KUWAIT’S POLITICAL STABILITY: Dependence on Identity

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.

Identity: Citizen-Defined

The Kuwaiti identity has formed through a gradual process, beginning with Kuwaiti 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. 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. 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.” The cohesiveness created by the Arabic language continues to connect different tribes through a common 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.

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.” The influx of migrant workers has also affected Kuwaitis’ presence in the public sphere, as well as their familial, personal, and civic 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. 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 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 the state or the Islamist opposition may never occur in Kuwait. Given that many aspects of Kuwaiti identity are threatened by the automatic wealth and financial independence brought on by oil, creating a shift in how young Kuwaitis view the role of family.


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Kuwait's National Assembly. The building that houses the Kuwait National Assembly.

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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-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. Though inconsistent with Western democratic notions, this attempt to establish Shari'a law represents movement towards 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....” 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 weak usage of law as the governing principle of society. 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 Kuwait 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 Kuwait 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.

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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. This influence includes the transnational identities of Sunni and Shia, 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. 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 youth 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.

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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 Shia have attempted to condemn sectarian tensions, resulting in far more instances of cooperation between the sects rather than conflict. The Lebanon Daily Star reported in 2015 of the resignation of a Kuwait Member of Parliament, Faisal al-Duwaisan for sectarian concerns involving threats and insults from fellow Member Hamdan Al-Azemi. The cohesiveness of the Sunni-Shi’a community in Kuwait further supports Longva’s claim that Kuwait’s legitimacy is based on an ethnocratic elite regime dominated by certain ethnic groups. 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 Kuwait 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’a 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. 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 Shia’s 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 Kuwait 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-denaturalizing 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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The United States' Responsibility in the Atomic Bombings
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By Emily Murphy

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Image 1: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e0/Nagasakibomb.jpg>
Image 2: <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/MacArthur%20Reports/MacArthur%20V1/Images/p_117.jpg>
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