



KUWAIT

Quick Facts

Population: 2,993,706 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 17,818 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kuwaiti 30.4%, other Arab 27.4%, Asian 40.3%, African 1%, other .9% (includes European, North American, South American, and Australian) (2018 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$289.7 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Although Kuwaiti soldiers, civilians, and U.S. forces have been the targets of sporadic attacks by radical religious elements in the past – most notably in June 2015, when a suicide bombing killed 27 people in a Kuwait City Shi’a mosque (an attack claimed by an Islamic State affiliate) – the phenomenon of global jihad is less prevalent in Kuwait than in many of its Gulf neighbors.¹ Rather, ISIS and other terrorist groups have more commonly used Kuwaiti soil for logistical activities, such as the recruitment of fighters, and as a hub through which funds, operatives, and equipment are transferred to other countries. Counterterrorism measures have been successful in preventing fatal attacks in Kuwait itself, and, since 2015 in particular, efforts against facilitation networks involved in the global jihad have improved markedly.

Kuwait preserves a delicate political balance by permitting Islamists a presence in the nation’s parliament but vesting large amounts of power in the nation’s Emir. For their part, Kuwait’s Islamists (who include Shi’as, Salafis, and a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate) exhibit a pragmatic gradualist approach, working to expand the role of sharia law within the day-to-day life of Kuwaitis while remaining loyal to the country’s constitution. Kuwait’s Sunni Islamists have also increasingly become key players in the country’s cross-ideological opposition, while the country’s Shi’a Islamists are widely considered government loyalists.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Violent extremists

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 the imperialist presence that Washington allegedly represents on the Arabian Peninsula. Kuwait currently hosts 16 active and six inactive American military bases, and

tens of thousands of soldiers on its soil,² which serve as a natural target for organized terror groups and individual extremists driven by Salafi *jihadi* ideology. Militant Islamists consider the Kuwaiti regime a target and, to an extent, an apostate. Second, and perhaps more important, Kuwait serves as a transit country for money, equipment, and operatives into countries in which the West is waging war – mainly Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and, since 2012, Syria.

People of Kuwaiti descent were recruited by and joined the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq (al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI), the precursor to today's Islamic State terrorist group, as fighters and suicide bombers.³ Upon their return to Kuwait, these now veteran *jihadists* of Kuwaiti nationality could attack domestic targets. The number of Kuwaiti nationals that participated in the Iraqi insurgency declined in tandem with the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. As of 2015, unofficial data indicated that only 70 Kuwaiti nationals had left to fight with ISIS fighters abroad.⁴ Since then, however, the Syrian civil war has offered Kuwaitis (along with other foreign nationals) a new platform to engage in *jihadi* activity.⁵

According to some reports, veteran *jihadists* of Kuwaiti descent have attempted to carry out domestic attacks. Further, senior al-Qaeda officials are known to entrust Kuwaiti recruits with carrying out secret missions in Kuwait.⁶

The June 26, 2015 attack that killed 27 people and wounded 227 others worshipping in a Shi'a mosque – the worst act of terrorism to take place in Kuwait since 1983 – highlighted Kuwait's vulnerability to regional sectarian tension to the threat posed by the Islamic State.⁷ The bombing of the Imam al-Sadiq mosque was designed to cause maximum damage to intercommunal relations in Kuwait, centering on the Hasawi community of Kuwaiti Shi'a. 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.⁸

Though little is known about the organized violent Islamist presence in Kuwait,⁹ 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. That suicide bombing was carried out by a Saudi citizen working with a local support network. In September 2015, a Kuwaiti criminal court 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.¹⁰

Al-Qaeda, too, is believed to operate clandestinely in Kuwait. Geographically, al-Qaeda's activity in Kuwait is supposedly subordinate to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the group's official franchise in the region. AQAP is mainly based in Saudi Arabia and Yemen and little is known about its actual operational control over *jihadi* activity in Kuwait. Nonetheless, AQAP's agenda strongly suggests that the organization's reach includes the entire Gulf region.

Kuwait is an important transit point for the transfer of funds, equipment, and operatives from the Gulf countries to Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹¹ A network of smugglers and document forgers in Kuwait have historically supported illicit organizations both financially and militarily. Operatives of Kuwaiti origin consequently became significant actors within the core al-Qaeda organization in Pakistan, holding logistical and operational roles.¹²

Over the past decade, 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* in 2013, for instance, found that Kuwait “has emerged as a central fund-raising hub for direct financial support to insurgents” fighting in Syria.¹³ A similar study was released by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in January 2017.¹⁴ And in July 2020, in part as a response to this ongoing trend, the Kuwaiti government announced it would begin making laws designed to penalize terror financiers more comprehensive.¹⁵

The final element of violent Islamist activity in Kuwait lies with religious scholars, who play a critical

role in educating and indoctrinating Kuwaiti Salafis.¹⁶ The most famous is Hamid al-Ali, a Salafi cleric and former professor of Islamic studies with a considerable following. Al-Ali is a financier and supporter of global terror, and has been formally designated as such by the U.S. government. His views – supportive of al-Qaeda while at times aligned with the regime’s more moderate approach – reach many young Muslims through the sermons and articles he publishes online.¹⁷ Al-Ali also approves of ISIS, commending the group’s success in “the great cleansing of Iraq.”¹⁸ In 2014, the U.S. Treasury Department designated al-Ali a supporter of the al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda.¹⁹ Although he still has a large following on social media, al-Ali’s ability to provide materially for various groups has been stymied in recent years. Another important radical religious figure is Suleiman Abu Ghaith, a former high school religion teacher in Kuwait City who became a leading figure within al-Qaeda. After joining the group in 2000, Abu Ghaith was a member of the Majles al Shura, the al-Qaeda quasi-legislative and consultative committee. He led 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 Ghaith departed for Iran as part of a group of al-Qaeda senior leaders in 2003.²⁰ 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. Ultimately, he was sentenced to life imprisonment during his trial in 2014.²¹

The role played by Iran (and Iranian proxies) in the Arabian Peninsula is increasingly concerning. In the summer of 2015, the largest cache of weapons in Kuwaiti history was discovered in Abdali, near the Iraqi border.²² In the aftermath of the incident, 25 Kuwaiti Shi’as and one Iranian were charged with spying for Iran and Lebanon-based Hezbollah. Members of the so-called Abdali cell were charged with buying, transporting, and storing weapons and explosives, with several accused of having connections with Hezbollah.²³ In January 2016, 23 of the 26 accused were found guilty of a series of crimes, including intending to commit “hostile acts” against Kuwait and possession of weapons; two were sentenced to death, including the Iranian member *in absentia*. Others were fined or sentenced to anywhere between five years to life in prison.²⁴ In June 2017, however, Kuwait’s highest court, the Court of Cassation, commuted the death sentence for one man to life in prison, decreased the life sentence of another to 15 years in prison, and sentenced several other men, initially ruled not guilty, to 10 years in prison.²⁵ There has not been another flashpoint between Iran and Kuwait since.

The potential appeal of the Islamic State to Kuwaitis appears to have waned since the end of its physical *caliphate* in 2019. While no public opinion polls on the issue had been published as of September 2020, in the years before the end of the group’s territorial control in Iraq and Syria support for its cause had already become a minority endeavor. For instance, in a February 2017 poll conducted by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, only 5% of Kuwaitis surveyed held any sort of positive opinion of the Islamic State.²⁶ It is reasonable to conclude that the group’s appeal has only declined since.

The Kuwaiti government, alongside its Gulf counterparts and the United States, has nevertheless continued to target Islamic State through multiple means. In July 2020 the U.S. Treasury Department announced that Kuwait, along with other members of the Terror Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) would impose sanctions on certain individuals, companies, and charities financing the Islamic State.²⁷ Moreover, U.S. troops based in Kuwait had been deployed as part of counter-IS operations as recently as January 2020.²⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood

Al-Haraka al-Dostooriya al-Islamiya, or Hadas, also known as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), was established in 1991 after Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi control in the first Gulf War. At that point, the ICM began serving as the political front of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait.²⁹ The ICM now represents the Kuwaiti parliament’s most prominent and well-organized Islamic movement. In recent years, the ICM has come to focus increasingly on political reform, ahead of the traditional Islamist social issues it once pushed in parliament. For instance, when an anti-corruption protest movement emerged in

2011, the ICM supported these movements, and, after the *Emir* changed the voting law in 2012 to allow voters one rather than four votes each, the ICM joined other opposition blocs in boycotting parliamentary elections between 2012 and 2016. The Muslim Brotherhood also has a social arm, Jamiyyat al-Islah al-Ijtimai (Social Reform Association, or Al-Islah). Al-Islah runs a variety of outreach programs, primarily for youth, while the ICM runs electoral campaigns.

The ICM returned to parliament in November 2016, when it cumulatively gained control of seven out of the chamber's 50 seats. However, in March 2019, by-elections were held to fill the seats of Jamaan al-Harbash and Walid al-Tabtabai – two ICM and Salafi MPs, respectively, who were sentenced to seven years in prison for participating in the 2011 protest that led to the storming of parliament.³⁰ Both seats were replaced by independent non-Islamist candidates, and as a result the share of Sunni Islamist MPs in parliament has shrunk since the last full parliamentary election in 2016.³¹ As of August 2020, it is unclear how many Islamist candidates will contest the polls set to be held in November, or whether the election will even move forward as scheduled. However, analysis by the Baker Center at Rice University suggests that laws introduced after the 2016 election would make local races more competitive, and could make it more likely that Hadas gains a significant foothold in national politics in the future.³²

While the ICM traditionally holds only between two and six seats in parliament, its influence within the Islamist bloc is nonetheless significant. It is the most popular and powerful, as well as best funded and most highly organized, Islamist movement. The ICM is involved in various social, charitable, educational and economic activities. It recruits its members from mosques and university campuses (its coalition with the Salafis has dominated Kuwait University's student union elections since the late 1970s).³³

The ICM formally seeks to implement *sharia* law and protect a fairly conservative vision of Kuwaiti traditions and values. However, its contemporary agenda has increasingly focused on political reforms. The movement has occasionally introduced legislation that aims to implement various *sharia* provisions, such as a law mandating payment of *zakat* (religious tax). It is, however, interested in operating within the Kuwaiti constitutional order rather than overturning it.³⁴ Relative to other national and trans-national affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ICM maintains a tepid position toward the United States (though not toward Israel), and it has not criticized the security relationship between Kuwait and Washington.³⁵

Salafis

Salafis are an important factor in the Kuwaiti political system, although there is no single bloc that dominates. Since 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 three main groups: the Islamic Salafi Grouping (al-Tajamu al-Islami al-Salafi), the Salafi Movement (al-Haraka al-Salafiyya), an offshoot of the former, and the Umma Party (Hizb al-Umma), yet another offshoot. All three signify a more extreme—yet far less organized—opposition to the regime. Many other Salafi members in the current parliament are independent Islamists, demonstrating the lack of discipline among these political blocs. A growth in their numbers and the group's increased focus on political reform suggests a moderate and pragmatic—rather than ideological—approach to politics.

It should be noted that any parliamentary initiative pursued by Islamists, or indeed other opposition blocs, can be easily blocked, as the *Emir*'s approval is required for all constitutional amendments. For instance, as mentioned above, 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. This was the last time it was attempted.³⁶ 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].”³⁷ This measure was likewise rejected by the

Emir in May 2012.³⁸

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Since the start of the war in Yemen, as well as a result of ongoing violence in neighboring Iraq and rising tensions with Iran, sectarian relations have worsened. Shiites in Kuwait are organized politically, although their agendas are not as developed as those of Sunni Islamists. The most notable point of contention among Kuwaiti Shiite political groups is their desire to redress long standing inequalities and to receive 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).

Although organized political parties are formally banned, a large number of political blocs – ranging ideologically from Salafis to socialists – behave like them. As in many other Arab countries, September 11th and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq ignited and exposed latent suspicions and hatred of the West in certain areas. 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 and to the American role in Kuwaiti liberation. Thus, the country’s opposition movements or local Muslim Brotherhood branch have tended not to be anti-American.

Kuwaiti society remains traditionally Muslim in many ways, although there are no *mutawa* (religious police) nor are the five daily prayer times strictly observed. Nonetheless, alcohol remains banned, as in Saudi Arabia. More extreme anti-Western voices are largely censored out of the country’s otherwise fairly free press, yet they are still easily available to the public on the Internet or in pan-Arabian media.

A 2007 Pew poll suggested that 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.³⁹ Since 2011, despite comparative polling evidence, the conflict in Syria has brought extremist voices closer to the surface. However, A more recent Pew study suggests that widespread support for *jihadi* activity in a variety of Arab countries, including Kuwait, remains low.⁴⁰ Only two to five percent of those polled as part of that survey expressed support for “IS and its affiliates, al-Qaeda, and other [*jihadi*] activity.”⁴¹ These results are unsurprising as they regard the Kuwaiti people, comparatively few of whom have joined ISIS since its rise to prominence in 2014.⁴²

Only six of Kuwait’s more-than-1,100 mosques are Shiite, while the rest are Sunni.⁴³ There are also several churches in the country. 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).⁴⁴ Notably, although nationality is restricted to Muslims, the constitution allows for religious freedom.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kuwait is a constitutional hereditary *emirate*.⁴⁵ The country’s *Emir* serves as the head of state, and has the power to appoint the prime minister, dissolve the parliament, and even suspend certain parts of the constitution. 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, *sharia*, according to the constitution, is a guideline rather than formal state law.

Islamists in parliament have, in the past, taken issue with this separation. Indeed, the first action of the Islamist-dominated parliament that was elected in February 2012 was to call for an amendment to article two of the constitution to make *sharia* the only source of legislation. This ideological tug-of-war has been

going on for decades.⁴⁶

The ruling elite seeks to maintain order and is committed to achieving a balance between the popular importance of Islam and blunting the rise of extremism. The Kuwaiti government exercises direct control over Sunni religious institutions. It does so by appointing Sunni *imams*, monitoring their Friday sermons, and paying the salaries of mosque staff. It also finances the building of new Sunni mosques.⁴⁷

Two controversial elections in 2012 left the country, its society, and its politics deeply polarized. The February 2012 elections 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 from the Islamic Salafi Alliance, or ICM. A further five pro-government Sunni politicians and seven Shiites were elected, reinforcing that parliament's Islamist character. 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.⁴⁸

Sunni Islamists joined with some of the country's largest tribal groups and secular opposition to boycott the December 2012 election, in protest of a decree issued by the *Emir* that October. The decree amended the electoral law to reduce the number of votes each Kuwaiti could cast from four to one. A series of mass, cross-ideological public demonstrations argued that only elected parliamentarians and not the Emir could change electoral law. An informal opposition coalition, consisting of the ICM, the secular Popular Action Bloc, trade unions, and student groups, demanded an elected government and an end to Al-Sabah control of the executive. Some thought this change in electoral law would harm the most organized political blocs and tribes in the country, thereby uniting their opposition. Member of the al-Mutairi tribe and former MP Musallim al-Barrak emerged as the charismatic figurehead of the opposition; his views were populist rather than ideological or Islamist in nature, lending him widespread appeal.⁴⁹

The December 2012 vote created a new political class. An unprecedented seventeen Shiite MPs – more than double the usual number – were elected, all of whom are known for their reputation as government loyalists. In response, the Islamist and tribal opposition migrated toward street politics. 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. These moves signaled a worrying loss of faith in Kuwait's political system.

When the *Emir* dissolved the parliament elected in July 2013 and called early elections in November 2016, the ICM and most other groups that boycotted the 2012 and 2013 votes announced their return to formal politics. This reflects the extent to which the opposition, both secular and Islamist, has faith in the system as outlined in the constitution.

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 opposition candidates, including al-Barrak.⁵⁰ However, opposition politicians still won nearly half 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 Shi'a representation fell from nine to six members of parliament.⁵¹ As noted above, however, two members of the Sunni Islamist opposition, Jamaan al-Harbash (a Muslim Brotherhood member) and Walid al-Tabtabai (a Salafi) were removed from parliament after being convicted of storming parliament in 2011; they were replaced in March 2019 by non-Islamists through a by-election. The next parliamentary election is scheduled to be held by November 2020, but it is unclear whether the COVID-19 pandemic will delay the polls.

The rapid growth of ISIS and its territory linking eastern Syria and western Iraq beginning in 2014 heightened concerns among U.S. policymakers about the extent of illicit funding flowing from Kuwait to the organization. Then-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.⁵² 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.”⁵³ Moreover, Kuwait’s Justice and Endowments Minister, Nayef al-Ajmi, resigned in May 2014 after being named by Cohen as a promoter of terrorism; his ministry came 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.”⁵⁴

In 2013, however, Kuwaiti law criminalized terrorist financing, mandating prison sentences of up to 15 years and severe financial penalties. In September 2014, the country’s parliament added additional legal actions for terrorist financiers, suggesting a new commitment to fighting terrorism – something that became even more important following the 2015 attack.⁵⁵ There appear to have been fewer terror financing incidents since harsher laws were instituted and, since 2015, Kuwaiti forces have targeted suspected ISIS members for arrest; Kuwait is also now a member of MENAFATF (Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force), which is critical to stopping terror financing.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ Less than a year later, a Kuwaiti couple believed to be plotting an attack was arrested in the Philippines.⁵⁸ In July 2019, Kuwaiti authorities deported eight arrested members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as they had been convicted in their home country of terrorism charges since the organization is outlawed there – a move criticized by Human Rights Watch since these people would face “the serious risk of torture and persecution” in their home country.⁵⁹ In an unrelated move, in July 2020, Kuwait labelled as terrorists two individuals and four groups, demonstrating, according to the state news agency, the country’s commitment to “stem terrorism financing” in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1373.⁶⁰

In addition to outright arrests and the targeting of 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, some Kuwaiti *imams* have been taken to court by the government, which has accused them of “activities contrary to the function of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the mosque.”⁶¹ Further, as mentioned above, the Kuwaiti government is leading the way on securing financial assistance for Syria and, more recently, Iraq: in February 2018, Kuwait hosted a donors’ conference for Iraq, which raised \$30 billion in aid to rebuild that country’s infrastructure and economy.⁶² More recently, in its capacity as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council since 2018, Kuwait has remained active as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group and has participated in a number of related ministerial-level meetings since that time.⁶³

In October 2020, Kuwait’s long-serving *Emir*, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, passed away at the age of 91. He was succeeded by his younger brother, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah. The leadership change, however, is likely to yield more continuity than substantive change, given the popularity of the multilateral foreign policy that had for years been pursued by Sabah. Sheikh Nawaf’s choice of crown prince, whom he has up to one year to select, will give more of an indication of his government’s longer term policy direction. In the near term, however, he is likely focus on Kuwait’s economic issues, which have been exacerbated by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

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