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KUWAITI SHIA: GOVERNMENT POLICIES, SOCIETAL CLEAVAGES,
AND THE NON-FACTOR OF IRAN

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For several months the “Arab Spring” protests have rumbled throughout the Middle East, shaking many long-standing governing structures and sending regional leaders scrambling to examine the societal fault lines within their nations. Among the many social divisions under scrutiny - class, age, education, and political orientation - the issue of sect causes great unease amongst regimes. The Persian Gulf is home to the vast majority of the world’s Shia Muslim population, and several Gulf states have sizable minority Shia populations. Many within the Gulf view Iran as being an active player in influencing Shia affairs within the region. Yet while the Sunni monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, scramble to pacify their domestic Shia groups, alternating between expensive government investment programs and crackdowns by security forces, the Shia of Kuwait have been relatively quiescent. Kuwaiti leaders, while reacting strongly to instances of disloyalty by isolated Shia, appear to trust and incorporate their Shia citizenry. Shiite Kuwaitis experience among the greatest levels of incorporation to be seen in the Gulf. This report will explore the societal tensions within Kuwait; the nature of the relationship between Kuwait’s government and its domestic Shia population, and the role, if any, played by Iran in determining this relationship.

After explaining our methodology and a brief overview of Kuwait’s demographic circumstances, we will first examine the relationship between Iran and Kuwait in the decade following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Throughout the 1980’s Iran rhetorically and actively, supported the overthrow of the Kuwaiti monarchy by supporting foreign and domestic radical Shia groups within the country. As our research reveals, however, the tensions between the states failed to result in the oppression of Shia as a group. In actuality, the Kuwaiti government took a more focused approach to the issue of domestic unrest and targeted organizations that

attempted, in the regimes view, to overthrow or destabilize the monarchy. Iraq's role in Kuwaiti politics will also be examined.

The pattern of Kuwait's regime targeting threatening organizations continued in the 1990's, in part because of an easing of tensions with Iran and new limits on Iranian revolutionary rhetoric. More importantly, the relationship improved when in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and became the major external threat to Kuwait and the Gulf. With Iraq as the pre-eminent threat to the Kuwaiti regime, the post-liberation government focused its repressive policies on those persons who had collaborated with the Iraqi occupation. Here again we demonstrate that these policies failed to directly target the Shia population of the state, instead focusing on the *bidoon*, those persons without citizenship.

Today the Kuwaiti state continues to focus its internal security campaign against the *bidoon*. Shia citizens as a group, are relatively well integrated into the Kuwaiti state. Kuwaiti government policy, on paper and in practice, discriminates on the basis of citizen-non-citizen instead of on a sectarian basis. This leaves the Shia relatively well-treated with no large scale sectarian campaign on the part of the government. Shia are given all the rights of citizens and are allowed to practice their religion, vote and run in elections, hold office, and use their own legal codes and traditions in personal status laws. In truth, far from discriminating against its Shia citizenry as a threat, the Kuwaiti government continues to encourage their integration and fosters a non-sectarian Kuwaiti national identity among the Shia, in spite of tensions between Kuwait and Iran and notwithstanding a debate that exists within some segments of the Sunni community about the degree of Kuwaiti-ness of the Shia within Kuwait.

1. Methodology

Not much attention has been directed in the West towards the internal political developments of Kuwait. While we came across the work of some scholars, such as Gregory Gause, Graham E. Fuller and Rend al-Rahim Francke, and Laurence Louer, who examined internal political affairs in the Gulf, the vast majority of the works we encountered were focused upon Kuwait as a state actor within the Gulf security context. The “Arab Spring” has recently directed much international attention towards the Shia communities of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; in Kuwait, however, the affairs of Shia receive relatively little scrutiny from international scholars.

Iran is a common topic of discussion among scholars. While many tend to dismiss the perception that Iran had much influence in the lives of Kuwait's Shia, newspapers in the region and some of our interviewees presented a different story. Some regional news outlets, such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Qabas*, discussed the possibility that Shia sleeper cells operated in Kuwait under the direction of Iranian forces.¹ One of our interviewees, a Sunni scholar at Kuwait University, openly expressed the view that some Kuwaiti Shia could be under the influence of Iran.² This viewpoint is also expressed by the leaders of Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, who accuse Iran of mobilizing Gulf Shia.³ This popular assumption is one which has yet to be

¹ D. Parvez, “Shia Crackdowns in the Middle East,” *Al Jazeera*, 22 September, 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/09/2010921131347921736.html> (Accessed April 11, 2011) and “Kuwait Watches Pro-Iranian Sleeping Cells: Report,” *Al Arabiya*, February 27, 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/08/22/117295.html>. (Accessed April 11, 2011).

² Interview 3 Abdullah Al-Shayejji, interview by authors, March 17, 2011, oral.

³ Michael Slackman, “Arab Unrest Propels Iran as Saudi Influence declines,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/24/world/middleeast/24saudis.html?_r=1&ref=iran (accessed April 11, 2011).

tested by scholars, who, in the words of Gregory Gause, tend to focus on “conventional power threats and ignore” the importance of external states interfering in domestic affairs.⁴

We gathered information from a variety of sources. In addition to exploring the online databases supplied by Ebscohost and JSTOR, we often examined newspapers of the region. We read translated articles from MidEast Wire, and explored English-Language news outlets such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Gulf News and The Kuwait Times. We were limited in our research by our inability to directly translate documents written in Arabic. To acquire demographic data, we relied upon figures obtained from the Pew Center and pulled census data from the government website.

We conducted a series of interviews in Kuwait with well-educated professional educators, businessmen and former government officials. A number of these interviews were conducted on background with the understanding that the interviewees would not be either named or quoted.

We encountered some difficulty in obtaining interviews while we were in the country. Part of the problem was the sensitive nature of our topic, which touched upon matters of Shia loyalty and the role of outsiders. There had also been a crackdown on protesters the day before we arrived making people even more reluctant to discuss politics. On more than one occasion when we explained the nature of our research to Kuwaitis we met on the street, the conversation immediately cooled. One interview candidate who expressed willingness to meet with us in private conveyed a strong reticence to converse with us over the phone, which presumably could be monitored by the government. Given our limited sample of interviews within Kuwait, we felt it necessary to support our paper with additional conversations with outside experts. These interviews were also elite based and not representative of the Kuwaiti population as a whole..

⁴

F. Gregory Gause III, “Threats and Threat Perceptions in the Persian Gulf Region,” *Middle East Policy* Vol. 14 No. 2 (summer 2007): 121.

These reservations aside, we found them on numerous occasions to be quite helpful in representing several broad trends and ideas prevalent in Kuwaiti society. These interviews provided supporting evidence that some segments of the Shia elite, at least, feel that they are well integrated into Kuwaiti society and consider themselves Kuwaiti. The Sunni perspective, however, was somewhat more divisive and revealed an on-going debate within the Sunni community, about the degree to which the Shia are considered Kuwaiti. While some in the Sunni community believe that the Shia are integrated and nationalistic - Kuwaitis, in every sense of the word - other segments view the Shia with more distrust and suspicion.

This project has proven to be an enlightening experience for both of the authors. We first approached the topic of Kuwaiti Shia with two fundamental assumptions: that Kuwaiti Shia were excluded from the society as a whole, and that Kuwait's relationship with Iran played a critical role in producing these societal tensions. Our research revealed that we were wrong on both counts. Not only is Kuwait's Shia policy a model for Sunni-Shia integration throughout the Gulf, but the relationship of Kuwait to its powerful Persian neighbor plays a marginal role on how the state has treated its citizen population.

2. Data

The Shia of Kuwait are estimated to be between 20-25 percent of the total population of Kuwait.⁵ A number of our interviewees, both Shia and Sunni, believed that the Shia population was far less, ranging in the 16-18 percent range.⁶ Kuwait's total population was estimated in

⁵ PEW Research Center "Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population," The PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, Oct. 2009.

⁶ Interview 1, interview by authors, March 15, 2011, Kuwait City, oral and Interview 3.

2008 to be 3.328 million people.⁷ Slightly less than half of the population is made up of Kuwaiti citizens, which are estimated to be at 1.04 million of the total population.⁸ It is unknown for certain how many Shia are Kuwaiti citizens because the Kuwaiti census ignores religious identifiers.⁹ A new census is being conducted by the Kuwaiti government and its results should be published some time after its scheduled completion on May 31, 2011.¹⁰

Citizenship in Kuwait is divided into two classes. First class citizenship is granted to those families that immigrated into Kuwait before 1920; it carries more social prestige.¹¹ The second class is granted to those who immigrated between 1920 and 1948 and this class is prohibited from voting or running for office.¹² Some exceptions are made, for services to the state or as a political strategy, but these are limited in numbers and relatively rare. Exact numbers of these citizenship classes are difficult to obtain but one study from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* estimates that 80 percent of citizens are first class and 20 percent are second class.¹³ Citizenship class “does not correspond to religious sect” with first class citizens being either Sunni or Shia.¹⁴ Best estimates indicate that Sunnis make up approximately 70 percent of the citizens and Shia the remaining 30 percent.¹⁵

The Shia of Kuwait are divided into three separate groups. Two groups are of Arab descent, the Hasawi and the Baharna while the third, the ‘Ajam, is the largest and of Iranian

7 Central Statistic Bureau, “Census History,” Kuwaiti Census (English page), http://www.kuwaitcensus.com/index_en.html (accessed April 11, 2011).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Katherine Meyer, Helen Rizzo, and Yousef Ali, “Islam and the Extension of Citizenship Rights to Women in Kuwait,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1998), 134.

12 Ibid, 134.

13 Ibid, 135.

14 Ibid, 134.

15 Ibid, 135.

descent.¹⁶ The Hasawi and the Baharna have roots in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, southern Iraq, and the Arab regions of Iran.¹⁷ The Iranian 'Ajam tend are the wealthiest of the Shia groups and the one most closely aligned with the government and form a key part of the government bloc.¹⁸ According to Gregory Gause the wealthiest Shia family of Kuwait is from the 'Ajam.¹⁹

The Kuwaiti Shia community is not a monolithic political bloc. Both Islamist and secular Shia parliamentarians are “at pains to portray themselves as representatives of mixed Sunni-Shi'ite constituencies”.²⁰ The Shia are internally fragmented by economic disparities, “new” vs. “old” settlers, and by allegiance to different maraji'.²¹ While there is no definitive data on the subject, 30-40 percent of Kuwait's Shia are believed to be Imami, those who “accept the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini and his doctrine of an Islamic state ruled by clerics”.²²

3. The Kuwait-Iran Relationship – 1980's and 1990's

To determine whether Kuwaiti policy towards the Shia has been influenced by the state's relationship with the Islamic Republic, we must first examine the history of that relationship. Out of the many years of Kuwaiti-Iranian interaction, we scrutinized the period following the 1979 Revolution when the advent of the radical Islamic Republic in Iran resulted in the greatest period of tension in the two-nations' history. Prior to this time the relationship had been relatively positive as Iran, under the Shah, worked to develop ties with its Arab neighbors against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In April 1973, Iranian Premier Amir Abbas Hoveyda offered military assistance

16 Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, “The Arab Shia; The Forgotten Muslims”, Palgrave, New York, 2001, 157.

17 Ibid, 157.

18 Ibid, 157.

19 Interview 4, Gregory Gause III, interview by authors, April 6, 2011, oral.

20 Fuller and Francke, 159.

21 Ibid, 157.

22 Ibid, 159.

to Kuwait if it were ever to be faced with Iraqi aggression.²³ Kuwait, a small nation and ever-conscious of its vulnerability to its larger neighbors, greatly valued such assurances to its security.

The Kuwait-Iran relationship, however, experienced a sharp decline in 1979 when the Shah fell and the Iranian Revolution brought to power radical clerics led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. A central pillar of Iran's foreign policy in the early 1980's was the concept of exporting the revolution.²⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini, the nation's Supreme Leader, declared that it was Iranian policy to foment Muslim uprisings with the directive of replacing the Western-oriented regimes of the Gulf with Iranian-oriented, preferably Shia, theocracies. "We have no choice," stated Khomeini, "but to destroy those systems that are corrupt and to overthrow all oppressive and criminal regimes."²⁵ Iran directed much of its Shia mobilization efforts towards Iraq's majority Shia population, its opponent in war since 1980, but it also tried to mobilize anti-regime elements in other Gulf states, particularly those with Shia communities.

This campaign of mobilizing Shia populations alarmed Kuwait, which joined the coalition of Arab states supporting Iraq in its eight-year war with Iran. The 1980's was a period of heightened security threats to the Kuwaiti regime, both internal and external. The monarchy was alarmed by the polarization within its Shia population; many of Kuwait's own Shia identified Ayatollah Khomeini as their spiritual leader while others followed the religious guidance of the Grand Ayatollah Abol Qasim Kho'i in Najaf who, despite being quietist, organized protests to press the government for greater rights.²⁶

23 Talat Parveen, *Iran's Policy Towards the Gulf*, New Dehli: Ashok Kumar Matel Concept Publishing Company, 2006, 24.

24 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18.

25 Ibid, 18.

26 Ghanim Al Najjar, "Human Rights in a Crisis Situation: The Case of Kuwait after Occupation," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Feb. 2001), 194.

A series of attacks by Kuwaiti and foreign Shia terrorist organizations shocked the state in the early 1980's. The regime interpreted these attacks as evidence that Iran was manipulating foreign organizations and Kuwaiti Shia citizens to punish Kuwait for supporting Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War.²⁷ Iran, for its part, accused Kuwait and its neighbors of being puppets of the "Great Satan" America which, despite claiming neutrality, supported Iraq in its foreign policy.²⁸ The conflict between Iran and Kuwait reached a peak in the late 1980's as Kuwait provided logistical assistance to Iraq for its attacks on Iranian oil facilities, and Iran in turn retaliated by attacking Kuwaiti oil tankers and production sites.²⁹

Coming at the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, the 1990's witnessed a dramatic change in the Kuwaiti perception of the Iranian threat. The tension broke when, to the utter surprise of its government, Kuwait was invaded by its former strategic ally Iraq. Following the liberation of Kuwait the Kuwaiti government reevaluated the regional security dynamic in which Iran became a reduced threat to Kuwait. The revision was also due to changes in Iranian foreign policy following the death of Khomeini. Iran had been drained by its long and costly war with Iraq, international isolation, and economic crisis at home, which caused Iranian policy makers to fear for the survival of the regime. Khomeini's successor Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani sought to craft a more conciliatory policy in order to reduce Iran's isolation.³⁰

²⁷ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, (January 13, 2010), 16.

²⁸ Helen Chapin Metz, ed. Iran: A Country Study. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987, "Relations with Regional Powers," <http://countrystudies.us/iran/103.htm> (accessed March 16, 2011).

²⁹ Ibid and Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, (Nov. 4, 2010), 8.

³⁰ Eva Patricia Raket, "Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006." Perspectives on Global Development & Technology vol. 6, no. 1-3 (2007) 170.

This new behavior of the Islamic Republic relieved many of the tensions between Iran and Kuwait. First among the Islamic regime's revolutionary concepts to be redefined was the concept of exporting the revolution. Said Khamenei:

The export of the revolution did not mean that we would rise up and throw our weight and power around and begin wars, forcing people to revolt and carry out revolutions. That was not the Imam's intention at all. This is not part of our policies and in fact it is against them.³¹

Iran began a campaign to foster better political and economic ties with all of its Gulf neighbors, including Kuwait. Iran was the first nation to denounce Kuwait's occupation by Iraq, and many Kuwaitis who fled the country during the occupation, particularly the Shia, sought refuge in Iran.³² Iran issued an estimated 72,000 Iranian citizenship certificates to Kuwaitis.³³ While the period was by no means without incident - Iran's insistence upon the sum of \$90 million in exchange for a confiscated Kuwaiti Airlines jet was a minor dispute - in general the 1990's reflected a period of relative ease in Kuwait's relationship with Iran.³⁴

The 1980's, therefore, reflected the peak period of Iran-Kuwait tensions. If a relationship existed between Kuwaiti-Iranian tensions and the Kuwaiti government's treatment of its Shia citizenry, one would expect to find increased levels of oppression during these years of war and chaos. Instead Kuwaiti Shia remained incorporated in Kuwait's political and social culture and experienced much the same circumstances as their fellow citizens.

³¹ Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan "Islamic Realpolitik: Two Level Iranian Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 26 No. 4 (December 2009), 19.

³² Interview 6, Ambassador Edward Gnehm Jr., interview by authors, Washington D.C., April 15, 2011, oral.

³³ Interview 1.

³⁴ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy", 16.

4. Kuwaiti Policy: Control Amidst Chaos

The Kuwaiti government during the 1980's experienced a number of internal crises that threatened national security and the regime. The regime was faced with attacks by terrorist actors, the increased prevalence of foreigners, and the rising challenge of political opposition. In reacting to these dilemmas, government policy denied political freedoms to a variety of groups within Kuwaiti society. The Shia were not unaffected by these policies. These incidents did not reflect a government policy to oppress the Kuwaiti Shia as a group. Indeed, the Shia of Kuwait often fared much better than other elements of Kuwaiti society, such as the bidoon and expatriate workers. Government policy affecting the Shia either targeted specific, dangerous, Shia organizations, or impacted broad swaths of the Kuwaiti general politic. From this, it is demonstrated that the government's treatment of Kuwaiti Shia, as a whole, is a trend independent of the influence of the state's relationship with Iran.

Kuwait experienced a number of terrorist attacks from Shiite organizations, both Kuwaiti and foreign, in the decade following the Islamic Revolution. 1980 witnessed the bombing of Kuwait's London offices and the hijacking of a Kuwaiti Airline by the Iraqi Shia group al-Dawah.³⁵ Al-Dawah - an organization funded and based in Iran - was also implicated in a 1983 attack on the American and French embassies and a 1985 assassination attempt on the Amir.³⁶ In 1987, six Kuwaiti Shia citizens were tried and executed for setting fires in the national oil fields in support of the Islamic Revolution.³⁷

³⁵ Sharon Stanton Russel and Muhammad Ali al-Ramadhan, "Kuwait's Migration Policy since the Gulf Crisis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 26 (1994), 572.

³⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy," 9.

³⁷ John Kifner, "Six Kuwaiti Shiite Terrorists Condemned," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/07/world/6-kuwaiti-shiite-terrorists-condemned.html> (accessed March, 16 2011).

Demographic and political threats also confronted the regime. Kuwait's public and private sectors employed large numbers of foreign workers, which became a source of unease in this period. Non-Kuwaiti residents have outnumbered Kuwaiti citizens since 1965.³⁸ This unease came to a peak when the 1980 census revealed a greater growth of the foreign resident population than was expected - Kuwaiti citizens made up just 41.6% of the population.³⁹

Faced with these political threats, the Kuwaiti regime acted in a manner calculated to support its own political stability. In 1981 government the government reapportioned the nation's electoral map and raised the number of districts from ten to twenty-five.⁴⁰ The move shifted political power away from recently nationalized working class citizens and towards settled tribes.⁴¹ That year, Shia representation in parliament also fell by more than half in comparison to the previous parliament; from 20 percent to 8 percent.⁴² The move, however, was not motivated by sectarian animosity. Rather, the paramount motivator was the ruling family's desire for greater electoral control and security. The expanded number of electoral districts enhanced the ability of the regime to influence the election of individual candidates in a period of political crisis. The groups favored by the redistricting were lower class, non-urban, settled tribal families who shared a common interest with the regime in opposing the wealthy families.⁴³ These groups, moreover, were believed by the regime to be more responsive to "dole-outs" from the royal family.⁴⁴ The Shia were simply one group among many to be disfavored by the electoral reshuffling, and not the specific targets of the regime.

38 Sharon Stanton Russel, "Politics and Ideology in Migration Policy Formulation: The Case of Kuwait." *International Migration Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 29

39 Ibid, 38.

40 Ibid, 572 and Ghanim Al Najar, "Struggle over Parliament in Kuwait," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, June 18, 2006, 1.

41 Fred Lawson, "Class and State in Kuwait," *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports*, No 132 (1985), 19 and 20.

42 Ibid, 20.

43 Interview 6, Edward Ghenm..

44 Ibid.

The Kuwaiti Shia were similarly not targeted by regime policy in the years of parliamentary suspension from 1986 and 1991. The 1981 elections had greatly favored conservative Islamists and Bedouin tribal leaders.⁴⁵ To its surprise the regime found it had traded one political threat for another. The reshuffling had replaced the working class and the Arab nationalists as the principal opposition force with new conservative parties reflecting tribal and Islamist interests.⁴⁶ A Palestinian scholar who received citizenship because of his long service to the state described the rise of the Islamists and the “developing militancy expressed by sections of the Shi’i community” as key motivating factors in the Amir's decision to disband the Parliament in 1986.⁴⁷ Yet the government took no repressive actions towards the Shia as a community.

Instead, the regime’s focus fell upon specific Kuwaiti political groups and organizations, and on non-Kuwaiti citizens. Ghanim al-Najjar remarks that civil rights in Kuwait “suffered greatly” during parliamentary disbandment.⁴⁸ For the first time since independence, a government censor was assigned to every independent newspaper.⁴⁹ The government refused to officially register new political organizations, and some groups were shut down altogether. Those affected included the Cultural and Social Society, a Shia Islamic organization that sympathized with Iran. This occurred, however, only after several of the organization’s members had been implicated in criminal acts and targeting the state.⁵⁰

Despite greatly exacerbated tensions between Kuwait and Iran during the 1980’s and internal political and demographic strife, Kuwait did not develop repressive policies targeted at

45 Lawon, 38.

46 Interview 4, Gregory Gause

47 Shafeeq Ghabra, “Voluntary Associations in Kuwait: The Foundation of a New System?,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Spring, 1991) 211.

48 Najjar, 196.

49 Ghabra, 211.

50 Ibid, 213.

its Shia citizens. Ambassador Edward Ghenm felt that in the 1980's the regime was "more aggressive" with the Shia population than the Sunni.⁵¹ The 1979 Law of Gatherings called for the break-up of any meeting over twenty, regardless of religion, political orientation, or purpose.⁵² We were, however, unable to find data which examined the application of this law and it is unclear how the law was applied. Authoritarianism and political repression did occur; the regime shut down political organizations, limited political freedoms, engaged in electoral gerrymandering and even closed parliament. Yet these instances of repression were never targeted towards the Shia citizenry as a whole. Shia political groups, with the exception of those implicated in violence against the state, fared alike with other organizations in Kuwait. Indeed, far from oppressing the Kuwaiti Shia, the regime took, and takes, care to preserve positive inclusion of its Shia citizens, as will be discussed below.

5. The Role of Iraq

We here should mention the role of Iraq in Kuwaiti government policy. This report is focused mainly on the role of Iran in determining the actions the government of Kuwait takes with regards to its Shia population. The Kuwait-Iraq relationship, however, plays a significant role in the Kuwait's treatment of its Shia. Many of Kuwait's Shia are originally from Iraq, and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. And Iranian-born cleric who has lived in Iraq for more than 50 years, has a large following in Kuwait.⁵³ Ties between the two countries were never close. Many Kuwaiti Shia have family or tribal connections with Iraq, owned property there, and visited Iraq frequently before Saddam attacked Kuwait in 1990.⁵⁴

51 Interview 6, Edward Gnehm.

52 Lawson, 20.

53 Interview 4, Gregory Gause.

54 Interview 1.

Iraq has often been considered the premier security threat to the state of Kuwait by some scholars.⁵⁵ The Iraqi invasion in 1990 caused the Kuwaiti regime to again view Iraq as the main external threat to its security, much as it had before the Iranian Revolution.⁵⁶ The Shia tradition within Iraq is primarily that of the political “quietism” of the Sistani school as opposed to the more activist policies advocated by Iranian clerics such as Khomeini. The Kuwaiti focus on Iraq is on the state to state level and the government perceives little danger from Iraq exacerbating domestic tensions in Kuwait.⁵⁷

The aftermath of the Iraqi invasion saw widespread civil rights violations in Kuwait as the government attempted to insure the loyalty of its population. After declaring martial law in June 1991, a special Martial Law Court was convened to try alleged collaborators, those suspected of cooperating with Iraq and subversion.⁵⁸ Over 1,000 people were detained arbitrarily by authorities, deprived of fair legal representation and sentenced following unfair trials; 62 simply “disappeared”.⁵⁹ Here again, however, the Kuwaiti Shia as a whole were not targeted. The targets of the campaign were bidoon and non- Kuwaiti foreign workers. Yemenis, Jordanians, and Palestinians were expelled for their governments’ support of Iraq while the members of the bidoon class, which were believed to secretly support Iraq, were also targeted for arrests. A limited number of Kuwaiti citizens were arrested as well.⁶⁰

The 2003 Iraq invasion by the United States was widely supported by Kuwaitis who despised Saddam Hussein and wanted to see the end to his regime.⁶¹ Even with a weak central

55 Riad Kahwaji, “Gulf Cooperation Council Threat Perceptions and Deterrence Objectives,” *Comparative Strategy* Vol. 22 (2003), 518.

56 Patrick Cockburn, “Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq,” *New Yorker*: Scribner, 2008, 9.

57 Interview 4, Gregory Gause.

58 Amnesty International, “Kuwait: Three Years of Unfair Trials,” Feb. 1994, 5.

59 Ibid, 1.

60 Ibid, 6.

61 Interview 4, Gregory Gause..

government in Baghdad and with the U.S. Urging Kuwait to ease its demands. Kuwait continues to insist on full repayment of war debts, return of stolen property, and recognition of its land and maritime borders.⁶² Kuwait is less concerned with the Shia-led government in Iraq and has appointed Ali al-Momen, a retired Shia general, as its first ambassador to post-Saddam Iraq.⁶³ While Iraq is viewed as a threat to Kuwait, this threat perception rests on the strength of the Iraqi state and army and not on the potential for domestic meddling.

Iraq, and its Shia-dominated government, create unease among some members of Sunni society within Kuwait. The 2003 Iraq invasion prompted an outpouring of sectarian tensions, within Iraq, which Abdullah al-Shayehji declared, spilled across the border into Kuwait.⁶⁴ Several interviewees described Kuwaiti Sunnis as incensed that the U.S. led invasion gave power to the Iraqi Shia.⁶⁵ While not the subject of our focus in this report, we believe these attitudes and assumptions need to be examined more fully.

6. Kuwait-Iran Today: Developing Concerns

Today, tensions between Kuwait and Iran are again on the rise. While diplomatic relations and dialog between the two countries remain cordial, Kuwait harbors deep mistrust of Iranian intentions in the Gulf and in Kuwait. An Iranian with whom we spoke characterized the relations between Iran and its GCC neighbors as increasingly poor.⁶⁶ Kuwait adheres to the United Nations-imposed sanctions regime on Iran, and trade between the two countries

⁶² Bill Heenan, "Iraq calls for relief in its Gulf War reparation payments to Kuwait", The Examiner May 8, 2010 <http://www.examiner.com/middle-east-affairs-in-national/iraq-calls-for-relief-its-gulf-war-reparation-payments-to-kuwait> (accessed April 10, 2011).

⁶³ Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy," 11.

⁶⁴ Interview 3, Abdullah Al-Shayehji.

⁶⁵ Interview 4, Gregory Gause.

⁶⁶ Interview 5, March 16, 2011, interview by authors, oral.

amounted to just \$48 million in 2008.⁶⁷ What trade does exist is subject to strong international scrutiny. Reacting to threats of penalties from the United States, one Kuwaiti firm, the Independent Petroleum Group of Kuwait, announced in 2010 that it would no longer supply petroleum to Iran.⁶⁸ Kuwait and Iran remain in discussions over the boundaries of the al-Durra oil fields, an underwater expanse claimed by Kuwait, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁹

A source of greater tension is the issue of Iranian activity in Kuwaiti domestic affairs. In May 2010, Kuwait confirmed that it had arrested a number of civil servants and non-Kuwaiti residents for allegedly working for the Qods Force of Iran.⁷⁰ One Iranian received a sentence of life imprisonment, and two, along with a Kuwaiti national, received the death sentence.⁷¹ Some Kuwaitis suspect that Iran has influence, if not control, over Kuwaiti Shia, and that it seeks to “strengthen Shiites in Kuwait to ensure that Kuwait maintains a relatively friendly posture towards Iran.”⁷² While Iran denies any such involvement or intention, the matter has done much to confirm Kuwaiti suspicions of Iran’s activity in the Gulf.⁷³ On March 30th, Kuwait recalled its ambassador to Iran and expelled three alleged Iranian diplomats and a member of the Iranian embassy staff.⁷⁴ Iran retaliated by expelling three Kuwaiti diplomats from Iran.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Arab Times, “Kuwait Applies Iran Sanctions: EU Agrees to Dec. 5 Talks,” Nov. 12, 2009. <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/RSS/tabid/69/smld/414/ArticleID/161918/t/Kuwait-applies-Iran-sanctions/Default.asp>

(accessed Jan 12, 2011) and Katzman, “Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy,” 16.

⁶⁸ Katzman, “Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy,” 11.

⁶⁹ Nader Habibi, “The Impact of Sanctions on Iran-GCC Economic Relations,” *Middle East Brief*, No. 45 (Nov. 2010), 3.

⁷⁰ Katzman, “Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy,” 11.

⁷¹ Habib Toumi, “Kuwait recalls ambassador to Iran; Tehran denies spy ring leaks,” Gulf News, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-recalls-ambassador-to-iran-tehran-denies-spy-ring-links-1.785406> (accessed April 12).

⁷² Katzman, “Iran: Regional Perspectives and US Policy,” 16.

⁷³ Mideast Wire, “Kuwait Acts Decisively Against the Sleeping Cells,” Aug. 27, 2010 www.mideastwire.com (accessed Jan. 10, 2011).

⁷⁴ “Kuwait recalls Iran Ambassador after spy ring trial,” Al Arabiya, March 30, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/30/143606.html>, (Accessed April 12, 2011).

⁷⁵ “Iran Expels 3 Kuwaiti Diploats: Press TV,” April 10, 2011 Xinhuanet.com, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-04/10/c_13821995.htm (accessed May 2, 2011).

If the relationship between Kuwait and Iran had an impact on the Kuwaiti government's treatment of its Shia citizens, one would expect to witness an increased level of Shia oppression in Kuwait today. Yet, as will be illustrated below, government policy towards its Shia citizens remains largely fair and inclusive. The more discriminatory policies of the regime are directed towards foreign nationals, bidoon, and women within the country.⁷⁶ The Kuwaiti government denies full citizenship rights to many of the bidoon who despite longstanding roots in Kuwait, experience "discrimination [in] accessing education, health care, and employment, as well as violations of their right to marry and establish a family because they are not allowed to register births, marriages, or deaths."⁷⁷

7. Kuwaiti Governmental Policy Towards the Shia

The current Kuwaiti government stance towards its domestic Shia fits within this historical pattern of lack of oppression. Instead, the government actively seeks the incorporation of Shia citizens. The Kuwaiti government, in responding to the Human Rights Report, declared that its Constitution is applied "without distinction on grounds of race, colour, religion, or age."⁷⁸ There are also constitutional guarantees of freedom of belief and the rights of every person to perform religious rituals.⁷⁹ The constitution lists the basis of society as the family unit which is "founded on religion, morality, and patriotism" with no specificity of religion being offered.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ "HRW Criticizes Kuwait," Jan 25, 2010 Arab Times Online, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleId/148577/ren/r/Default.aspx> (accessed May 2, 2011).

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2011: Kuwait," <http://www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011/kuwait> (accessed Feb. 2, 2011).

⁷⁸ Arab Human Rights Index, "Kuwait Country Reservation," Arab Human Rights," <http://www.arabhumanrights.org/en/countries/reservations.aspx?cid=8> (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

The legal code in Kuwait is to be applied with “no discrimination in the application of the law.”⁸¹ Constitutionally and legally Kuwait treats all citizens equally.

The major cleavage within Kuwaiti society centers around citizenship status not sectarian orientation. Citizenship is determined by blood relationship, where any child born of a Kuwaiti father shall have citizenship in Kuwait.⁸² Religion is not a factor governing Kuwaiti citizenship, rather parental status, mostly of the father with exceptions should the father be unknown, serves to define citizenship. The original definition of citizenship was also not along sectarian lines, but instead determined by the 1959 Nationality Law which defines citizenship based on the length of time of familial residency within the state of Kuwait.⁸³ Legally, therefore, the Kuwaiti state makes no religious distinctions in the granting of citizenship.

Within Kuwait, however, there are Personal Status Laws which govern family and personal matters and these are delineated based on religious sects. Personal Status Laws, and the courts that interpret them, are broken into three branches, one for Sunni Muslims, one for Shia Muslims, and one for non-Muslims. They allow Shia to be governed by their own religious rules in family and domestic matters.⁸⁴ The trials are open and fair, legal counsel is available, and defendants have the right to appeal decisions.⁸⁵ The government has also agreed to found a Court of Cassation, a supreme court, to oversee Shia Personal Status Laws, although this has not yet been established.⁸⁶

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 RefWorld, “Nationality Law, 1959,” The UN Refugee Agency, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,LEGAL,,LEGISLATION,KWT,4562d8cf2,3ae6b4ef1c,0.html> (accessed March 14, 2011).

84 Kuwait, State of, <http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/kuwait.htm> (accessed March 14, 2011).

85 Kuwait: Freedom in the World-2003, “Freedom House,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2003&country=422> (accessed March 14, 2011).

86 International Religious Freedom Report 2010, “Kuwait,” U.S. State Department, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148828.htm> (accessed March 14, 2011).

Islam is the state religion of Kuwait, but most religious minorities are permitted to worship privately in Kuwait.⁸⁷ Shia, however, are granted full political rights and Freedom House states that “Sunni-Shia relations are generally good” although there is a limited amount of discrimination and harassment.⁸⁸ Harassment of religious minorities is not official government policy and the government has taken several actions against such harassment. Under the Printing and Publication Law of 1961, and several articles in the Kuwaiti Constitution, the publication of materials deemed “offensive to religion” are prohibited, with no religion being specified.⁸⁹ While these provisions do represent a restriction on the freedom of expression they have also served to showcase the government’s tolerance of religious minorities. These provisions were cited in the 2007 banning by the Ministry of Interior of a television program which had criticized Shia beliefs and practices.⁹⁰

Shia citizens are included at all levels of government. The state allows Shia to run for, and win, political office as well as vote, with restrictions on both limited only to citizenship status. Kuwaiti cabinets, since 1975, have included at least one Shia member.⁹¹ In recent years this has increased to two Shia members within the Cabinet.⁹² The Kuwaiti political leadership has attempted to include Shia members within the elite governing structures of the state. Kuwaiti

⁸⁷ Kuwait: Freedom in the World-2010, “Freedom House,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7855> (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁸⁸ Kuwait: Freedom in the World-2007, “Freedom House,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2007&country=7209> (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁸⁹ Kuwait: Freedom in the World-2002, “Freedom House,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2002&country=1530> (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁹⁰ Kuwait: Freedom in the World-2008, “Freedom House,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7426> (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁹¹ Abdul-Reda Assiri and Kamal Al-Monoufi, “Kuwait’s Political Elite: The Cabinet,” *Middle East Journal* Vol.42 No. 1 (winter 1988)

⁹² 2009 Human Rights Report: Kuwait, “2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices,” U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136072.htm> (accessed March 14, 2011).

parliaments have also included between two and three Shia Islamists since the 1999 elections.⁹³

In 2009 nine Shia were elected to Parliament, the most ever elected to a Kuwaiti parliament.⁹⁴

This number corresponds to the best estimates of Shia citizens within the larger population of Kuwaiti Shia. The number of Shia within the Kuwaiti Parliament is proportional to their numbers within Kuwaiti society, although the Cabinet is slightly under-representative.

The Shia situation within Kuwait, however, is not completely rosy. Construction and maintenance Sunni mosques in Kuwait is governmentally funded whereas Shia mosques are built by private donations from the community.⁹⁵ Shia judges are unable to train Kuwait, forcing them to study in Iraqi or Iranian seminaries.⁹⁶ This has delayed the formation of new Shia courts and many cases due to lack of judges to rule on them.⁹⁷ Yet some Kuwaiti Shia express ambivalence, if not satisfaction, with these circumstances. One Shia businessman indicated that the Shia in his community actually preferred the independence of running their own affairs to government involvement unlike Sunni clerics and judges who are funded directly by the state and forfeit a level of independence.⁹⁸ Even given these limited restrictions, Kuwaiti Shia citizens experience a level of incorporation greater than in any other Gulf society.

8. Societal Tensions

While Shia are incorporated into Kuwaiti law, both in theory and in practice, an examination of societal tensions reveals several somewhat divergent narratives. According to our

93 Ghanim Alnajjar, "The Challenges Facing Kuwaiti Democracy," *Middle East Journal* Vol. 54 No. 2 (spring 2000), 246.

94 2009 Human Rights Report: Kuwait, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136072.htm> (accessed March 14, 2011).

95 International Religious Freedom Report 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148828.htm> (accessed March 14, 2011).

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Interview 1.

interviews, Shia citizens feel largely accepted into society and treated as equals. “I’ve heard no complaints,” stated Gregory Gause, who has made numerous trips to Kuwait and interacted extensively with Kuwaitis from across the social spectrum.⁹⁹ On this matter many Sunnis agree, expressing great confidence in the loyalty of the Shia citizenry. Yet our conversations also revealed some for whom confidence in the Shia was not universal. At least one of our interviewees stated that some Sunnis suspect the Shia of possessing dual loyalty.

The Shia citizens of Kuwait believe that they are a part of the state. Shia citizens “encounter little visible persecution at the official or social levels.”¹⁰⁰ Despite this, the Shia remain “sensitive about their position” and are careful not to appear overtly sectarian.¹⁰¹ This emphasises the Shia’s Kuwaiti-ness to both the government and to society. Interviewee 1, a prominent Shia businessman, both well educated and devout, with many ties to both Iran and Kuwait, declared that the Shia citizens of Kuwait were Kuwaiti citizens in every sense of the word.¹⁰² Even the Imami Shia in Kuwait maintain that “their religious adherence to the Khomeini doctrine does not lessen their loyalty to Kuwait” and that imami’s “do not challenge the political system or its leadership in Kuwait”.¹⁰³ This feeling of incorporation is unique in the Gulf and is largely due to the fact that the al-Sabah family see the Shia as a potential balance against other domestic threats to the regime.¹⁰⁴ The real governmental concern is believed, by some Shia, to be over the bidoon, not the Shia.¹⁰⁵

99 Interview 4, Gregory Gause.

100 Interview 2, interview by authors, March 16, 2011, oral.

101 Interview 6, Edward Ghenm.

102 Interview 1.

103 Fuller and Francke, 159.

104 Interview 4, Gregory Gause.

105 Interview 1.

The Sunni community in Kuwait, however, is split over its characterization of the Shia. One segment of the population believes that Shia are very nationalistic, even jingoistic, loyal, and patriotic.¹⁰⁶ This feeling can be traced back to the Iraq invasion where Shia were around half of the population in occupied Kuwait and served in the “vanguard of the resistance”.¹⁰⁷ The patriotism shown by Shia citizens “allayed Sunni suspicions about Shi’ite loyalty to Kuwait” and “fused the Shi’ite and Sunni communities” into a single community.¹⁰⁸ This is reflected in the assertion by an interviewee that the government ensures that each newly built area gets both a Shia and a Sunni mosque.¹⁰⁹ The very small portion of Shia that are believed to be disloyal to Kuwait are blamed by one Sunni interviewee on Iranian manipulation and subversion.¹¹⁰ One interviewee, a Sunni former government official with extensive experience in Gulf politics, commented that in contrast to Bahrain, where bad treatment led to uprisings, the Sunni monarchy of Kuwait treats its Shia very well.¹¹¹

The other section of the Sunni community still believes that the Shia have a split loyalty between Kuwait and Iran which has been growing over the last three years.¹¹² A section of the Kuwaiti Sunni resents the gains made by the Shia since the Gulf War.¹¹³ Despite the continued loyalty of the Shia, their “credibility and acceptance began gradually to erode a few years after the Gulf [W]ar” as many Sunni reverted to “previous patterns of behavior”.¹¹⁴ These current sectarian tensions, according to al-Shayehji, have been growing since Kuwaiti Shia efforts in 2008

106 Interview 2.

107 Fuller and Francke, 156.

108 Ibid, 156.

109 Interview 1.

110 Interview 2.

111 Interview 2.

112 Interview 3, Al-Shayehji. Al-Shayehji failed to specify any reason for this three year period. Another interview, however, pointed out that the tone from Saudi Arabia towards Iran began to get very hostile around 2007-2008. Another interviewee suggested that the increase in tensions was due to spill-over from Iraq.

113 Fuller and Francke, 157.

114 Ibid, 157.

to commemorate eulogy of Hizballah terrorist leader Imad Mughniyah. Mughniyah, who assassinated in Damascus, had led the Iranian-backed Lebanese cell that conducted terrorist attacks in Kuwait in the 1980's. The effort to hold a ceremony confirmed the belief of many Kuwaiti's that there is a Hezbollah network within Kuwait.¹¹⁵ According to al-Shayehji, this led to much animosity between the Shia and Sunni communities in Kuwait¹¹⁶ Professor Nathan Brown declared that the current tensions and the 1985 assassination attempt on the Amir mark high points in sectarian tensions with Kuwait.¹¹⁷ Al-Shayehji also declared that the sectarian divide was evident in the Gulf Cooperation Council decision to send troops into Bahrain this year, a decision that was approved by all Sunni Islamist groups in Kuwait but fiercely opposed by all Shia members of Parliament.¹¹⁸

The Shia citizens feel a “a sense of belonging and vested interest in the fortunes of the state...which is not true anywhere else in the Gulf”.¹¹⁹ The Shia perceive themselves as full citizens, enjoying all the rights of Kuwaiti nationals. Interestingly, however, this view is not shared by the entirety of the Sunni community. There appears to be an on-going debate among Sunni's about the loyalty and Kuwaiti-ness of the Shia population. Some Sunnis view the Shia as loyal citizens which Iran has unsuccessfully attempted to mobilize in its favor. Sectarian tensions play no role in this view-point; these Sunni view the Shia as Kuwaiti as well as full citizens. Other Sunni, however, see the Shia as a potential fifth column within Kuwaiti society. Sectarian tensions within Kuwait are both real and growing and form an important, and potentially

115 Fuller and Francke, 159.

116 Ibid.

117 Interview 7, Nathan Brown, interview by authors, April 15, 2011, oral.

118 Interview 3, Al-Shayehji.

119 Fuller and Francke, 155.

decisive, cleavage within Kuwait. The existence of these societal tensions is supported by the recent waves of protests in Bahrain, which have exacerbated sectarian tensions within society.¹²⁰

9. Conclusion

Understanding the relations between the Shia communities in the Gulf and their broader societies is vital to gaining a more complete understanding of the countries and the region as a whole. Popular understandings of these relationships often emphasize the role of Iran in shaping state policies, and discuss the Sunni-Shia tensions that are manifest in a number of Gulf societies. Whereas sectarian cleavages have resulted in the negative treatment of the Shia in other Gulf states, in Kuwait government policies towards the Shia have been open and inclusive. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been a concern of Kuwaiti policy-makers for three decades, yet this concern has failed to translate into a repressive campaign against the Shia citizenry. Today government policy seeks to integrate the Shia within society and treat them as full citizens. We find that in Kuwait the primary distinction, in terms of government policy, is between citizen and non-citizen. Despite minor divisions in religious affairs, the Shia in Kuwait feel well integrated, and consider themselves Kuwaiti. Within Sunni society, however, there is an on-going debate about the loyalty and Kuwaiti-ness of the Shia.

These findings have intriguing implications regarding Kuwaiti society. On the one hand, the model of Sunni-Shia integration in Kuwait merits further inspection. The emphasis on a shared national identity and inclusive citizenship could well be applied to other nations where sectarian strife is more common. Yet the positive integration of the Kuwaiti Shia should not draw

¹²⁰

AFP, "Kuwait Sues Shite Daily Over Saudi 'Invasion'," March 22, 2011, http://www.africasia.com/services/news_mideast/article.php?ID=CNG.4725db2184667c3e2f4744ca1b32e987.1c1 (accessed March 24, 2011).

attention from other elements of Kuwaiti society which are less advantaged. The rights of the bidoon, new citizens, and expatriate workers have often been ignored or poorly protected by the Kuwaiti regime. These issues should not overshadow the real accomplishments of Kuwaiti society. Despite lingering tensions, Kuwaiti Shia citizens are among the best integrated Shia in the Gulf.

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