

Arabian Peninsula Background Notes

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Political Activism Among the Shi'ah of Kuwait

Kuwait's Shi'ah community is clearly a minority and poses no demographic threat to the state or to the Sunni community. Estimates of the Shi'ah proportion of the population run from 20% to over 30%. The majority are of Persian origin. Some – such as the Behbehani, Kazimi, Abl, and Marufi families – settled in Kuwait a century or two ago – in some cases before prominent Sunni families arrived from the Najd.¹ Others were later emigrants over the course of the 20th century, including thousands encouraged to come in the 1960s by the government, which saw them as natural supporters of the government. All those arriving between 1921 and 1940 were considered “second-class” citizens, who were not allowed to vote until recently (and still cannot run for the National Assembly). All of Kuwait's Shi'ah are Ja'fari but it should be noted that some Kuwaitis of Persian origin are Sunni and have found it easier to assimilate.² In addition, the ruling family is said to have permitted the immigration of Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'ah because they could be used by the government in security functions.³

The Shi'ah of Kuwait are reasonably well-integrated into the larger community, unlike the situation in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. Again unlike those two countries, many Kuwaiti Shi'ah are established merchants, well-to-do, and, for some at least, well connected to the ruling family.⁴ In the past, the Shi'ah tended to be more naturally urban, ambitious businessmen, politically aware and organized – in contrast to the Sunnis who were more tribal and people of the desert. At the same time, the Shi'ah were dependent on the government for services and business. Many of the Kuwaiti Shi'ah have long depended on the Amir for protection and in turn have backed the Amir and the Al Sabah both financially and politically. Many were recruited into the armed forces (like the bedouin) and gained nationality this way. In more recent times, the Shi'ah have been noted for their work ethic and concentration on education, thus enhancing their position in society.

All Shi'ah citizens have the right to vote, and successive National Assemblies have had Shi'i representation, although in numbers less than their proportion of the population (a

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N.B. This background note is a preliminary attempt to present in summary form the essential details of a particular set of circumstances or event in Arabian Peninsula history. It lays no claim to being comprehensive or fully accurate. Although considerable effort has been made to assure the reliability of the information it contains, its accuracy is limited to the information contained in the sources listed in the note. The contents of this note may be freely quoted and cited provided both the author and source are given. A complete listing of APBNs is contained on www.JEPeterson.net.

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factor that in the past may have been due in part to the way in which electoral districts were constructed). They are represented in the 16-member cabinet generally by one or two ministers. Nevertheless, they have experienced subtle discrimination in treatment by the state and are confronted with a hostile attitude from Kuwait's strong salafi movement. There is some fear that such factors will marginalize the Shi'ah further and create a measure of dissension and militancy.

The Rise of Shi'ah Activism

Because Kuwait's Shi'ah seem to be relatively well-integrated into Kuwaiti society, they are not thought to harbor strong grievances or resentments against society or the state. In addition, the Kuwaiti Shi'ah community can be described as essentially quietist since it carries the twin problems of: (a) being identified as an agent for Iran and thus a potential fifth column, and (b) sharing a common cause and agenda with co-religionists in neighboring Iraq. There are some partial exceptions to this conclusion, however.

Before the Iranian Revolution, there were few major divisive issues between Sunnis and Shi'ah in Kuwait and much of the remainder of the Gulf as well. Although the entry into Kuwaiti political discourse of Najafi elements - represented by the opposing trends of al-Da'wah and the Shirazis (see below) - threatened the traditional leadership of the Shi'ah community, it had little overall effect on Sunni-Shi'i relations.⁵ At first, most Sunni and Shi'ah young people supported the Iranian revolution. By 1980, however, the Persian nature of the Iranian republic became clear and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War changed the mind of most Kuwaitis. They became

suspicious of Kuwaiti Shi'ah and increased discrimination began to appear. This in turn forced the Shi'ah to seek support and protection from Iran. The Kuwaiti government expressed concerns about the loyalty of Shi'ah in the military - estimated at as much as 40% of the total - and gradually began to winnow them out.⁶

The involvement of some young Kuwaiti Shi'ah, including members of prominent families, in subversive activities and sabotage, further raised Sunni suspicions of the entire Shi'ah community. The Iranian revolution also sparked a renewed emphasis on Islam amongst the Shi'ah. Some of these built on the popular Shi'ah organization, al-Jam'iyah al-Thiqafiyah al-Ijtima'iyah (Social and Cultural Society), established in 1968. The society was founded by pillars of the Shi'ah establishment with the backing of the state to promote "Shi'ah culture" as its name suggests. However, it also mobilized support for assembly candidates.

By 1972, it had been captured by a younger core of activists influenced by al-Da'wah exiles from Iraq. The society was instrumental in the successful election of ten Shi'ah MPs in 1975. But when the National Assembly was suspended in 1976, the "young men" (shabab) core in the society denounced the suspension as an illegitimate act, the first time that Shi'ah had publicly opposed the government. Members of this core have been dominant Shi'ah Islamists in the assembly ever since. The society was closed down in 1979 after its alleged involvement in activities in Saudi Arabia. An outgrowth of the banned society, though, was the National Islamic Alliance (al-Tahaluf al-Islami al-Watani), formed in 1992. Originally adhering to the Iranian line, the group later professed to be a loyal opposition and it has been represented by several members in the National Assembly since then. It has,

however, fractured over time.⁷

Concern about Kuwaiti Shi'ah attitudes toward and connections to Iraqi Shi'ah stems partly from Kuwaiti fear and resentment of Iraq because of the persistence of Iraqi claims to ownership of Kuwait under the monarchy, then during the first regimes of the republic, and of course with Saddam's invasion in 1990. More particularly, Sunni suspicions have been stoked again by the rise to power of Iraq's Shi'ah and the widely circulated apprehension and perceptions of the emerging strength and purpose of a "Shi'ah Crescent." There is little evidence, however, to support these hostile perceptions.

There are no formal organizations of a political nature within the Shi'ah community, although loose associations or affiliations do exist. Judging by those Shi'ah active politically (as in members of the National Assembly), the community can be divided into "secular" camps and Islamists. Amongst the "secularists," the spectrum runs from socially and politically conservative individuals, generally prosperous businessmen or government officials, to liberals who in political terms transcend their sectarian identity by close alignment with Sunni liberals.

Islamists themselves fall into at least two groupings. The National Islamic Alliance is a loose grouping of Islamist Shi'ah MPs that generally oppose the government within the National Assembly. They have been accused of being supporters of Hizbullah. Other Shi'ah MPs and political figures also have been grouped in or near the pro-government National Islamic Charter, a name that has changed on various occasions and currently seems to be known as the Justice and Peace Grouping (Tajamma' al-Adalah wal-Salam). They are often referred to as the Shirazis, a term that derives from the influence of the religious figure Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi

who resided in Kuwait between his departure from Karbala' in 1971 and his resettlement in Iran in 1979.⁸ When the "young men" of the Social and Cultural Society/National Islamic Alliance broke ranks with the Shi'ah alliance with the ruling family in the 1970s, the Shirazis tended to side with the Shi'ah establishment. The divisions between these factions are old and deep, and some Shi'ah Islamists have found themselves siding with the liberals against more hardline Shi'ah Islamists.⁹

A very small number of Shi'ah have engaged in illegal political activities over the past several decades. The first cases arose during the Iran-Iraq War. Scattered bombings in the early part of the war involved mostly Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'ah affiliated with al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah, with only a handful of Kuwaiti participants. But more than a dozen young Kuwaiti Shi'ah were arrested for setting off bombs in oilfields in January 1987; two of these shockingly came from the prominent Behbehani and Dashti families. A violent riot broke out when some of the accused were sentenced to death. Credit for subsequent bombings was claimed by Kuwaitis in refuge in Lebanon. Another dozen Kuwaitis were convicted in 1989 of plotting to overthrow the government. A Kuwaiti newspaper charged in 1996 that a Kuwaiti branch of Hizbullah had sent weapons left over from the Iraqi occupation to the Bahraini Hizbullah branch.¹⁰

Developments in Lebanon and post-war Iraq have also stirred young Shi'ah and several individuals have sought to articulate their grievances and concerns. Lebanese Shi'ah resident in Kuwait were involved in some of these subversive activities as well. The most public connection between Kuwaiti Shi'ah and Lebanese Hizbullah occurred in February 2008 when a large demonstration took place

commemorating the death of Hizbullah leader ʿImad Mughniyah. The event stirred passions among many Kuwaitis because of Mughniyah's role, with Iranian help, in the 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner. Calls were made for two MPs who attended the rally, ʿAdnan ʿAbd al-Samad (who called Mughniyah a "hero" in his remarks) and Ahmad Lari, to resign and they were accused of being members of a Hizbullah Kuwait. The bloc in the National Assembly to which they adhered quickly expelled them. Other prominent Shi'ah were interrogated by the public prosecutor but no charges were brought against them.

Sunni-Shi'i relations in Kuwait were further roiled in 2008 when a militant cleric, Muhammad al-Fali of apparently Iraqi origin, attempted to return to Kuwait from where he had been deported previously for insulting the companions of the Prophet.

Shi'ah Representation in the National Assembly

The National Assembly provides the most prominent public face of Shi'ah political participation and attitudes that is available. It is therefore worthwhile to outline Shi'ah participation in the parliament. From the establishment of the National Assembly in 1963 to 1981, the Shi'ah were reasonably well represented with numbers ranging from three to ten. But the February 1981 elections dropped the number of Shi'ah members from 10 to two, even though one-third of the candidates were Shi'ah. Their numbers never recovered to the same level.¹¹ Only three were elected in 1985, four in 1990, five in 1992, one each in 1993 and 1995, five in 1996, six in 1999, five in 2003, and one in 2005.¹²

The June 2006 elections saw the Shi'ah membership increase to four winners. Only

one of these was considered pro-government (Salih ʿAshur from the National Islamic Charter). Two others (Ahmad Lari and ʿAdnan ʿAbd al-Samad) identified with the National Islamic Alliance while the fourth, Hasan Jawhar, has been described as a reformist Islamist and member of the erstwhile Popular Action Bloc, known in recent years as the Justice and Peace Grouping or sometimes simply as the Shirazi Group.

Shi'ah strength in the assembly increased to five members after the May 2008 elections, all of them Islamists. Notably two of these were incumbent members who had taken part in the March 2008 rally to mourn Lebanese Hizbullah leader ʿImad Mughniyah. While their action agitated many Kuwaitis, and especially Sunni Islamists, it did not prevent their re-election. Indeed, it has been suggested that the detention and questioning of the two members by the government created a backlash of support from across the Shi'ah community.

The smaller number of districts - with the first five vote-getters in each claiming seats - undoubtedly were an important factor in the May 2009 elections when nine Shi'ah were elected, seven of them in the First District. However, these nine do not form a monolithic Shi'i bloc. The National Islamist Alliance was successful with two winners (including ʿAdnan ʿAbd al-Samad) but the other two of its candidates lost (including Ahmad Lari). The more moderate and generally pro-government Peace and Justice movement saw victory by one (Salih ʿAshur) of its two candidates. Other winners included moderate Islamist Hasan Jawhar and cleric Sayyid Husayn al-Qallaf, who significantly dedicated his victory to the Amir. Two other independents won election under the banners of the Human Message Group (Tajammaʿ al-Risalah al-Insaniyah, representing Hasawi Shi'ah) and the Charter Group (Tajammaʿ al-Mithaq), although these tags do

not seem to have any strong relevance.

Furthermore, two of the first four women to win election were Shi'ah and both (Masumah al-Mubarak and Rawla Dashti) can be regarded as liberal intellectuals (and most observers have included Dashti in the liberal bloc).

Attitudes

Sectarian divisions in Kuwait, despite the turmoil in surrounding countries in recent decades, remain of relatively minor concern and are far outweighed by the bitter struggle for control of Kuwaiti society between Sunni Islamists and liberals. It may be assumed that Kuwaiti Shi'ah are gravely concerned with the situation of fellow Shi'ah in neighboring countries but also, in the main, limit their active concern to financial assistance for humanitarian purposes.¹³ There is no record of Kuwaiti Shi'ah participating in Iraqi violence.

A principal reason for Shi'ah "quietism" seems to be that most tend to be members of the establishment. Some of the most important and most prosperous families are closely linked to the ruling family. Besides commerce, Shi'ah have excelled at education and academic positions and a number have attained high positions in the government, including ministerial posts. This generally makes them fundamental supporters of the status quo. This was reinforced during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990 when many Shi'ah participated with Sunnis in underground opposition. Of course this does not preclude resentment over what discrimination does exist and young Shi'ah have tended to be more excited than their elders about regional events – particularly in Iran and Iraq, and Lebanon – and a few have turned to illegal actions.

It can probably be assumed that Kuwaiti Shi'ah regard al-Qa'idah and similar groups with deep antipathy because of (a) the anti-Shi'ah nature of such militancy and (b) the anti-status quo efforts of such groups (given the nature of Shi'ah participation in Kuwaiti society). In addition, the growing strength of Sunni Islamists has pushed the government to courting the Shi'ah as a counter-weight.¹⁴

Leadership

Shi'ah leaders with political impact in Kuwait can be divided loosely into two categories: politicians and religious notables. It should be noted that this list does not include heads of many prominent Shi'ah families who seemed to be involved only in commerce.

The politicians can be divided further into the categories of ministers (who have not expressed overt "political" opinions) and members of the National Assembly (who by the very nature of their election are true politicians). There is of course overlapping of categories since at least one member of the cabinet must be an elected MP.

The new government of May 2009 included two Shi'ah members. One of these was selected from the body of elected MPs. Fadl Safar (Ali Safar holds a Ph.D. in petroleum engineering and was employed by the Kuwait Oil Company before being appointed Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Municipal Affairs in 2008 and re-appointed in the May 2009 cabinet. He has drawn controversy during the Mughniyah affair and was briefly detained following an accusation that he belonged to a Kuwaiti branch of Hizbullah. The other minister, Mustafa Jasim al-Shamali, is a career civil servant.

Ma'sumah Salih al-Mubarak, a professor of political science at Kuwait University, was the first female cabinet minister in Kuwait, holding various portfolios between 2005 and 2007. She was one of the first four women elected to the National Assembly in May 2009. She, Rawla Dashti, another winner noted for her work in human rights and women's rights, and the other two female winners are all university professors and are not known to be engaged in sectarian politics.

Salih 'Ashur was a colonel in the Kuwaiti air force and a civil servant before his election to the National Assembly in 1999. He has been conspicuously at odds with 'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad and Ahmad Lari. After being defeated in a re-election bid in the mid-2000s, he won again in the May 2009 election. He has long been a vigorous follower of Muhammad al-Shirazi.

'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad has been elected to the National Assembly a number of times, beginning in 1981 and was re-elected in May 2009. He was one of the "young men" active in the Social and Cultural Society who were instrumental in getting ten Shi'ah elected to the National Assembly in 1975. The bloc was powerful enough to push 'Abd al-Muttalib al-Kadhimi, the first Shi'ah minister in Kuwait, into appointment as Minister of Oil and 'Abd al-Samad became Kadhimi's private secretary. He has a strong Islamist voice and allegedly was one of a group of Kuwaitis arrested in Mecca after the explosions during the 1989 *hajj*. Although it is not known whether he has any formal connections to Hizbullah, he was one of two MPs detained at the 2008 rally commemorating the death of Hizbullah leader 'Imad Mughniyah and apparently called Mughniyah a "hero" in his remarks.¹⁵

'Abd al-Samad's name is often linked with that of Ahmad 'Ali Lari in the National Islamic Alliance. Lari was the other MP who

attracted attention for his presence at the Mughniyah rally in 2008. He served in all the National Assemblies between 1993 and 2008 except one but was defeated in his May 2009 re-election bid.

Nasir 'Abd al-'Aziz Sarkhuh is a former member of the National Assembly (1981-1996) and regarded in the past as a leader of the Social and Cultural Society and an admirer of the Iranian revolution. A Kuwait University professor, he has been noted for being relatively outspoken on Shi'ah issues as well as a sharp opponent of the government, and has attacked US foreign policy in the region in the assembly. He has not run for office since 2000.

Sayyid Husayn 'Ali al-Qallaf is a Kuwaiti religious figure who has also been a vocal MP with a long history of challenging various ministers, even resigning from the National Assembly in late 2002 when he failed to oust one. Educated in Iran, he was alleged to be a member of Hizbullah in the late 1990s when he was refused a US visa. In Kuwait, however, he is regarded as an independent Islamist. There are signs, however, that his militancy has abated, having been a strong proponent of permitting women to vote and dedicating his victory in the May 2009 assembly elections to the amir.

Qallaf has been close to fellow MP Hasan 'Abdullah Jawhar, a political scientist at Kuwait University and affiliated with the National Islamic Alliance. While on a visit to the US as part of a Kuwaiti parliamentary delegation in 1997, he claimed the State Department told the delegation not to include him in official talks.

One of the most prominent religious figures in Kuwait is Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, head of the Shi'ah Clerics' Congregation (Tajamma' al-'Ulama' al-Shi'iyah), which he founded. An opponent of

Saddam Husayn's regime, he arrived in Kuwait in the 1980s and became prominent only after 1991. Because he was not in Kuwait in the 1970s, he is not seen as partisan to either the Hizballahis or Shirazis and has managed to attract most *ulama'* to participate in his organization, which acts as a rhetorical defender of Shi'ah causes. Since 2003, he has been regarded as Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani's representative in Kuwait. He seems to be more of a moderate representative than a militant, mediating between the government and the Shi'ah community in recent years. This has not prevented him from being an activist on behalf of the community, objecting for example to the Ministry of Awqaf's intention to monitor Shi'i mosques in 2005. This followed the government's warning to him to tone down his Friday sermons. His response was to criticize the government publicly for excluding Shi'ah from government positions.¹⁶

A few younger clerics are more radical in their rhetoric. Yasir al-Habib, a former mullah in Kuwait, is also involved in the production of a website, www.alqatrah.org, and a newsletter for British Shi'ah, www.shianewspaper.com.¹⁷ Some of the online posts of his speeches are given alarmist titles there, such as "Shaykh al-Habib calls for revolutionary change on the occasion of 'Ashura" and "The Shaykh calls for a Shi'ah intifadah." However, these seem to consist of injunctions to religious duty and observance more than political statements. Considerable debate has been pursued on the Internet over a YouTube video of a prayer in which he allegedly curses some of the companions of the Prophet. But he is also on record as decrying "false versions of Islam" that call for violence. It is unclear whether the Kuwaiti government has ever acted against him or regards him as a potential threat. It is also unclear whether he has a following or is seen as an eccentric.¹⁸

The point should be emphasized again that none of the individuals above have ever advocated violence and all express loyalty to the current regime. Indeed, the political orientation of Kuwait's Shi'ah is more accommodating, if not pro-government, relative to the large and restive communities of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. It's outlook is more akin to the outlook of smaller communities in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

Notes:

1. Information on many of these families is provided in J.R.L. Carter, *Merchant Families of Kuwait* (London: Scorpion Books, 1984).
2. Personal interview.
3. Personal interview.
4. Furthermore, it appears that, unlike elsewhere in the Gulf (as among the Baharinah of Bahrain and the Eastern Province), there has been little switching of the *marja'* from Iran to Sistani. This is probably because of the Persian origins of most of the Kuwaiti Shi'ah, and secondarily perhaps due to historically fraught relations between Kuwait and Iraq.
5. Rodger Shanahan, "Bad Moon Not Rising: The Myth of the Gulf Shi'a Crescent." Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, September 2008, p. 4.
6. Personal interview.
7. Shafeeq Ghabra, "Voluntary Associations in Kuwait: The Foundation of a New System?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 208; *ibid.*, "Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 367-368; and Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 134-139.
8. Shirazi was an independent religious notable, not aligned with any Shi'i clerical grouping. During his time in Kuwait, he founded both the Ahl al-Bayt, a charitable organization that has financed religious and charitable projects in a number of nearby countries, restored mosques, and provided humanitarian aid, as well as the Hawza of the Supreme Prophet (Hawzat al-Rasul al-A'dham). The Ahl al-Bayt is now run by MP Salih 'Ashur. Louër, pp. 120-126.
9. Personal interview.
10. The report was carried by Reuters, 10 June 1996. A Hizbullah affiliation in the Gulf does not necessarily mean membership in the Lebanese or Iranian Hizbullah organizations but is more commonly used to indicate religiosity and commitment to Shi'ah principles.
11. Jassim Muhammad Khalaf, "The Kuwait National Assembly: A Study of Its Structure and Function" (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Albany, 1984), pp. 110-114; personal interview.
12. Michael Herb provides a complete breakdown of National Assembly elections and membership on his website, <<http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/database.htm>>.
13. Without specific research through fieldwork on this subject, all conclusions must necessarily remain speculative.
14. Personal interview.
15. Khalaf, p. 133; Louër, p. 137; personal interview.
16. ArabicNews.com, 16 Mar. 2005; AFP, 9 June 2005. Muhammad is related to Sayyid 'Abbas al-Muhri, who was persuaded to settle in Kuwait in the 1950s and provided leadership for the Persian Shi'ah. 'Abbas had long been an admirer of Khomeini, who appointed him in 1979 as his personal representative in Kuwait. But 'Abbas then attracted

the attention of the Kuwaiti government because of his critical remarks and sermons. When he and his son Ahmad failed to heed warnings, they were stripped of their Kuwaiti citizenship and deported to Iran with 18 members of the family. Eventually, most of the sons were allowed to return to Kuwait. Abdulaziz Ibrahim Al-Fayez, "The National Security of Kuwait: External and Internal Dimensions" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1984), pp. 134-136; Louër, pp. 121, 167-172, 252-253.

17. The early issues of the "Shia Newspaper" carried diatribes against the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, spoke admiringly of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, and even commended an American soldier for saving the life of an Iraqi child. The newspaper is produced by an organization, Khuddam al-Mahdi, that is said to be headed by al-Habib.

18. An anti-Shi'ah blog alleges that he fled Kuwait after his arrest was ordered because of anti-Sunni cassette tapes he had distributed and that he went into exile in London. <<http://shia-show.blogspot.com/2007/08/funny-way-to-pray.html>>, 13 Aug. 2007.