Has Kuwait Reached the Sectarian Tipping Point?

By Michael Rubin

Kuwait is perhaps America's closest Arab ally; it remains the only country in the Middle East on whose behalf the United States went to war. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran has at times tried to leverage Kuwait's large Shi'ite minority against the Kuwaiti state, it has mostly been unsuccessful. Indeed, Kuwait's Shi'ite community has repeatedly worked to prove its loyalty to Kuwait. Recent political instability, however, is again opening the door for sectarian forces to undermine Kuwait and, by extension, an important pillar of US defense strategy.

Kuwait has a population of perhaps 2.7 million, half of whom are citizens. Of these, between a quarter and a third are Shi'ites.[1] Kuwait's Shi'ites are diverse in terms of ethnicity—Arab, Persian, and Indian—and time spent in country. Kuwaitis differentiate between the "old settlers," who have been in Kuwait for centuries, and "new settlers," who may have called Kuwait home for only three or four generations.

In addition, every Shi'ite theoretically follows a single source of emulation, a living ayatollah to whom he pays *khums*, or religious taxes. But Kuwaiti Shi'ites follow several different sources of emulation and also differ in political orientation, generally falling into five groups:

- The *Ajam*, ethnic Persian Shi'ites who migrated to Kuwait from Iran in the second half of the 18th century and constitute Kuwait's largest Shi'ite community.

- The *Hassawi*, Shi'ites who arrived in Kuwait from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province following the Saudi conquest of eastern Arabia in the second half of the 18th century.

- The *Bahrani* or *Qalalif*, who hail from Bahrain and migrated to Kuwait in several waves beginning in the mid-17th century. They tend not to be too political.

- Some Iraqi Shi'ites who migrated from Basra or the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and remain in Kuwait. Many who lacked formal Kuwaiti citizenship have returned to Iraq since Saddam's fall.

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Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Religious divisions and changing demographics have increased political instability in Kuwait, opening the door for Iranian influence and, in turn, greater sectarian violence.

- Iranian influence has ebbed and flowed in Kuwait, but Kuwaiti Shi'ites have traditionally rejected Iranian excesses because of Kuwaiti rulers' efforts to treat them as full members of society.

- Kuwait represents an important US ally in the Middle East, and the United States should recognize that its stability depends upon outreach to Kuwaiti moderates, both Sunni and Shi'ite.

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- Lebanese and South Asian Shi'ite workers, including some Ismaili Shi'ites, who have recently settled in Kuwait.[2] In addition, 45,000 Iranians live and work in Kuwait.[3]

The vast majority, however, consider themselves Kuwaitis first and foremost. The Kuwaiti state, for its part, has fully integrated Shi'ites into the economic, social, and political fabric of society. Indeed, Shi'ite families are among the wealthiest Kuwaitis: the Marafi Behbahani family from the Iranian province of Khuzistan,[4] the Matruk family from Bahrain, and businessman Mahdi Mahmoud Haji Haidar each reflect the opportunities Kuwaiti society provides to its citizens regardless of sect. According even to Shi'ite sectarian sources, Kuwaiti Shi'ites are better off than other Arab brethren.[5]

Affluence amplifies cultural and religious presence. Rich Kuwaiti Shi'ites sponsor mosques and seminaries.[6] As of 2007, there were over 30 official Shi'ite mosques in the country and just as many unofficial ones. In addition, there are 60 *Husayniyat*—Shi'ite commemoration halls—and hundreds of other facilities.[7]

Although some Shi'ite clerics are on the government payroll, the government generally does not interfere and allows the Shi'ite community to appoint its own prayer leaders.[8] Independent religious endowments handle finances.[9] Shi'ites face little discrimination in university admissions, with the exception of Kuwait University's Theological Faculty, which trains only Sunnis.[10] However, three major Shi'ite seminaries are in Kuwait, and Kuwaiti students frequent seminaries in both Iran and Iraq.[11]

Shi'ite Political Activity in Kuwait

Sectarianism in the Middle East has grown steadily since Iran's Islamic Revolution. Kuwaiti Shi'ites, however, solidified their identity as Kuwaitis almost 60 years before the revolution. During the 1920 border war between Kuwait and the Sultanate of Nejd, Shi'ites fought successfully to protect Kuwait from Bedouin encroachment.[12]

Kuwaiti Shi'ites have long been active, but it was the country's emergence as a major oil exporter that transformed Kuwait from religious backwater to a significant center of Shi'ite activity. As oil wealth improved living standards, Shi'ite sources of emulation recognized the potential *khums* windfall they could collect from Kuwait.[13] Major ayatollahs dispatched representatives to collect the *khums* from within the newly rich emirate, which they could then utilize to bolster their religious and—for some—political influence inside Kuwait.

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Kuwaiti Shi'ites have also gained influence in Kuwait's parliament, where they are well, though not proportionately, represented. In the 1963 elections, the 50-member National Assembly included 5 Shi'ites. Representation increased to 8 after the 1967 elections, 10 after 1971, and 13 in 1975. That same year, the emir appointed Abdul Mutalib al-Kadhimi, a Shi'ite, to be oil minister, one of the most important posts in the cabinet.[14]

Kuwait's relatively liberal political atmosphere attracted Shi'ite activists, including Muhammad al-Hussaini al-Shirazi. Shirazi long waged a two-front struggle against both the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad and the Najaf clergy who feared he would divert lucrative pilgrimage traffic from Najaf to his home town, Karbala. Shirazi added an ideological dimension to the competition when he welcomed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Iraq in 1965, a move that the Najaf clergy feared would antagonize the Iranian shah, whose opposition to Ba'athism they encouraged.[15] Shirazi's nephews Hadi and Mohammed-Taqi al-Modarresi soon joined Shirazi, transforming Kuwait temporarily into an independent base of Shi'ite scholarship.[16]

Events in Iraq and Iran would soon shake Kuwait's relative sectarian tranquility. As Ba'athist repression in Iraq grew, many Shi'ite activists—particularly members of the Islamic Da'wa Party—moved to Kuwait.[17] With one exception, all major Da'wa figures in Kuwait at the time were Iraqis.[18]

The Da'wa and Shirazi rivalry in Kuwait dominated local Shi'ite politics. Both groups established themselves in rival mosques, and their competition soon spread to Kuwait University, where they established rival student organizations.[19]

The Najaf establishment was not aloof to Shirazi's activities: Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, at the time perhaps the most prominent Shi'ite scholar, sought to dismiss Shirazi's status as a scholar. Shirazi responded by obtaining a *fatwa* from Hassan al-Ihqaqi,

perhaps the top cleric resident in Kuwait, attesting to his scholarship.[20]

The 1976 dissolution of parliament bolstered both Da'wa and Shirazi's followers, who argued that their more radical approach rather than old-guard Shi'ite movements could better represent Kuwaiti Shi'ites. Before Kuwait held new elections, the new Shi'ite movements also primed the Kuwaiti Shi'ite community to be more receptive to Khomeini's propaganda.[21]

The Iranian Revolution Rocks Kuwait

Iran's successful Islamic Revolution reverberated throughout the region and sent shockwaves across Kuwait. Kuwaitis were well acquainted with Khomeini. In 1969, Khomeini dispatched Ali al-Mohri, son-in-law of Ayatollah Abbas al-Mohri, to be his first representative to Kuwait.[22] Initially, Khomeini limited his activities in Kuwait to collecting *khums*, even though some of his radical students subsequently came to Kuwait to preach and agitate.[23] Shirazi's followers also distributed Khomeini's speeches in pamphlets and on audio cassettes to Kuwaiti Shi'ites.[24]

A year before Khomeini ousted the shah, Mohammad Montazeri, son of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's postrevolution deputy, came to Kuwait to organize Shi'ite recruits to train with the Palestine Liberation Organization and Lebanese Amal. Many of these recruits subsequently joined the Office of Liberation Movements, the predecessor to today's Quds Force, the elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps charged with export of revolution (an Iranian euphemism for terrorism).[25] Montazeri also asked Kuwaiti authorities to allow Khomeini, whose residence in Iraq was becoming untenable, to come to Kuwait.[26] The Kuwaitis initially granted Khomeini a visa but later canceled it, forcing the cleric to flee instead to France.[27] Khomeini harbored a grudge against Kuwait for the rest of his life.

With the victory of the Islamic revolution, Iran replaced Iraq as the main external influence on Kuwaiti Shi'ite politics. Three weeks after Khomeini's victory, Ayatollah Abbas al-Mohri led a large delegation from Kuwait to Khomeini's headquarters in Tehran.[28] Khomeini subsequently appointed al-Mohri to be his Friday prayer leader in Kuwait.[29]

Encouraged by his success and foreign delegations, Khomeini began attacking Kuwait. He called for transnational unity of Muslims in "a great Islamic government," essentially dismissing Kuwait's sovereignty.[30] On June 9, 1979, Khomeini warned the Kuwaiti government against "aiding the opponents of Islam and deviant individuals."[31] Three months later, Khomeini discussed the potential to "export the revolution to Kuwait."[32] Khomeini's Kuwaiti followers formed the "Hezbollah of Kuwait."

As Khomeini's influence increased, Sheikh Jabar, Kuwait's emir, purged Shi'ites from sensitive positions in the oil sector, police, and security services.[33] Kuwaiti Shi'ites resented the Kuwaiti government's measures, but they had essentially become political footballs.[34]

At its core, the problem is changing demography.

In the face of Iranian aggression, Kuwaitis were just as provocative. The two governments clashed after Kuwaiti media began to refer to the Iranian province of Khuzistan as "Arabistan," or "Land of the Arabs," implicitly endorsing Iraq's desire to annex the province.[35] Mutual charges of interference in each other's internal affairs followed. As tensions increased, Kuwaiti authorities first limited al-Mohri's movement, then prevented him from preaching, and finally deported him and his family and stripped them of Kuwaiti citizenship.[36]

The Iran-Iraq War further strained relations. Few Kuwaiti Shi'ites fought for Iran, but Kuwait helped Iraq financially.[37] Tehran also accused Kuwait of allowing Iraq to use its ports to import supplies and export oil. Iran apparently responded by sabotaging Kuwaiti oil installations.

A 1983 series of bombings had Iranian fingerprints.[38] Targets included the US and French embassies, a US military contractor's compound, the international airport, an industrial center, and the Ministry of Electricity and Water. Three Kuwaitis were among the perpetrators. The other perpetrators included 17 Iraqis, three Lebanese, and two bedouns—stateless individuals living in Kuwait.[39] Some of the suspects were teachers at Iranian schools in Kuwait City.[40] Tensions increased as Iranian forces began to target Kuwaiti oil tankers in 1984, and the following year after Iranian-backed terrorists attempted to assassinate the Kuwaiti emir.

Within Kuwait, the Islamic Revolution precipitated years of Da'wa fissures, often leading to an alphabet soup of new, short-lived spinoffs. Al-Mohri attracted younger,

more radical Kuwaiti activists, but as the Kuwaiti government cracked down, some of his followers joined other organizations, including the Social Cultural Association or the National Islamic Accord Movement.[41]

Another split occurred toward the end of the 1980s after Kurani disputed Khomeini's governance theories. Ayatollah Muhammad Mahdi Asefi, who regarded Khomeini as the highest source of emulation and would later rise to head the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly—an Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite umbrella group that promotes Iranian revolutionary principles worldwide—highlighted ethnic divisions when he suggested Kurani's opposition to Khomeini was rooted in racism against non-Arabs.[42]

If, during the 1970s and 1980s, sectarianism threatened to drive Shi'ites and Sunnis apart in Kuwait, the 1990s was a decade of healing rifts. Because so many Kuwaiti Sunnis were abroad when Iraq invaded, Kuwaiti Shi'ites disproportionately suffered occupation. Their resistance to the Iraqis earned them renewed respect among Sunnis.[43] Meanwhile, Khomeini's dismissal of Montazeri led Shirazi's followers to sever relations with Tehran. After Khomeini's death, Tehran also sought to ease tensions.[44]

Kuwaiti authorities took full advantage of the Shirazi schism and sought to co-opt former radicals to offset Iranian influence. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Information permitted Shirazi's followers to publish newspapers and magazines and establish their own television network.[45] Kuwait also allowed the Islamic National Alliance to work to organize Shi'ite candidates prior to the 1992 parliamentary elections.[46] Five Shi'ites joined the postliberation parliament.

During Kuwait's 2003 parliamentary elections, Shirazi's followers aligned themselves with a handful of people who had remained faithful to the initial Da'wa line and defeated candidates of the pro-Iranian Islamic National Coalition.[47] After their defeat, the coalition fractured and gave rise to the Islamic National Understanding, politically oriented toward the reform movement in Iran.[48] That same year, to unify their existence following Shirazi's passing, his followers established the Assembly for Justice and Peace.[49] In 2004, Shirazi's followers formed the Front for Justice and Peace to counter Kuwaiti Hezbollah, and in 2005, original Da'wa members formed a group called simply the Pact, which also opposed Kuwaiti Hezbollah.[50] Shortly before the 2006 elections, Shirazi's followers formed the Coalition of the National Assemblies, a group that excluded the Islamic

National Alliance because, according to Abdul Hussain as-Sultan, secretary-general of the Front for Justice and Peace, "They are too close to Iran and want to dominate the Shi'ite scene."[51]

In 2006, the Shaykhis, a Shi'ite offshoot sect, formed the Assembly of the Human Message. While the Shaykhis traditionally eschew politics, the need for self-defense in the context of Iraqi sectarian violence led them to form organizations to protect communal interests, a structure they adopted not only in Basra but also in Kuwait.

Kuwait's Political Maelstrom

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq changed regional dynamics. Many Western analysts suggest that Saddam's ouster empowered Iran and, more broadly, Shi'ites.[52] Warnings about the so-called Shi'ite crescent reflect traditional Arab Sunni bias that Shi'ites represent a fifth column. Still, as Kuwait has moved to liberalize, extremists have used sectarian tensions to undercut political stability.

At its core, the problem is changing demography. Kuwait's population is aging. Outside the cosmopolitan Kuwait City, half of Kuwait's population now comes from the more conservative countryside, and many of the so-called Bedouin have roots in Saudi Arabia's tribal and religiously conservative interior.[53] Because of their higher birth rate and males' tendency to marry multiple times, the Bedouin population is growing.

To preserve the Kuwaiti elite's more tolerant culture, Kuwaiti authorities have moved to reduce Bedouin influence by cracking down on Saudis acquiring Kuwaiti citizenship, sometimes stripping Kuwaiti citizenship from those also holding Saudi passports.[54] The issue is also intricately linked with the issue of the Bidoon, stateless people whose ancestors Kuwaiti authorities suspect destroyed their original, non-Kuwaiti passports to claim statelessness fraudulently.[55]

As the Bedouin population has increased, they have sought to flex their muscle. The result has been deadlock, if not political chaos. Between 2006 and 2012, the Kuwaiti emir dissolved parliament three times and suspended it a fourth. Not every issue was sectarian—civil service pay and inflation have also been key issues. The parliamentary dissolutions and suspension may have averted crises in the short term, but long-term difficulties remain unresolved. Against the backdrop of deadlock, sectarianism has become a potent tool.

On February 7, 2006, Kuwaiti Emir Sabah IV appointed his nephew Nasir al-Muhammad al-Sabah to be prime minister. Nasir had broad experience: he had worked at both the foreign ministry and United Nations before serving as Kuwait's ambassador to Iran and Afghanistan and then as minister of information, minister of labor and social affairs, minister of state for foreign affairs, and chief of the emir's office.

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As political reform continued—in May 2005, women won both the right to vote and serve in the National Assembly—parliamentarians became more vocal. A key opposition demand was to reduce the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5 to, theoretically, reduce tribal influence.[56] When Nasir refused, the parliament demanded he submit to questioning. To avoid that questioning, the emir suspended parliament.

In June 2006, Kuwait held new elections. Four Shi'ites won seats, no women won seats, and the emir subsequently agreed to consolidate districts. That parliament would not serve out its term. In March 2008, against the backdrop of the government's refusal to accede to parliamentary demands to raise civil servant pay, the cabinet resigned and the emir dissolved the National Assembly.

Again, on May 17, 2008, Kuwaitis went to the polls. Rather than curtailing tribal and Bedouin influence, the reconfigured districts amplified it. Sunni Islamists, tribal leaders, and their allies won 27 seats; Shi'ites won 5. The conservative forces soon seized on sectarian issues as a means to weaken the government. On November 16, 2008, three Salafist members of parliament announced their intention to question Nasir after he allowed Muhammad Baqir al-Fali, an Iran-based Shi'ite preacher whom a Kuwaiti court had charged with insulting the first two caliphs, to enter Kuwait. Fali was deported, but when that did not satiate the Salafi parliamentarians, the cabinet resigned.[57] Their resignation enabled the government again to bypass a political show that could only exacerbate conflict.

The emir may have believed he had sidestepped the issue. He reappointed Nasir, who could begin with a blank slate. But the maneuver did not satiate the opposition, who had learned just how powerful sectarian arguments could be. Ahmad Lari, a Shi'ite deputy elected in 2006, condemned the conservative factions' embrace of sectarian issues for political ends. "It is necessary that we be alert—whether we are Shiites, Sunnis, Bedouin, or town dwellers—in order to protect Kuwait from this sedition," he declared.[58]

This outcome was not to be. With Fali gone, Sunni extremists seized upon Husayn al-Fuhayd as their next target. Fuhayd was a Shi'ite preacher whom they accused of being "the most extremist Shiite cleric, and most abusive against the Prophet's companions, whose presence in the country will lead to a huge sedition."[59]

After the 2009 elections—which saw nine Shi'ites win seats—the emir again asked Nasir to form a government. It was not an easy tenure, as Salafis fanned sectarian flames to incite communal discord and weaken the government. A preacher at one prominent mosque, for example, disparaged Shi'ites as heathens. Another imam used his pulpit to condemn Shi'ites during Friday prayers.[60] On some occasions, Shi'ite parliamentarians demanded that the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs crack down on Sunni incitement.[61]

Both Sunnis and Shi'ites have had grievances. Shi'ite leaders alleged that the secondary school curriculum depicted Shi'ites as infidels and polytheists and that a royal Qu'ran recitation competition discriminated against Shi'ites.[62] Shi'ite parliamentarians have also complained that Shi'ite clerics receive more intrusive interrogation than their Sunni counterparts at Kuwait International Airport.[63]

Officials did not deny the pernicious influence of Sunni extremists. Shortly after his retirement, former interior minister Jabir al-Khalid, accused the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to brainwash youth.[64] The government has cracked down on hate speech across the sectarian divide,[65] and prominent Sunnis have also rallied to the defense of Shi'ites after repeated vandalism against a Shi'ite mosque.[66]

Most recently, sectarianism has been seen with regard to blasphemy laws that, as written, might make insulting those revered by Sunnis to be a capital offense while leaving amorphous the criminality of insulting those revered by Shi'ites.[67]

Rather than simply extinguishing sectarian fires, the Kuwaiti government has become increasingly proactive. It has provided medical care on the Shi'ite commemoration of Ashura. Kuwait University likewise postponed exams scheduled on the holiday.[68] And when tensions

peaked amidst the 2010 Twitter blasphemy scandal, Kuwaiti authorities briefly banned public gatherings until tempers had cooled.[69] The government has used laws against undermining national unity to prosecute sectarian instigators.[70]

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Shi'ite leaders also worked to calm tensions. Shi'ite cleric Mohammad Baqir al-Mohri, for example, offered the Salafis an olive branch. "In the interest of Islam first and then in the interest of the national unity of Kuwait," he declared, "I am fully prepared to sit down with the brother Salafis to look for points of agreement on disputed issues between us," an invitation he offered repeatedly.[71] After several hundred people protesting corruption stormed the National Assembly in November 2011, al-Mohri came to the government's defense.[72]

But external events exacerbated tension. On February 14, 2011, sectarian tension erupted in Bahrain, leading to its worst violence in over 15 years. The Gulf Cooperation Council dispatched a joint military force to Bahrain to help quell the Shi'ite protestors. Suddenly, the Kuwaiti government found itself in sectarian crosshairs.

First, Salafist members of parliament demanded Kuwait send troops to Bahrain to fight the Shi'ites. Then, after Kuwait sent naval forces to assist in Bahrain, Shi'ite deputy Saleh Ashur insisted the government explain itself. The next day, on April 1, 2011, the cabinet resigned to extricate itself from the impasse.[73]

The procedural maneuver to dismiss governments rather than answer parliament had outlived its utility, however. Nasir formed a new government on May 8 but served only a half year before the emir replaced him with Defense Minister Jaber al-Sabah against the backdrop of a corruption scandal.

Al-Sabah called new elections for February 2, 2012. Seven Shi'ites won seats, but anti-government Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, and tribal forces gained further ground. Political paralysis continued as the opposition forces continued to battle the central government. Again, external events exacerbated political disputes. A February 29, 2012, decision to recognize the Syrian National Council as the legitimate Syrian government

fell largely along sectarian lines.[74] In a subsequent debate, a shouting match erupted after a Sunni parliamentarian accused a Shi'ite counterpart of being the "servant of the Syrian president."[75] On June 18, 2012, the emir suspended parliament.

Two days later, the Constitutional Court voided the February elections and reinstated the 2009 parliament. The emir scheduled new elections for December 2012. After the court voided his efforts to reverse electoral district consolidation, the emir decreed that voters could select only one candidate rather than follow a complicated system in which they could cast four votes. Tension grew as elections approached and turned uncharacteristically violent. The elections proceeded despite a boycott by many who had won seats in the voided February polls. Shi'ites won 17 seats, their highest representation ever. However, Shi'ites lost half their seats in the subsequent July 2013 elections.

Stepping Back from the Brink

Although sectarian tension increased during the heady years of Iran's Islamic Revolution and during the last several years of political paralysis, the vast majority of Kuwaiti Shi'ites have consistently proven their loyalty to Kuwait and rebuffed Iranian attempts to leverage them in pursuit of Iranian policy goals.

Unable to leverage Kuwaiti Shi'ites to its cause, the Iranian regime has become increasingly aggressive. In April 2010, a Kuwaiti paper alleged that Kuwaiti security was on high alert against an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) plot against flights at Kuwait International Airport.[76] The following month, Kuwaiti authorities disrupted an IRGC cell.

The plot came against the backdrop of a Kuwaiti initiative to better relations with Iran.[77] The cell was reportedly monitoring American movements and activity in Kuwait's oil fields. Most worrisome were indications that the cell had recruited both Kuwaiti military officers and Shi'ites from old families.[78] Sunni extremists seized upon the plot's unraveling to incite further against Kuwaiti Shi'ites.[79] Kuwait subsequently expelled three Iranian diplomats.

No sooner had Kuwaiti security officials foiled that plot than another surfaced involving an alleged Iranian plot to provoke sectarian tension by assassinating Shi'ite religious figures in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.[80] Although the IRGC coordinated the first plot, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence ran the second cell.

Curiously, the two cells were not in communication with each other and appeared not to be aware of each other's activities.[81]

The Islamic Republic dismissed Kuwait's claims as illogical. "Iran does not actually have a need for a spy network in a small country like Kuwait," former IRGC commander Hussein Alai quipped, adding, "The entire Kuwaiti army is smaller than one Iranian division."[82]

It was against this backdrop that 90 percent of Kuwaitis—including many Shi'ites—called for the deportation of any expatriate Shi'ites linked to Hezbollah or the IRGC.[83] Perhaps because of these Iranian plots and popular sentiment, Kuwait was quicker than the European Union to designate Hezbollah a terror group.[84] Tensions increased after an Iranian parliamentarian allegedly threatened military action against Kuwait.[85]

The rise of Da'wa and other Shi'ite groups in post-Saddam Iraq has also contributed to sectarian tension in Kuwait. In 2005, a suspect in the 1983 Kuwait bombing campaign won election to parliament.[86] Kuwaiti security officials have also carefully monitored sectarian indoctrination and illegal weapons training conducted, respectively, by Saudi and Iraqi extremists in Kuwait's western desert.[87]

Although Prime Minister Jabir denied a media report regarding the presence of thousands of Iraqi radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's militiamen among the Bidoon in Kuwait,[88] Kuwaiti authorities did refuse entry to Murtada al-Quzwayni, a radical Iraqi Shi'ite cleric.[89] Even when banned, some more radical Iraqi Shi'ites have turned to YouTube and radio to broadcast sectarian incitement into their smaller neighbor.[90]

Will Kuwait witness sectarian violence similar to that which afflicts Iraq, Bahrain, or eastern Saudi Arabia? Kuwait is a religiously diverse country in a region where diversity often breeds instability. Political paralysis and frequent elections have also increased tension. Sectarianism can be a useful tool for populist politicians, however corrosive it can be to society. Kuwait's relatively free press and social media ironically can exacerbate tension, especially for those seeking to publish religious incitement.

Although the Iranian recruitment of Kuwaiti military officers and those from old families should raise alarms, recruitment can be a complicated business that reflects not simply ideological affinity or financial greed, but also other circumstances such as blackmail or extortion. Through periods of strain, Kuwait's cohesive national identity has always triumphed. Unlike Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, where Sunni leaders actively discriminate against their Shi'ite citizens, the Kuwaiti monarchy's willingness not only to embrace but also to defend their Shi'ite subjects strengthens the Kuwaiti state and immunizes it from the internal turmoil that afflicts other states in the region.

Iran, Hezbollah, and perhaps some Iraqi Shi'ite elements have sought to extend their battle to Kuwait, but Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Sunni radicals can also play just as corrosive a role. Kuwaiti authorities have worked to counter Shi'ite radicalism, but balancing democratization with changing demography may pose an insurmountable challenge.

Kuwait's liberal elite—those interested in the good of all Kuwaitis regardless of sectarian preference—are increasingly becoming a minority against the backdrop of higher tribal and Bedouin birth rates. Kuwait could preserve sectarian peace or continue its relatively democratic political culture, but it may soon be forced to choose between the two.

This choice creates a conundrum for US policymakers whose natural inclination is to encourage democracy and liberalization but who do not want to endanger a regime that has proven itself a reliable partner for Washington. The best approach for the United States is to embrace a more nuanced understanding of regional sectarianism and to recognize that sometimes the most corrosive sectarianism comes not from Shi'ites, who often reject Iranian influence, but from younger Sunnis who look to Saudi society as a model.

Indeed, embracing and engaging Kuwait's moderate Shi'ites might be the best anecdote to Iranian influence because, against the backdrop of tribal animosity, a strong US partnership that spans both Sunnis and Shi'ites in Kuwait would undercut Iranian efforts to depict Tehran as the protector Kuwaiti Shi'ites need. At the same time, as Kuwait's leadership faces a demographic challenge from Sunni Bedouin, forging a pan-sectarian coalition is the key to preserving Kuwait's traditional tolerance and relative liberalism.

Notes

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