability and legitimacy in the Gulf because citizens and groups are able to establish ties across borders, generating influence on other governments.¹⁵ This influence includes the transnational identities of Sunni and Shi'a, which have been particularly important in shaping state policies as well as political and civil action among the populace. About a quarter of the Kuwaiti population is of the Shi'a sect of Islam, making it a rather large minority.¹⁶ External events have largely shaped the relationship between the two sects within Kuwait. For example, prior to the 1990 Iraqi invasion, Kuwait had largely sided with Iraq as an ally to counterbalance Iran, who reportedly backed

and inspired a series of attacks on Kuwait in the 1980s. Kuwait's financial support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s further cemented Iran and Kuwait as enemies.

The June 2015 attacks on the Al Sadeq mosque in Kuwait brought into light the question of the country's territorial safety. The Islamic State, known as ISIS and comprised primarily of Sunni Muslims, initially claimed responsibility for the attack. This raised questions about terrorism in Kuwait and how to combat the growing issue. A similar increase in terrorist attacks in Europe has triggered an onslaught of semi-discriminatory laws grouped as "deradicalization" or "Countering Violent Extremism" action. In Kuwait, these actions have been taken to extreme measures: a counter-terrorism law enacted towards the end of July mandated DNA testing for all Kuwaiti citizens and expatriates—an astounding 4.2 million people whom the state is now expected to test.

Further efforts to counter extremism center around Kuwait's stateless population, the *Bidun*. A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report estimated that the number of *Bidun* in Kuwait is around 106,000, which represent people who do not have access to government aid, decent jobs, education, or healthcare. The potential attraction to extremism in such a group is very high. *Bidun* tend to keep a low profile, but the backlash against the June Attacks further ostracized the *Bidun* community. In early August, *Kuwait Times* released a list of twenty-nine suspects for the bombing; of those, twelve were *Bidun*.



Kuwait City

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Sunni-Shi'a tensions do exist, and do play a role at all levels of Kuwaiti society. However, both Sunni and Shi'a have attempted to condemn sectarian tensions, resulting in far more instances of cooperation between the sects rather than conflict.¹⁷ The *Lebanon Daily Star* reported in 2015 of the resignation of a Kuwaiti Member of Parliament, Faisal al-Duwaisan for sectarian concerns involving threats and insults from fellow Member Hamdan Al-Azemi.¹⁸ The cohesiveness of the Sunni-Shi'a community in Kuwait further supports Longva's claim that Kuwait's legitimacy is based on an ethnocentric elite regime dominated by certain ethnic groups.¹⁹ In the case of Kuwait, the main threat was posed by the increasing influx of migrants whose numbers overwhelmed those of Kuwaiti citizens.

In the wake of the June 2015 attacks on a Shi'a mosque, sectarian tensions have been further diminished. One Sunni Kuwaiti described his own efforts the very day of the attacks: "I did go to the mosque then the hospital...there [was] no space. The hospital was full. So I went to the Blood Donation Bank." This interview shows the sentiment of solidarity among Shi'as perhaps mimicking the sense of solidarity that occurred in the wake of the Iraqi invasion. Solidarity, however, is not to be confused with a combined identity. A professor at the California State University of San Marcos, Ibrahim Al-Marashi observes that within the Shi'a community there are different beliefs and cultural values; therefore the identity of "Kuwaiti," based upon Shi'a traditions, has come to be over time.²⁰ It is still unclear whether the societal solidarity that emerged after the bombing will translate into political support for the Shi'a community.

Conclusion

Kuwait has been threatened by violence and war for decades. This feeling has hung over Kuwaitis since even before the 1990 invasion, as Kuwait was a common target between Iran and Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. Kuwait's history of support for Iraq, which shifted to support Iran, makes it a target for extremism from both the Sunni and Shi'a sects. Furthermore, its connection to the United States, who protected Kuwait in the 1990 Gulf War, as well as in other conflicts, makes Kuwait a potential target for anti-Western groups such as al-Qaido.

There are very real issues that need to be addressed in Kuwait—from the integration of women to helping the *Bidun* achieve citizenship, from guaranteeing basic human rights for expatriates to stopping terrorism and human trafficking. Creating political parties are an initial step towards creating this movement. The fear, of course, is that establishment of political parties will cause sectarian strife and distract from the importance of preserving Kuwaiti identity. If Kuwaitis become more secure in their identity as Kuwaitis, they may feel more at ease to address problems. Increased connection to the Kuwaiti state could prevent young movement-oriented minds from leaving Kuwait.

Kuwait needs to search for a middle road, one between domination by Islamic groups and the Emir. Should the National Assembly gain legitimacy through productive dialogue and structural change, societal movement can finally be expected. Without this kind of movement from participating Kuwaiti citizens, the regime-destabilizing threats could spin into actual political movements outside of the government's control. In the end, it may be in al-Sabah's best interest to address the changes through their current political context – a more vibrant democracy can lead to efficiency – and concede some power back to the National Assembly.

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Regime Stability in Kuwait: Dependence on Identity

By Emily Murphy

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