American Foreign Policy Council

KUWAIT

Kuwaiti soldiers and U.S. forces, as well as civilians in Kuwait, have been the targets of sporadic attacks by radical religious elements over the last few years. However, the phenomenon of the global jihad is less prevalent in Kuwait than in many of its Gulf neighbors. Rather, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups use Kuwaiti soil for logistical activities such as the recruitment of fighters for jihad arenas (Iraq, Afghanistan 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 the country, efforts against facilitation networks serving the global jihad have been lacking so far.

In the political arena, Kuwait preserves a delicate balance,

allowing Islamists a presence in the nation's parliament yet vesting in the king power to dissolve parliament when 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

Kuwaiti security forces occasionally respond to terror attacks and expose plots inside the small Gulf country. While not a primary target for al-Qaeda and its allies, Kuwait does have a role within 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. Kuwait currently hosts an extensive military presence (encompassing some 16 active and 6 inactive bases, and tens of thousands of soldiers) on its soil,[1] which serves as a natural target for al-Qaeda and individual extremists driven by Salafi *jihadist* ideology. The Kuwaiti regime is considered by Islamists to be a target as well, perceived 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 "Holy War" is being waged—mainly Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

There is little known about the organized Islamist presence in Kuwait. However, terror attacks, arrests and interrogations in Iraq and Afghanistan have yielded indications that such a presence exists, though in small numbers. Core *jihadi* militants are estimated to be in the tens, with a few hundred indirect supporters in outer circles.[2]

Al-Qaeda is believed to be operating 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. Nonethe-

less, AQAP's agenda strongly suggests that the organization's reach includes the entire Gulf region. Given the rise in attention garnered by AQAP during 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 attack planning against Western targets in Kuwait. Such players can be elements with historical ties to core al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who for years have been operating independently, 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. "Bojinka plot" conspirators Abd al Karim Murad, Ramzi Yousef and above all Khalid Sheikh Mohamed (subsequently the September 11 attacks mastermind) were Kuwaiti residents and their large families still live in the country. In the years since September 11th, there have been few and relatively infrequent terror incidents in Kuwait, most of which have been attributed to al-Qaeda (though not always proven to be so).

- In October 2002, one U.S. Marine was killed and a second wounded after two Kuwaiti Muslim extremists opened fire at soldiers in Faylaka Island, about 10 miles off the coast of Kuwait City.[3] Both attackers, one of whom had allegedly pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden, were killed during the altercation. In an audiotape that surfaced the next month, bin Laden praised the attack as the work of "zealous sons of Islam in defense of their religion."[4] Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, al-Qaeda's former chief of external operations, claimed full responsibility for the attack in his military court hearing.[5]
- In January 2003, two civilian contractors working for the U.S. military in Kuwait were attacked in an ambush a few miles from "Camp Doha," a U.S. military base. One was killed and the other injured.[6]
- In a series of raids conducted in early 2005, Kuwaiti authorities arrested about 30 operatives belonging to a global *jihadi* cell in the country. Amongst those arrested were many nationalities:

Kuwaiti, Saudi, Jordanian, and Yemeni. While it is likely these activists were at least al-Qaeda affiliated, several other names were associated with the group, among them "The Brigades of the Two Shrines (i.e., Mecca and Medina) in Kuwait," "Sharia Falcons Squadrons" and "Peninsula Lion Brigades." The arrests followed other incidents during the same period in which Kuwaiti army officers plotted to attack American targets after they were allegedly inspired by anti-U.S. propaganda.[7]

- In a recent incident in August 2009, Kuwaiti authorities arrested six members of a "terrorist network" linked to al-Qaeda, who were planning to attack the "Camp Arifjan" U.S. military base. The heavily-protected camp houses 15,000 U.S. soldiers and is used as a logistics base for troops serving in Iraq. The six arrested operatives were of Kuwaiti origin and had also planned to attack the headquarters of Kuwait's internal security agency.[8]

Aside from the aforementioned attacks directed against Western and government targets, the Kuwaiti arena is used for the benefit of other *jihadi* theaters.

First and foremost, Kuwait is an important transit point for the transfer funds, equipment and operatives from the Gulf countries to Pakistan and Afghanistan.[9] This route, only sparsely monitored by Kuwaiti authorities, is a significant pipeline that feeds insurgent and terror groups in the Afghan-Pakistan arenas. Through a net-work 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.[10]

Similarly, Kuwait has been a source of fighters and suicide bombers used by the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq (al-Qaeda in Iraq or AQI).[11] Kuwaiti youth were and still are being 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.[12]

One of the greatest threats to Kuwait's national security stems from veteran *jihadists* of Kuwaiti nationality which have completed their "duty" in Afghanistan or Iraq, and wish to put the lessons they learned to use 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.[13] However, so long as more attractive *jihad* arenas exist (such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, 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 and providing global *jihadists* in the Middle East and Asia with the funds necessary to carry out their terror activities. As official awareness to 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, designed to freeze financial assets and restrict the travel and arms trade of such operatives. The committee's effectiveness, however, is in question.[14]

The final element of Islamist activity in Kuwait lies in the role of fundamentalist religious scholars. 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) 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 on the internet. 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 legislation and consulting committee, or *Majles al Shura*. He was also the head of the organization's media committee responsible for propaganda and one of Osama bin Laden's top aides. Abu Gheith departed for Iran as part of a group of al-Qaeda senior leaders in 2003, and is reported to be there under some kind of protective custody.[15] Religious figures such as Hamid al-Ali and Suleiman Abu Gheith play a critical role in the education and indoctrination of Kuwaiti Salafis—especially those that join the armed *jihadist* struggle.[16]

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 Sunni and Shi'ite adherents, 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 Shi'ites.[17]

Tensions driven by religious differences between the Sunni and Shi'ite elements of Kuwaiti society do exist. However, despite the sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq, Kuwait maintains a relatively stable sectarian environment. The Shi'ites have sought to redress longstanding inequalities and expect an apology for accusations that they constitute a fifth column, allegations that surfaced during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Those accusations abated as Shi'ites demonstrated their loyalty during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Generally speaking, Shi'ites in Kuwait are less organized politically than Sunnis.

Public support for Islamist activity and radicalism in general is hard to determine in Kuwait. Electoral preferences provide only limited

insight, as over two-thirds of Kuwait's population consists of non-citizens who lack the right to vote. As in many other Arab countries, September 11th and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan ignited and exposed some of the inherent suspicion and hatred towards the West and the U.S. in particular, irrespective of the relatively fruitful cooperation at the governmental level.

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. They can still, however, easily be found 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 believe that suicide bombings "in defense of Islam" are sometimes justified, and 13 percent express "some confidence" in Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda's founder and general chief.[18] 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.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kuwait is a constitutional hereditary emirate.[19] 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. Kuwait's constitution, which was approved in 1962, states that "the religion of the state is Islam and the *Shariah* shall be a main source of legislation." 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.

The ruling elite has put considerable effort into maintaining order, and is committed to achieving the right balance between recognizing 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.[20]

The overall number of mosques in Kuwait exceeds 1,100. Only six of them are Shi'ite, with the rest Sunni.[21] 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).[22]

There are no formal political parties in Kuwait, as they were never regulated by law. Therefore, the 50 seats in the Kuwaiti parliament are occupied by quasi-political groups of Bedouins, merchants, moderate Sunni and Shi'ite activists, secular liberals, nationalists and independents. Instead of political parties, which are illegal, parliament members conform to unofficial national and religiously affiliated blocs.

The Islamist bloc, which functions as a *de facto* political party, is the most influential in the Kuwaiti Parliament. It consists mainly of Sunni Salafis and *Hadas* (Kuwaiti Islamic constitutional movement) members. 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 laws that conform to Islamic law. The bloc is composed of devoted Islamists, yet not necessarily extremists. To highlight that balance, they joined hands with Shi'ite Islamists and others to condemn both the September 11th attacks and the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.

The Islamists have long called for an amendment to Article 2 of the constitution which states that *sharia* is "a main source of leg-

islation," 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.[23] 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 seek to add "and according to the *Shariah* [sic]."[24]

The Islamist bloc enjoys a changing number of parliament members, usually ranging from 15 to 24 members. Elections have become a common occurrence in recent years, as the parliament was dissolved by the Kuwaiti Emir four times in six years, most recently due to protests over election laws and allegations of fraud. In the 2009 elections, Sunni Islamists won only 13 seats (a sharp decrease compared to the last decade's rise in their power), while Shi'ite Islamists won six seats and Independents, mostly associated with the government, won 21—a significant portion of the total 50 seats of the parliament.[25]

A major development in the 2009 elections was the election of four women parliamentarians for the first time in the country's history.[26] Prior to that poll, men had filled the seats of Kuwait's parliament exclusively for nearly five decades, and it was only four years ago that the country granted women the right to vote and run for office.[27] This phenomenon, along with the loss of seats by Islamists, may signify a more moderate and liberal approach emerging in already relatively modernized Kuwait. 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.[28] 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.

The most prominent Islamic movement in Kuwait is called Al-Haraka al-Dostooriya al-Islamiya, or Hadas, also known as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM).[29] 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. Neither the ICM nor the Muslim Brotherhood retains any legal status. The movement's main legally recognized manifestation is the Social Reform Society, a charitable nongovernmental organization.

ICM traditionally boasts between two and six MPs, yet their influence within the Islamist bloc is significant. It is 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. ICM recruits its members via mosques as well as from university campuses, adding many doctors and other academics to its ranks.[30]

The ICM formally seeks the implementation of *sharia* law and the protection of a fairly conservative vision of Kuwaiti traditions and values. Other than leading and supporting the amendments mentioned above, the movement has occasionally introduced legislation in parliament that aims to implement various sharia provisions, such as a law that mandates payment of *zakat*, a religious tax. It is, however, interested in operating within the Kuwaiti constitutional order rather than overturning it.[31]

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, suggests strong reasons for skepticism on that score, as the opposition has never been able to maintain a united front for very long, and the Kuwaiti government has tools at its disposal to disperse and even exclude dissenters.[32]

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.[33] However, the Amir has dissolved the parliament on several occasions, many of which were precipi-

tated by political disputes with the ICM.

It is worth mentioning that the ICM, regardless of its relative success, suffers criticism for being insufficiently dedicated to political opposition. A different line of criticism claims the ICM is masking its true, radical sentiments.[34]

Another factor in the Kuwaiti political system are the Salafis. Their main groups are 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 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 moving in a more fundamentalist path in the future.

In its fight against radicalization and as a part of the global effort against al-Qaeda, the Kuwaiti regime is implementing policies to control and prevent radical Islamists from engaging in terrorism—although 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."[35]

ENDNOTES

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