



# KUWAIT

## Quick Facts

Population: 2,875,422 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 17,818 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kuwaiti 31.3%, other Arab 27.9%, Asian 37.8%, African 1.9%, other 1.1% (includes European, North American, South American, and Australian) (2013 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$118.3 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2018)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Kuwaiti soldiers, civilians, and U.S. forces have all been the targets of sporadic attacks by radical religious elements in recent years. However, the phenomenon of global jihad is less prevalent in Kuwait than in many of its Gulf neighbors, despite the June 2015 suicide bombing that killed 27 people in a Shia mosque in Kuwait City.<sup>1</sup> Najd Province, an Islamic State affiliate, claimed responsibility for that attack.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, ISIS and other terrorist groups more commonly use Kuwaiti soil for logistical activities, such as the recruitment of fighters for arenas of jihad (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and so on), and as a hub through which funds, operatives and equipment are transferred to other countries. While counterterrorism measures have been successful in preventing fatal attacks in Kuwait itself, efforts against facilitation networks serving the global jihad have so far been lacking.*

*In the political arena, Kuwait preserves a delicate balance: permitting Islamists a presence in the nation's parliament but vesting power in the nation's Emir to dissolve parliament, a power that he exercises whenever Islamist ideas and criticism cross political red lines. Kuwait's Islamists, for their part, have exhibited a subtle approach, working to gradually expand the role of sharia law within the day-to-day life of Kuwaitis while remaining loyal to the country's constitution.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

While not a primary target for al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other terror groups, Kuwait does have a place on the global jihadi agenda, for two main reasons. First, its long-standing relationship with the United States, especially since the first Gulf War, symbolizes to a great extent the imperialist presence that Washington allegedly represents on the Arabian Peninsula. Even with cutbacks following the 2011 withdrawal of troops from Iraq, Kuwait currently hosts an extensive American military presence (encompassing some 16 active and 6 inactive bases, and tens of thousands of soldiers) on its soil,<sup>3</sup> which serves as a natural target for organized terror groups and individual extremists driven by Salafi jihadist ideology. Islamists also consider the Kuwaiti regime a target as well, as they perceive it to be pro-U.S. and to an extent apostate

(not adhering completely to the Islamic, or sharia, law). Second, and perhaps more important, Kuwait serves as a transit country for money, equipment and operatives into countries in which a war by the West is being waged—mainly Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also Syria since 2012.

There is little known about the organized Islamist presence in Kuwait.<sup>4</sup> However, Kuwaiti security forces occasionally respond to terror attacks and expose plots inside the small Gulf country. Notably, however, they failed to predict or prevent the June 2015 ISIS attack perpetrated by a Saudi citizen working with a local support network in Kuwait. In September 2015, a criminal court in Kuwait convicted 15 out of 29 suspects in the bombing, acquitting the other fourteen. The 15 convictions included seven death sentences, of which five were handed down in absentia, as two of the suspects were believed to be fighting for ISIS in Iraq and two others were Saudi citizens arrested in Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Qaeda is believed to operate in Kuwait in a clandestine manner. Geographically, al-Qaeda's activity in Kuwait is supposedly subordinate to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the official al-Qaeda franchise in the region. AQAP is mainly based in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and there is little known regarding its actual operational control over jihadist activity in Kuwait. Nonetheless, AQAP's agenda strongly suggests that the organization's reach includes the entire Gulf region. Given the rise in attention garnered by AQAP since 2009, especially in Yemen, it is likely that the organization will be slower to expand its reach to the smaller countries under its supposed authority, including Kuwait.

AQAP's focus on Saudi Arabia and Yemen has opened the door for other actors to take part in planning attacks against Western targets in Kuwait. Such players are often elements with historical ties to core al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who for years have been operating independently and carrying out sporadic attacks in the country. In this regard, one should remember that the most senior operational figures of al-Qaeda have Kuwaiti connections. The conspirators behind the infamous Bojinka plot, Abd al Karim Murad, Ramzi Yousef, and above all Khalid Sheikh Mohamed (who would later mastermind the September 11 attacks), were all Kuwaiti residents, and their large families still live in the country. Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, a Kuwait-born Pakistani national, was Osama bin Laden's courier and confidante and was killed with him in the Navy SEAL raid on the Abbottabad compound in May 2011.<sup>6</sup> In the years since September 11th, although there have been few and relatively infrequent terror incidents in Kuwait, most of those that have occurred are generally attributed to al-Qaeda (though not always proven to be so).

First and foremost, Kuwait is an important transit point for the transfer of funds, equipment and operatives from the Gulf countries to Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> This route, only sparsely monitored by Kuwaiti authorities, is a significant pipeline that feeds insurgent and terror groups in the Afghan-Pakistan. Through a network of smugglers and document forgers, Kuwait is used to support these organizations financially and militarily. Operatives of Kuwaiti origin consequently have grown into significant actors within the core al-Qaeda organization in Pakistan, playing both logistical and operational roles.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Kuwait served as a source of fighters and suicide bombers for the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq (al-Qaeda in Iraq or AQI), the precursor to today's Islamic State terrorist group.<sup>9</sup> Kuwaiti youth were recruited and sent to Iraq, usually through Syria, to perform their jihadi duty by fighting Coalition forces. According to one local AQI commander in Iraq, dozens of Kuwaiti nationals were operating in his area of command as of 2008.<sup>10</sup> Although the participation of Kuwaiti nationals in the Iraqi insurgency declined in tandem with the winding down and 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, the escalation of the civil war in Syria in 2012-13 offered Kuwaitis (along with other foreign nationals) a new platform to engage in jihadist activity, incidentally also boosting the Sunni-led opposition in Iraq to Prime Minister Maliki.<sup>11</sup>

One of the greatest threats to Kuwait's national security stems from veteran jihadists of Kuwaiti nationality who have completed their duty in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria, and wish to put to use the lessons they learned against targets in their homeland. These experienced fighters, who have widespread contacts with other militants and the necessary know-how in guerilla fighting and the construction of bombs, can significantly increase the threat to Western and Kuwait government targets in the country. According

to some reports, there have been past attempts to use Kuwaiti veterans in attacks, and senior al-Qaeda officials in Pakistan are known to have entrusted Kuwaiti recruits with secret missions to be conducted in Kuwait.<sup>12</sup> However, so long as more attractive jihad arenas exist (such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria etc.), the phenomenon of experienced Kuwaiti jihadists launching attacks on Kuwaiti soil will remain limited.

Terrorism finance is another critical issue in Kuwait. While the source of the problem mainly lies in neighboring Saudi Arabia, there are also several terror supporters known to be operating in Kuwait, providing global jihadists in the Middle East and Asia with the funds necessary to carry out their terror activities. As official awareness of this phenomenon has grown, more effort has been put into interdicting and stopping illegal financial transfers. Similar initiatives have also been implemented by the UN Security Council's Sanctions Committee that are designed to freeze financial assets and restrict the travel and arms trade of such operatives. The committee's effectiveness, however, is questionable.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the efficiency and comprehensiveness of Kuwait's own counterterror efforts are hampered by the fact that it has no specific legal framework criminalizing terrorist financing and other terrorist-related activities.<sup>14</sup> Thus the prosecution of any such crimes must take place through alternative statutes.

Since 2012, credible reports have suggested that Kuwait-based actors play a pivotal role in the channeling of funds to rebel groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria. An in-depth investigation by *The National* newspaper in Abu Dhabi found that Kuwait "has emerged as a central fund-raising hub for direct financial support to insurgents" fighting in Syria, compounding the tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid raised by private or individual means.<sup>15</sup> Kuwait also hosted the first in what became a series of annual UN donor conferences on Syria that took place in Kuwait City on January 30, 2013. This resulted in pledges totaling more than \$1.5 billion, of which \$300 million was promised by the Kuwaiti government.<sup>16</sup> Kuwait hosted additional donors' pledging conference on Syria in Kuwait City on January 15, 2014 and March 31, 2015, and co-organized, with the UN, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway, further humanitarian support meetings that took place in London on February 4, 2016 and in Brussels (with Qatar an additional co-organizer) on April 5, 2017.<sup>17</sup> In addition to these official and unofficial funding channels, prominent Sunni Islamist politicians and clerics have openly campaigned to arm rebel fighters in Syria. A conservative Islamist former MP, Waleed al-Tabtabie, posted photographs of himself on Twitter wearing combat gear in Syria.<sup>18</sup>

The rapid growth of ISIS and its capture of a swathe of territory linking eastern Syria and western Iraq in 2014 heightened concerns among U.S. policymakers about the extent of illicit funding flowing from Kuwait to the organization. Former U.S. Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen stated bluntly in March 2014 that Kuwait had become "the epicenter of fundraising for terror groups in Syria" and noted more generally that a new financial tracking unit set up by the Kuwaiti government to investigate suspicious financial transactions and money laundering was still not operational. The Treasury Department expressed particular concern over the dual nature of alleged funding flows, in which organizations "to some extent channel money to blankets and bread and schools, and then money also to supporting terrorist activities."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Kuwait's Justice and Endowments Minister, Nayef al-Ajmi, resigned in May 2014 after being named by Cohen as having a history of promoting terrorism, and with his ministry coming under suspicion for allowing non-profit organizations and charities to collect donations for the Syrian people at Kuwaiti mosques, which Cohen argued was "a measure we believe can be easily exploited by Kuwait-based terrorist fundraisers."<sup>20</sup>

A suicide bombing at a Shia mosque in Kuwait City on June 26, 2015 that left 27 dead and 227 wounded highlighted Kuwait's vulnerability both to the general surge in sectarian tension across the region and to the particular threat posed by the Islamic State. The attack was the worst act of terrorism in Kuwait in more than thirty years, since the coordinated December 12, 1983 bombings that targeted the United States and French Embassies in Kuwait and the headquarters of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation.<sup>21</sup>

The bombing of the Imam al-Sadiq mosque was designed to cause maximum damage to intercommunal relations in Kuwait. The blast, carried out by Fahad Suleiman al-Gabbaa, a Saudi citizen, targeted the center of the Hasawi community of Kuwaiti Shia. Also known as Sheikhis, the Hasawi originally emigrated from the al-Hasa region of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in part to escape endemic marginalization and discrimination.<sup>22</sup>

The final element of Islamist activity in Kuwait lies in the role of fundamentalist religious scholars. Such figures play a critical role in the education and indoctrination of Kuwaiti Salafis—especially those that join the armed jihadist struggle.<sup>23</sup> The most famous among them is Hamid al-Ali, a Salafi cleric known for his considerable following. Al-Ali, previously a professor of Islamic studies at Kuwait University, has been officially designated by the U.S. government as a global terrorism financier and supporter. His views—at times radical and supportive of al-Qaeda (for instance, issuing fatwas approving of crashing planes into buildings as a form of attack) and at others more aligned with the moderate approach imposed upon him by the regime—reach many young Muslims through the sermons and articles he publishes online.<sup>24</sup> Al-Ali also approves of ISIS, commending the group's success in “the great cleansing of Iraq.”<sup>25</sup> Another important radical religious figure is Suleiman Abu Gheith, a former high school religion teacher in Kuwait City who became a leading figure within al-Qaeda. After joining the group in 2000, Abu Gheith was a member of the al-Qaeda quasi-legislative and consultative committee (Majles al Shura). He headed the organization's media committee responsible for propaganda and was one of Osama bin Laden's top aides as well as his son-in-law. Abu Gheith departed for Iran as part of a group of al-Qaeda senior leaders in 2003.<sup>26</sup> Ten years later, in March 2013, he was seized by U.S. Special Forces in Jordan and extradited to the U.S., where he appeared in a federal court in New York and pleaded not guilty to charges of conspiracy to kill Americans ahead of his trial in 2014, which sentenced him to life imprisonment.<sup>27</sup>

Since 2015, Kuwaiti forces have implemented a series of arrests targeting suspected ISIS members.<sup>28</sup> In August 2016, Kuwaiti authorities apprehended a Filipina woman believed to have ties to ISIS. She was later sentenced to ten years in a Kuwaiti prison.<sup>29</sup> Less than a year later in March 2017, a Kuwaiti couple believed to be plotting an attack was arrested in the Philippines.<sup>30</sup>

In its fight against radicalization and as a part of the global effort against al-Qaeda and ISIS, the Kuwaiti regime is implementing policies to control and prevent radical Islamists from engaging in terrorism—although, as previously discussed, not always doing so sufficiently. In addition to outright arrests and the targeting of Islamist financial flows, the Kuwaiti government has also initiated a number of other counterterrorism measures, including a wide-scale educational program aimed at countering the influence of unchecked radicalism. In addition, Kuwaiti imams are sporadically taken to court by the government, which accuses them of “activities contrary to the function of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the mosque.”<sup>31</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Approximately 85 percent of Kuwait's total population of 3.4 million is Muslim, but Kuwaiti citizens (which comprise only 1 million of that total) are nearly all Muslims. While the national census does not distinguish between Sunnis and Shiites, approximately 70-75 percent of citizens, including the ruling family, belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. The remainder, with the exception of about 100-200 Christians and a few Baha'is, are Shiites.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq, Kuwait manages to maintain a relatively stable sectarian environment, although tensions have risen sharply since 2012 as hardline Sunni and Shiite politicians have publicly favored differing sides in the Syrian civil war. Generally speaking, Shiites in Kuwait are less organized politically than the Sunnis. Their most notable point of contention is their desire to redress longstanding inequalities and obtain an apology for accusations that they constitute a fifth column for Iran (an allegation that surfaced during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, but which abated as

Shiites demonstrated their loyalty during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990).

The general level of public support in Kuwait for Islamist activity and radicalism is hard to determine. Electoral preferences provide only limited insight, as over two-thirds of Kuwait's population consists of non-citizens who lack the right to vote, and organized political parties are banned. As in many other Arab countries, September 11th and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq ignited and exposed latent feelings of suspicion and hatred in certain quarters towards the West and the U.S. in particular, irrespective of relatively fruitful cooperation at the governmental level. Nevertheless, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was less controversial in Kuwait than elsewhere in the Arab world, due to the legacy of Kuwaitis suffering at the hands of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

Kuwait manages a delicate balance with regard to Islamic devotion. The society remains traditionally Muslim in many ways, although there are no mutawwa (religious police) as in Saudi Arabia, nor are the five daily prayer times strictly observed. The Kuwaiti public, however, generally supports Islamic traditions; alcohol, gambling, mixed dancing, and other such Western symbols are relatively rare. More extreme anti-Western voices are largely censored out of the country's otherwise fairly free press. However, they are still easily available to the public on the Internet or in pan-Arabian media.

A 2007 Pew poll suggested that there is a significant fringe element inside Kuwait that actively supports or sympathizes with more extremist views and activities. According to the survey, 20 percent of Kuwaitis believed that suicide bombings "in defense of Islam" were sometimes justified, and 13 percent expressed "some confidence" in Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda's founder and general chief.<sup>33</sup> Since 2011, despite comparative polling evidence, the conflict in Syria has brought extremist voices closer to the surface in support of jihadist groups. Even though these views are a minority in Kuwait, they persist under the protective umbrella of some Islamist spokesmen, among them the aforementioned Sheikh Hamid al-Ali. A recent Pew study in 2015 suggests that widespread support for jihadist activity in a variety of Arab countries, including Kuwait, is low.<sup>34</sup> Only two to five percent of those polled expressed support for "IS and its affiliates, al-Qaeda, and other jihadist activity."<sup>35</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kuwait is a constitutional hereditary emirate.<sup>36</sup> The Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al-Sabah is the head of state, and has the power to appoint the prime minister, dissolve the parliament and even suspend certain parts of the constitution, as occurred between 1976 and 1981 and between 1986 and 1992. Kuwait's constitution, which was approved in 1962, states that "the religion of the state is Islam and the Sharia shall be a main source of legislation." Thus, though driven by Islamic belief, the government is less strict in the enforcement of Islamic law. Sharia, according to the constitution, is a guideline rather than the formal state law. Notably, the first action of the Islamist-dominated parliament elected in February 2012 was to call for an amendment to the constitution to make sharia "the" rather than "a" source of legislation.<sup>37</sup>

The ruling elite has put considerable effort into maintaining order, and is committed to achieving the right balance between emphasizing the importance of Islam to its citizens and ensuring stability by blunting the rise of extremism. The Kuwaiti government exercises direct control over Sunni religious institutions and appoints Sunni imams, monitors their Friday sermons, and pays the salaries of mosque staff. It also finances the building of new Sunni mosques.<sup>38</sup>

The overall number of mosques in Kuwait exceeds 1,100. Only six of them are Shiite, while the rest are Sunni.<sup>39</sup> There are no official reports delineating the number of mosques open to a radical interpretation of Islam, but several hints can be found on Kuwaiti Internet websites, which suggest the number is derived from the external involvement and financial support of radical elements (mainly from Saudi Arabia).<sup>40</sup>

As no formal political parties are permitted in Kuwait, the 50 seats in the Kuwaiti parliament are occupied by quasi-political societies of Bedouins, merchants, moderate Sunni and Shiite activists, secular

liberals, and nationalists. Parliament members either conform to these unofficial national and religiously affiliated blocs or sit as independents.

The Islamist bloc, which functions as a de facto political party, is the most influential group in the Kuwaiti Parliament. It consists mainly of Sunni Salafis and members of Hadas (the Kuwaiti Islamic Constitutional Movement). Its principal long-term goal is to impose sharia law in Kuwait. However, the Islamist bloc operates conservatively in the short-term, attempting to wield influence within parliament in order to pass legislation that conforms to Islamic law. The bloc is composed of devoted Islamists, but not necessarily extremists.

The most prominent Islamic movement in Kuwait remains Al-Haraka al-Dostooriya al-Islamiya, or Hadas, also known as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM).<sup>41</sup> The ICM was established in 1991, following the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi control in the first Gulf War. The ICM serves as the political front of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, though in recent years the ICM has grown away from its parent organization. The ICM broke ties with the international Muslim Brotherhood after the latter backed the Iraqi invasion in 1990 and failed to provide sufficient support for the liberation of Kuwait.<sup>42</sup> Neither the ICM nor the Muslim Brotherhood retains any legal status within the country. Instead, the movement's main legally recognized manifestation is the Social Reform Society, a charitable nongovernmental organization.

Salafis are another important Islamist factor in the Kuwaiti political system. Since its founding in the early 1960s, the Salafi movement in Kuwait has focused on *dawa* ("religious call," or proselytization) and has been active in charities, heritage, relief work, and building schools, universities, mosques, orphanages, and hospitals. In parliament, the movement is represented by two main groups: the Islamic Salafi Grouping (al-Tajamu al-Islami al-Salafi) and the Salafi Movement (al-Haraka al-Salafiyya), an offshoot of the former. Both signify a more extreme—yet far less organized—opposition to the regime. Many other Salafi MPs are independent Islamists. A growth in their numbers, and especially the establishment of a wide and organized political movement for the Salafis to work from, might serve as a prelude for the country's movement down a more fundamentalist path in the future.

Any initiative pursued by Islamists in parliament can be easily blocked, as the Emir's approval is required for all constitutional amendments. For instance, Islamists have long called for an amendment to Article 2 of the constitution, which states that sharia is "a main source of legislation," and to have the article rephrased to read that sharia is "the source of legislation." The amendment passed in parliament, only to be vetoed by the Emir in 2006. It was attempted anew, again without success, in 2012.<sup>43</sup> A similar change requested by the Islamist bloc relates to Article 79, which states that: "No law may be promulgated unless it has been passed by the National Assembly and sanctioned by the Emir." To this the Islamists sought to add "and according to the *Sharia* [sic]."<sup>44</sup> This measure was also rejected by the Emir in May 2012.<sup>45</sup>

The number of parliamentary seats in the Islamist bloc typically fluctuates between 15 and 24 members. Elections have become a common occurrence in recent years, as the parliament was dissolved by the Kuwaiti Emir four times in seven years between 2006 and 2013, most recently due to protests over election laws and allegations of fraud. In addition to repeated dissolution by the Emir, the Constitutional Court also stepped in to annul the two parliaments elected in February and December 2012, owing to technical irregularities in the conduct of the two elections.<sup>46</sup> In the May 2009 elections, Sunni Islamists won only 13 seats (a sharp decrease compared to their rise in power over the previous decade), while Shiite Islamists won six seats and independents, mostly associated with the government, won 21—a significant portion of the total 50 seats of the parliament.<sup>47</sup>

The 2009 elections were likewise significant because they saw the election of four women MPs for the first time in the country's history.<sup>48</sup> Prior to that year, men had filled the seats of Kuwait's parliament exclusively for nearly five decades, and it was only in 2005 that the country granted women the right to vote and run for office.<sup>49</sup> This phenomenon, along with the loss of seats by Islamists, was taken in 2009

to signify a more moderate and liberal approach emerging in already relatively modernized Kuwait, and although no women were elected in the February 2012 election, three subsequently won seats in the December 2012 parliament and two in the July 2013 vote. To further exemplify the trend, Kuwait's highest court judged in 2009 that female MPs are not obliged to wear headscarves, striking yet another blow to Muslim fundamentalists.<sup>50</sup> Though the majority of Kuwaiti women do wear the hijab, it is not compulsory according to the country's law, as it is in the ultra-conservative neighboring Saudi Arabia.

However, relations between the government and the parliament elected in 2009 deteriorated sharply after the start of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Youth movements associated with the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as with liberal blocs called for the resignation of the unpopular Prime Minister, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, a nephew of the Emir. In autumn 2011, popular mobilization intersected with the disclosure of a large political corruption scandal, which implicated 16 of the 50 MPs in having allegedly received government payments in return for votes. The resulting anger culminated in the November 2011 storming of the National Assembly building by demonstrators and the subsequent resignation of the Prime Minister a fortnight later.<sup>51</sup>

During 2012, Kuwait witnessed two controversial elections that left the country—and its society—deeply polarized. Elections in February 2012 resulted in an opposition landslide as conservative tribal and Islamist MPs won 35 out of the 50 seats. At least 21 MPs were Sunni Islamists, including four MPs each from the Islamic Salafi Alliance and the ICM. A further five pro-government Sunni politicians and seven Shiites were elected, reinforcing the strongly Islamist character of the parliament. During a turbulent four-month tenure before its annulment by the Constitutional Court in June 2012, Islamist MPs called for the introduction of the death penalty for blasphemy, a move that was particularly significant in the context of the attempt earlier that year to make sharia the sole basis of the constitution.<sup>52</sup>

Sunni Islamists then joined with tribal groups to boycott the December 2012 election. This occurred in protest of a decree issued by the Emir that October amending the electoral law to reduce the number of votes each Kuwaiti could cast from four to one. A series of mass public demonstrations—the largest in Kuwait's history—were organized by the opposition, which argued that only elected parliamentarians and not the Emir could change the electoral law, while the boycott movement was joined by liberal societies in an unlikely alignment of interests. An informal Opposition Coalition formed, consisting of the ICM, the Popular Action Bloc, trade unions, and student groups, which then proceeded to demand an elected government and an end to Al-Sabah control of the executive. Musallim al-Barrak emerged as the charismatic figurehead of the opposition; of Sunni tribal origin, his views are populist rather than ideological or Islamist in nature.<sup>53</sup>

With the opposition boycotting, the December vote resulted in the emergence of a new political class. An unprecedented seventeen Shiites MPs—more than double their usual number—were elected, spread across four ideological groupings. In response, the Islamist and tribal opposition migrated away from the parliamentary chamber toward street politics. This constituted a destabilizing development that signaled a worrying loss of faith in Kuwait's existing political system. Most of the Islamist groups, including the ICM, also boycotted the subsequent election in July 2013, although the Islamic Salafi Alliance broke ranks and gained two parliamentary seats.

When the Emir dissolved the parliament elected in July 2013 and called early elections in November 2016, the ICM and most other groups that had stood aside from the 2013 vote announced their decision to abandon their boycott and return to the political scene. The decision to return to electoral participation reflects the weakening of the oppositional coalition and a judgment that there is more to gain by taking part in the political process than by standing aside. An amendment to the electoral law that prohibited people from standing for election if they have been convicted of slandering the Emir ruled out many potential candidates from ICM and other groups from the opposition, including al-Barrak, who remained in prison until April 2017 serving his two-year sentence for criticizing the Emir.<sup>54</sup> However, opposition

politicians still managed to win nearly half—24—of the 50 seats in parliament, taking advantage of the strong anti-austerity mood in Kuwait. Sunni Islamists from the ICM and Salafi groups won twelve seats while Kuwaiti Shia representation fell from nine to six members of parliament.<sup>55</sup>

The ICM traditionally holds only between two and six seats, yet their influence within the Islamist bloc is significant. It is the most popular and powerful—and also by far the best funded and most highly organized—entity of the Islamist movements. The ICM, through the clandestine activity of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood and through the Social Reform Society, is involved in various social, charitable, educational and economic activities. It recruits its members from mosques and university campuses, adding many doctors and other highly educated academics to its ranks.<sup>56</sup>

The ICM formally seeks the implementation of sharia law and the protection of a fairly conservative vision of Kuwaiti traditions and values. In addition to leading and supporting the amendments mentioned above, the movement has occasionally introduced legislation that aims to implement various sharia provisions, such as a law mandating payment of zakat, a religious tax. It is, however, interested in operating within the Kuwaiti constitutional order rather than overturning it.<sup>57</sup> Relative to other national and trans-national affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ICM maintains a mild position toward the United States (though not toward Israel) and it has not criticized the security relationship between Kuwait and Washington, DC.<sup>58</sup>

If able to unite with other Islamists, the ICM's electoral power could help the movement achieve its goal of expanding the role of Islamic law in the day-to-day life of Kuwaitis. Kuwaiti political history, however, is reason enough for skepticism on that score, as the opposition has never been able to maintain a united front for long, and the Kuwaiti government has tools at its disposal to easily disperse and even exclude dissenters, evident in 2013 when members of the ruling family reached out to, and detached, selected groups within the broad opposition coalition.<sup>59</sup>

The ICM's gradual success is attributed largely to its discretion in picking its battles with the government and the ruling family. The ICM has strived to position itself simultaneously as an opposition movement and as a party accepting gradualism and the limitations of the Kuwaiti political system.<sup>60</sup> However, many of the occasions on which the Emir dissolved the parliament were precipitated by political disputes with the ICM. Moreover, ties between the ICM and the Kuwaiti government soured after Kuwait extended financial and political support to the military-led interim regime in Egypt that overthrew the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013.<sup>61</sup>

It is also worth mentioning that, regardless of its relative success, the ICM suffers criticism on multiple fronts. Some critique it for being insufficiently dedicated to the cause of political opposition. A different line of criticism claims the ICM is masking its true, radical sentiments.<sup>62</sup>

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia led a blockade against Qatar, citing the country's continued support of terrorist organizations.<sup>63</sup> Soon after, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt formally ended diplomatic relations with Qatar.<sup>64</sup> In the dispute that ensued, Kuwait has attempted to repair relations between the Gulf states.<sup>65</sup> Kuwaiti Emir Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah has repeatedly stated his country's desire to resolve the crisis, which he claims has severely damaged the region.<sup>66</sup>



## ENDNOTES

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