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Kuwait

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KUWAIT PRESENTS A UNIQUE microcosm featuring a variety of strands of political Islam. While undoubtedly a rentier state, reliant primarily on oil wealth and providing handsome disbursements to nationals, Kuwait also houses a vocal parliament where political blocs openly compete in elections. Among them are an active Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, four primary Salafi blocs, and two major Shiite political organizations. It is therefore something of an anomaly—far from the more authoritarian government systems that typify rentier states of the Gulf.

Despite featuring such a diverse range of Islamist blocs and experiencing some of the largest protests in the Gulf during the Arab Spring, Kuwait's political system has not changed dramatically. The chaos that erupted throughout the region brought back memories of the disarray of Iraqi occupation. Above all else, as Kuwaiti political scientist Sami al-Farraj put it, "Kuwait doesn't have the luxury to be unstable."¹ This overarching concern for stability has led Kuwait's ideologically driven Islamist parties to seek compromise and gradual reform over a strictly Islamist social agenda or radical political transformation—at least domestically. This desire for stability has become even more pronounced since the 2003 Iraq War and Arab Spring. In the face of regional instability following the uprisings of 2011 and the region-wide denigration of the Brotherhood after the failure of the Morsi

government, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood and certain Salafi strands have focused on advancing political reforms more broadly rather than simply pushing a platform that was previously dominated by controversial proposals to Islamize society.

Following Islamists' short-lived political successes in Egypt and Tunisia, many feared that Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood sought to "run the country."² In the face of the regional backlash against the Egyptian Brotherhood, the Kuwaiti government has maintained a delicate balance. Though it has been pressured to support moves against the Brotherhood taken by the Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi governments (at least rhetorically), Kuwait has not restricted activity of its own Brotherhood affiliate, which continues its calls for political reform. Still, rumors abound about purges of Brotherhood members from government;³ an Egyptian Brotherhood member was arrested in Kuwait in March 2014 after the Sissi government issued an international warrant for his arrest⁴ and former Brotherhood parliamentarian Mubarak al-Duwailah was sentenced to two years in prison in April 2016.⁵ Aside from these moves, however, the Brotherhood does not appear to be singled out by the Kuwaiti government as a political or security threat. The same could be said of the variety of Salafi political blocs in Kuwait, which have largely been allowed to continue promoting their platform.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S PLACE IN KUWAITI POLITICS

Notwithstanding its commitment to conservative social mores, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood's political bloc, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), today is, as one secular advisor to the Kuwaiti government put it, "politically more liberal than those who call themselves liberal."⁶ In fact, the group's "leaders are frustrated because they feel that in a sense they have become more democratic than the political system in which they operate—and perhaps more than Kuwaiti society is ready for."⁷ The ICM's agenda is shaped by local realities more than any desire to reach power. As one ICM member of parliament explained, "We are 100 percent loyal to [the ruling family]. We want reform, repair, not change."⁸ In fact, the emir meets with members of the Brotherhood

and attends their *dīwāniāt*, demonstrating that the Kuwaiti government, unlike others in the Gulf, "isn't in panic mode."⁹ Though the government has never legally recognized the ICM,¹⁰ its approach in dealing with the bloc, and with the Brotherhood in general, is far more accommodating than the repressive security-led approach seen elsewhere in the Gulf, primarily due to the organization's well-established place in the country's history.

One of the oldest Brotherhood branches in the Gulf, Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood was formally founded a decade before the country's independence, in 1951. Beginning in the 1960s, members of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood's Jama'at Islah participated in parliamentary elections yet failed to make substantial gains until the 1970s with the decline of Arab nationalism. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Kuwaiti Brotherhood benefited from government support through the nomination of its members to government positions, specifically in the education ministry, which housed a large number of supporters in curriculum development.¹¹

Although Brotherhood members had contested seats in parliament since the 1960s, they did so as individuals, not as members of the organization.¹² In fact, some members of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood's older generation argued that the group's formal entry into electoral politics in the 1980s represented a deviation from the mission of *da'wa* and incremental progress toward the ideal Islamic state as explained by Hassan al-Banna.¹³ Reservations also remained about the appropriateness of Islamists contesting elections in a non-Islamic political order and the movement's ability to act effectively in the political realm.¹⁴

The 1980s thus marked the first time Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood appeared as a major political force, guided primarily by the goal of Islamizing Kuwaiti society by taking measures such as pushing gender segregation in education, restricting the availability of alcohol, and limiting nationality solely to Muslims.¹⁵ Kuwait's activist Salafis also became politically organized during this period, and the influence of both Islamist currents was felt in new legislation.¹⁶ With the dissolution of parliament in July 1986, the opposition coalesced around Brotherhood and Salafi Islamists, merchants, the growing intelligentsia,

and former parliamentarians, all of whom called for the restoration of the legislature.¹⁷

The spread of revolutionary Islamist ideas in the 1980s also led to an internal split in the Kuwaiti Brotherhood. Two strands emerged: hardliners, who rejected participation in an un-Islamic government, and a more mainstream grouping, which considered the practice of political work a means of facilitating *da'wa*.¹⁸ Former parliamentarian Abdallah al-Nafisi represented the rejectionist position. In 1987, Nafisi resigned from Jama'at Islah on grounds that the discipline of the political bloc was too tightly knit and not suited to the all-encompassing nature of Islam.¹⁹ Although Nafisi had served as a member of parliament, he came to believe that reform was simply too slow and favored radical reforms instead.²⁰ His "comments contributed to the emergence of a new generation of the Muslim Brotherhood movement that began to clash with the methods of the traditional symbols of the movement in which they had been brought up in the seventies."²¹ Nafisi considered a clash with the government to be inevitable, even proclaiming that "the greatest actual enemy to the Islamic movement is the regime."²²

Prominent Brotherhood member Isma'il al-Shatti, on the other hand, advocated a more participatory stance. He referred to himself as a "gradualist reformer," who hoped to effect gradual change toward the Islamization of society through the political system.²³ Furthermore, he "explained that parliamentary work endowed the revivalists with societal credibility."²⁴ This internal division between these two strands led the Brotherhood to adopt inconsistent policies toward the regime, sometimes hoping to effect change through gaining ministerial positions and at other times joining the opposition to do so.

New circumstances under Iraqi occupation led the Muslim Brotherhood to focus increasingly on Kuwait's liberation rather than the social issues that the bloc had previously promoted.²⁵ The Brotherhood established a Committee of Social Solidarity inside the country, which aimed to increase living standards for Kuwaitis by disbursing treasury rations to markets of cooperative groups.²⁶ During the Iraqi occupation, the Brotherhood was instrumental in "supervising the provision of basic services to the citizens."²⁷

In March 1991, following the liberation of Kuwait, the Brotherhood founded the ICM.²⁸ By creating a strictly political bloc while maintaining *Islah* as its social arm, the Brotherhood hoped to gain more influence in the rebuilding of postoccupation Kuwait. At this time, the strand within the Brotherhood favoring gradual change over a dramatic clash with the government gained primacy and became institutionalized through the ICM. Importantly, members of the Brotherhood did not consider the new emphasis on politics to be "a switch" from their past social work;²⁹ rather, it was seen as a maturation, which came about after Kuwaitis had effectively "run the country by themselves" under occupation.³⁰ Furthermore, since the movement had formally broken off relations with the international Brotherhood organization due to its refusal to support the liberation of Kuwait because of the involvement of Western troops, the Kuwaiti Brotherhood became more locally focused.

In the 1990s, ICM members focused on the gradual application of sharia rather than liberalizing Kuwait's politics.³¹ Its primary strategy was to gain ministerial positions. But over time, the ICM sought to check government power rather than be an instrument of it. By pursuing fewer government positions, the ICM became more flexible.³¹ The organization also learned to work more effectively with other movements toward common goals³² and seemed willing to accept a middle ground, or an interim period in which sharia was not fully applied, to push other gains. For example, as Kuwaiti political scientist Sami Awadh notes, members of the Brotherhood are adaptable enough to accept an economic system with usury until a time when an Islamic system can replace it.³³ Such a willingness to effectively suspend ideological goals demonstrated the failure of Nafisi's faction of the Brotherhood that advocated for more immediate political and social change.

As the 2000s progressed, the ICM pushed for constitutional changes such as an elected prime minister, the institution of a single electoral district to reduce government gerrymandering, the legalization of political parties, and, eventually, the creation of a constitutional monarchy. It also continues to advocate wide-ranging social and economic aims, in keeping with traditional Brotherhood goals, such as "shap[ing] the

Kuwaiti citizen according to his unique Islamic identity and true Arab loyalty;" reforming the economic system "in line with the fair wealth distribution principles;" and making it "a more productive system in accordance with the Islamic principles of containment and integration."³⁴ By and large, however, the ICM's agenda highlights political reform efforts above issues of social policy, helping it to align with secular opposition parties.

Despite the fact that they share common goals, secular left-leaning political blocs and the ICM have often clashed over the issue of defending civil liberties. The ICM "supports liberalizing political reforms rather faithfully, but it draws the line when liberalization leads in a cultural direction."³⁵ For all its rhetoric about political freedom, the ICM has promoted measures that place limits on personal freedoms, such as the law on gender segregation in schools, rejection of female suffrage, restricting hours when women can work, and legislation punishing religiously offensive speech. As one Kuwaiti liberal put it, the perception is that "the Brotherhood used democracy to establish laws that are unconstitutional."³⁶ As a result, secular blocs often express their hesitance to ally with the Brotherhood. When asked about this, a former ICM parliamentarian remarked to me: "Of course we want Islam to be our social norm and the government to respect Islam."³⁷

At the same time, because of the Brotherhood's emphasis on political reform, more conservative Islamists have criticized the ICM for promoting a strictly political rather than religious platform. This has provided an opening for Kuwait's more conservative, and traditionally less politically active, Salafi movement. The Brotherhood, not surprisingly, is considered both the more flexible and the less confrontational of the two Islamist currents. Indeed, the popular perception is that "you can speak reason with the Brotherhood. They're part of the system of elites, so they would never dream of overturning [the system]."³⁸ Although they ultimately desire to implement sharia, members of the Brotherhood take a slow, long-term approach to this goal, considering that "the Quran came in stages."³⁹ This more gradualist stance prevails today, as issues around government reform appear more urgent than ever. At times, such a position has threatened ties with Salafi blocs. When the two strands have been allied in parliament, ICM deputies have become "often saddled with responsibility for controversial

stances [particularly regarding social policies], while the Brotherhood's inclination might be to take a more pliant or gradual approach."⁴⁰

Despite the Brotherhood's relative popularity,⁴¹ the most seats it has won in parliament was 6 out of 50 in 2006. The Brotherhood has never contested a plurality of seats, preferring to form coalitions with other blocs that grant it a degree of political cover.⁴² By tempering their demands for Islamizing society, the ICM has come to hold a more powerful political position as a leading opposition bloc. Still, its more pragmatic approach has left greater space for the development of a more strict and maximalist Salafi current in Kuwait.

THE SALAFI MOVEMENT

The Salafi movement in Kuwait can be divided broadly between quietist and activist strands. The quietists are more powerful domestically, while the activists have more followers abroad.⁴³ Quietist Salafis tend to be less politicized, preferring to focus on "peaceful proselytization and daily religious practices."⁴⁴ Activists, on the other hand, favor "broader political involvement."⁴⁵ In Kuwait, however, this distinction is somewhat blurred, as members of both the quietist and activist strands contest seats in parliament.

Kuwait's Salafi movement became organized in the mid-1960s among quietists, "when a small group of youth adhering to the Salafi Da'wa came together and drew up a basic instructional program, aiming at awakening Kuwaiti society."⁴⁶ Like the Brotherhood, Kuwait's Salafis focused initially on apolitical issues, namely education and charity.⁴⁷ From the beginning, the Salafi movement considered itself distinct from existing Islamist organizations. As Salafi religious authority Shaykh Abdullah al-Sabt explained, "We know that these groups had closed themselves through narrow partisanship. . . . That was one of the reasons which led us to reject these groups and establish for ourselves a real Salafi Da'wa."⁴⁸

By the end of the 1970s, the Salafis had found a following in Kuwaiti society, in particular among merchant families.⁴⁹ By the 1980s, the Salafi trend also gained a foothold in labor organizations and student unions, achieving an "unprecedented level of organizational development."⁵⁰

Kuwait's Salafis developed a more coherent organizational structure under the banner of the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (RIHS) in 1981, guided by the ideology of Egyptian cleric Shaykh Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq.⁵¹ While the RIHS's founding documents cite charitable purposes, it became an umbrella organization for Salafis in Kuwait and their primary institutional outlet for political participation.⁵² The RIHS also benefited from state support as well as funding from the Saudi religious establishment. Notably, Abd al-Khaliq was "one of the first Salafis who extensively wrote books and articles about politics and intended to reform Salafi jurisprudence about politics and participation in social protest and using new media."⁵³ In fact, Saudi clerics went so far as to issue a fatwa condoning the Salafis' political activity,⁵⁴ which Abd al-Khaliq announced on the eve of the 1981 polls.⁵⁵ Kuwait's 1981 election marked the first time anywhere in the world that Salafis participated in parliamentary elections, with the RIHS winning two seats.⁵⁶

With the dissolution of parliament in July 1986, members of the RIHS, like the ICM, became more independent of the government, though they had never held as many posts as the ICM. RIHS followers began "serious participation with the other political powers to put pressure on the political decision-makers to return parliamentary life to the country."⁵⁷ Salafi members of parliament, along with the ICM, joined the Constitutional Movement, which included a variety of ideological currents and urged reform and restoration of parliament.⁵⁸

During Iraq's invasion and subsequent occupation of Kuwait, many Kuwaiti Salafis fled the state for Saudi Arabia, where they became involved with Saudi Salafi networks.⁶⁰ Activist Salafis in Saudi Arabia were appalled by the Saudi government's decision to allow the U.S. military into the kingdom and responded with a burgeoning protest movement, Islamic Awakening, or Sahwa, which demanded wide-ranging political reforms⁶¹ and appealed to Kuwaitis residing in Saudi Arabia during the Iraqi occupation.⁶² Meanwhile, other Kuwaiti Salafis sided with the quietist strand, represented by the Saudi ulama, who did not oppose Kuwaiti liberation at the hands of Western militaries, as had been decided upon by their legitimate, and unquestionable, rulers.⁶³ The RIHS became divided along quietist and activist lines following

the Iraqi occupation, with the quietists overtaking the RIHS under Shaykh Abdullah al-Sabt's direction.⁶⁴ Despite claims to the contrary, the RIHS has since maintained close ties with the Saudi religious establishment and is sometimes criticized for being "a puppet of Riyadh" or "even cooperating with Saudi intelligence."⁶⁵

The Islamic Salafi Association (ISA), established in 1991 and linked to the quietist RIHS, is focused on social morality yet uses political means to enforce it, making it something of a hybrid between activist and quietist. Indeed, the ISA's parliamentary agenda is concerned primarily with Islamizing laws, instituting sharia as the sole source of legislation, and banning "vices" such as music concerts and alcohol.⁶⁶

The ISA competes for followers from the same pool of urbanized elites (or *hadhar*) as the ICM, yet it touts itself as less politicized than the Brotherhood. Members even criticize other political figures who they consider to have insulted the emir, who, as an Islamically legitimate ruler, they believe to be above criticism.⁶⁷ More extreme quietists of the Madkhali school, however, consider the RIHS to violate the principles of Salafism by having an organizational structure and participating in elections.⁶⁸ "For them, participating in politics and creating formal organizations lead to the corruption of one's belief, making people loyal to the organizations and their leaders instead of to God."⁶⁹

In 1996, the Salafi Movement broke off from the ISA, uniting people primarily on the basis of their dislike of quietist Salafis, whom they regard as tools of an American-Saudi conspiracy to silence political demands in the Gulf.⁷⁰

The Umma Party (Hizb al-Umma), meanwhile, is the only political bloc that calls itself a party (political parties are formally banned). It emerged in 2005 largely from members of the tribal *badu* population inspired by sharia scholar Hakim al-Mutairi.⁷¹ Although al-Mutairi had hoped to convert the Salafi Movement into a political party, he clashed with his deputy Shaykh Hamad al-Ali, who insisted on maintaining the group's loose structure.⁷² Mutairi thus left the movement to found the Umma Party.⁷³ Significantly, the party was the first political bloc to unambiguously call for popular sovereignty, with parliament determining the makeup of government, including the prime minister and other cabinet appointments.⁷⁴ It is thus disliked by conservative

Salafis, who believe Mutairi is guilty of "blurring the distinction between salafi and Muslim Brother thought and for compromising the strict adherence to the text by allowing too large a role for reason in its interpretation."⁷⁵

Since the Arab Spring, as illustrated by the proliferation of new Salafi organizations in Kuwait, the activist strand has become increasingly influential. Still, the quietists have generally been better represented in government, with the RIHS dominant and many of its members enjoying positions in the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Nonetheless, none of the activist Salafi movements has managed to break through in terms of parliamentary representation, due in part to their similarities with the already represented Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁶

Activists have tended to have only 1 member in the parliament, Walid al-Tabtaba'i, while the more quiescent ISA has tended to have 8 to 10 members. The relative electoral weakness of the activists is probably due to the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Constitutional Movement, which traditionally has had strong parliamentary representation, provides an appropriate platform for many who are attracted to activist Salafism. Unlike the Brotherhood in other countries, most of the cadres of the ICM are influenced by Salafism, and their discourse is similar to that of Salafi activists.⁷⁷

Still, Kuwait remains a meeting place for activist Salafis and was seen, at least before the Arab Spring, as the only Middle Eastern country where Salafis could freely express their ideas. In fact, Shaykh Abd al-Khaliq claims that the idea that "Egyptian Salafis should participate in politics emerged during the meetings and workshops that these Salafis had attended in his house and mosque."⁷⁸

The freedom granted to Salafi groups in Kuwait has extended to their charitable activities outside the country, with serious consequences in recent years. Several Salafi charities have funded some of Syria's most powerful militant organizations, and Kuwait has become, in the words of U.S. Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen, "the epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria."⁷⁹ Kuwait criminalized the financing of terrorist organizations only in 2013, thereby allowing Salafi charities, of both the activist and quietist strand,⁸⁰ a relatively free hand to finance extremist groups. The government has been hesitant to restrict

such support for extremist groups largely due to the popularity of the cause. "According to one of the prime minister's advisers, the government would risk pushing the country into instability if it imposed any constraints on the bank transfers and other means of sending money to Syria."⁸¹ By supporting the Syrian opposition, then, Kuwaiti Salafis have managed to gain a degree of popular support at home, while not threatening their position in domestic politics by stoking violence at home.⁸²

Inside Kuwait, Salafis' participation in parliamentary life has "diminished the ideological gap between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis that existed in an earlier period."⁸³ In fact, their primary difference more recently has been the ICM's willingness to form parliamentary coalitions with Shiite deputies, something Salafis refuse.⁸⁴ The Brotherhood, as the more politically pragmatic organization, has traditionally been willing to ally with any bloc that would advance its reform agenda, regardless of sect.

DEVELOPMENT OF KUWAITI ISLAMISM TODAY

Throughout the 2000s, Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood and activist Salafis came to resemble one another more closely, banding together with other opposition movements to advocate for broad-ranging political reform. The 2006 debate over reformulating electoral districts brought both blocs into the opposition in arguably the most vocal, public manner since the suspension of parliament in 1986. They cooperated with leftist groups that supported dividing Kuwait into 5 rather than 25 electoral districts. Such redistricting, they believed, would change the nature of elections: "In the opinion of reformers, this matter would transform elections from occasions to buy votes and to launch campaigns to a race on the basis of program and ideology."⁸⁵

Not all Salafis supported the move, however, with many members from tribal districts opposed, as they feared the new law could diminish their political power.⁸⁶ As the most organized political bloc, the ICM played a leading role in the "We Want Five" movement,⁸⁷ whose supporters organized large demonstrations throughout May 2006. In the midst of political upheaval, the emir was forced to dissolve parliament

and call for new elections in June; the new, largely Islamist and opposition parliament proceeded to pass new electoral legislation, a major coup for the newly united opposition.

The secular-Islamist opposition also joined efforts to root out graft, which came to a head with their demands to formally question Prime Minister Shaykh Nasir al-Sabah on charges of corruption. In November 2008, three independent Salafi members of parliament initiated a request to interpellate Prime Minister Shaykh Nasir on charges of, among other things "failing to perform his constitutional duties and achieving the wishes of the people."⁸⁸ Then-Salafi Movement parliamentarian Walid al-Tabtaba'i justified the request not according to religious reasoning, but rather democratic constitutional governance.⁸⁹ Shaykh Nasir was finally grilled, behind closed doors, in December 2009 over his handling of the financial crisis and possible misuse of state funds, marking the first time a premier had been interpellated. Still, the government had only agreed to allow this questioning after new elections had produced a sympathetic parliament.⁹⁰ Predictably, Shaykh Nasir was not removed from office, as the vote of no confidence failed to muster the required votes.

Such public displays of government manipulation united opposition movements further. Beginning in 2009, Walid al-Tabtaba'i sided with opposition, including members of the ICM, in calling for enhanced parliamentary power and the right of the people to directly elect their government.⁹¹ Tabtaba'i went so far as to proclaim in September 2012 that "we the people have decided that Jabir al-Mubarak will be the last prime minister from the House of al-Sabah."⁹² Similarly, ISA deputy Khalid Sultan came out in support of "an 'elected government,' i.e., forcing the emir to choose his prime minister based on the parliamentary majority."⁹³

By the late 2000s, as opposition to government policies grew, members of the Brotherhood and activist Salafis kept up the pressure, using Twitter to voice criticisms and participating in protests.⁹⁴ The February 2012 election, spurred by the government's resignation and dissolution of parliament amid mass protests, produced a landslide for the opposition, with Islamist, tribal, and liberal candidates winning 34 of 50 parliamentary seats.⁹⁵ The Brotherhood won all four seats it contested,

while Salafis from across the spectrum won a total of 10 seats, making them the most represented Islamist trend in parliament.⁹⁶ In a desire to prioritize political reform, the opposition agreed to *not* focus on amending the constitution to declare sharia the primary source of legislation.

The new parliament was voided, however, four months later, when the constitutional court (composed of the emir's appointees) declared the dissolution of the previous parliament unconstitutional.⁹⁷ The court therefore reinstated the pro-regime 2009 National Assembly. The secular-Islamist opposition coalition protested the reimposition of the 2009 parliament, which ultimately never met because its reinstatement was so controversial. Several political blocs (including liberal groups along with the ICM and ISA), youth associations, and labor unions formed the National Front for the Protection of the Constitution in September 2012, which also consisted of the majority bloc of some 34 opposition parliamentarians elected in February 2012. In October 2012, warning of "chaotic sedition that could jeopardize our country [and] undermine our national unity," the emir had the cabinet change voting rules ahead of the December 1 elections.⁹⁸ In addition, the emir "issued a decree to change the electoral process, abolishing the country's complicated system that allowed each voter multiple votes."⁹⁹

The opposition, to which the ICM and most Salafi groups belong, boycotted the December 2012 polls, leading to a low 39 percent turnout rate (compared to 60 percent in February) and returning a pro-government National Assembly.¹⁰⁰ Sunni Islamist representation was the most drastically affected, decreasing from 23 MPs to 4.¹⁰¹ Considering the inability of parliament to advance the Brotherhood's agenda, the ICM did not view the boycott as diminishing its political capital more broadly.

In June 2013, weeks before the military coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government in Egypt, the Constitutional Court dissolved parliament for the second time in one year, but left the same electoral law in place. Many opposition groups, including the ICM, several tribal leaders, Salafi figures, and liberal groupings, again boycotted the polls. When asked about the logic behind the ICM's two boycotts, one former ICM member of parliament explained that they

were meant to expose the government as the source of political gridlock.¹⁰² He stated: "The more we stay away, the more we show it's the government that cannot perform."¹⁰³

KUWAIT'S SUNNI ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS IN THE POST-COUP ERA

National malaise persisted in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, with left-leaning opposition leader Musallam al-Barrak urging a return to protests until new elections were called under new electoral laws.¹⁰⁴ The ICM and ISA support Barrak's ultimate goal of a constitutional monarchy, appearing to privilege such restructuring over social reforms. In early 2013, the ICM signed a 23-page document drafted by Musallam al-Barrak, Brotherhood figure Jama'an al-Harbash, and Tariq al-Mutairi of the liberal Civil Democratic Movement.¹⁰⁵ Political trends ranging from secular leftists to Salafis, as well as the largely Brotherhood-dominated Student Union, have signed the document, which "proposes a full parliamentary system, with a stronger legislature, independent judiciary and revised criminal code."¹⁰⁶

Significantly, as part of the opposition coalition, the ICM and activist Salafis dropped their once-central demand of amending Article 2 of the constitution to specify sharia as *the* primary source of legislation.¹⁰⁷ Both groups have seemed increasingly willing to work alongside other opposition movements to ensure progress on political reform.

Due to their continued cooperation in the face of government restrictions, the authorities have detained Islamists and leftists alike for criticizing other Gulf states. The leader of the Umma Party, Hakim al-Mutairi, was detained in March 2016 for insulting Saudi Arabia, while Tariq al-Mutairi of the liberal Civil Democratic Movement was also detained due to Saudi complaints about some of his statements on Twitter.¹⁰⁸

Neither the Brotherhood nor the Salafi trend, however, is being considered "a security threat," as both continue to operate openly.¹⁰⁹ While the Brotherhood is maligned elsewhere in the region, in Kuwait it is "regarded more as a political nuisance than a security threat."¹¹⁰ The April 2016 sentencing of former ICM parliamentarian Mubarak

al-Duwailah may point to a more targeted crackdown on Islamists in the future, informed by the Emirati example. Duwailah was sentenced to two years in prison¹¹¹ on charges of insulting and endangering ties with an ally and insulting leaders of an allied state after remarks he made about Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan being “against Sunni Islam.”¹¹²

Having experienced growing government restrictions and seen even worse elsewhere in the region, Islamists and secular opposition movements appear to be banding together and are considered more dangerous to the government as a result. As noted by Shadi Hamid, “The shared experience of repression . . . encourages opposition groups to focus on what they have in common. After all, they have a shared enemy—the regime. So they agree to prioritize the fight for basic freedoms and democracy. Ideological divisions are put to the side.”¹¹³ Mubarak al-Duwailah explicitly called for the overcoming of traditional differences in a January 2016 statement shortly after his arrest, signaling a very public effort to overcome longstanding ideological divides.¹¹⁴

Opposition unity was tested when early elections were called in November 2016. Most of the opposition competed, aside from some secular blocs and the ISA, the Salafi Movement, and the Umma Party. The ICM won all 4 seats it contested, while Salafis, mostly independents, gained another 4 seats. Islamist representation extends beyond these 8 seats, however, since other independents sympathetic to the ICM and Salafi groups were also elected. Overall, the new parliament has a very different profile than its predecessor, with only 20 of the 50 incumbents re-elected and with the broad-based opposition winning almost half of the seats (24 of 50). With their relatively strong position in parliament, Islamists in Kuwait will likely continue to promote the anti-corruption and pro-reform agendas on which they ran, in conjunction with other blocs when helpful. In fact, the first joint opposition meeting was held less than a week after the polls, following the announcement that Shaykh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah would be reappointed as prime minister.

Kuwait’s Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements thus remain leading political actors inside Kuwait—in part due to the fact that there is little organized liberal competition. As the liberal activist Ahmad al-Baghdadi put it, “Kuwait has liberals, but there is no liberalism. There

is a big difference between the two. You will find liberal individuals, but liberalism as a concept in society remains weak.”¹¹⁵ In such an environment, Islamists are poised to remain ideologically and politically appealing to the Kuwaiti population. Certainly, in the Kuwaiti context, “religious affiliation is stronger than the liberal one because it is ideology-based and uses religion, the heritage of the people.”¹¹⁶ The allure of such movements exists despite the fact that they have never earned a plurality of seats in parliament and even in the face of the political defeat of Islamist parties elsewhere in the region, namely Egypt.¹¹⁷

In the postcoup environment, Kuwait’s Islamists are working more closely with other opposition groups, a move that provides them political cover and helps them to avoid the mistakes of Egypt’s Islamists, who were accused of failing to work with other parties. During this period, Salafis have also increasingly acted like Brotherhood movements, privileging political reform over traditional goals of Islamizing society. As Nathan Brown writes: “The more salafis involve themselves in semi authoritarian politics, the more they respond like Brotherhood-type movements.”¹¹⁸ Kuwait’s Salafi blocs have historically been more persistent than the Brotherhood in pushing socially conservative legislation, with members of parliament proposing in 2012, for example, a decency law “to ban flirtatious behavior and ‘indecent attire’ in public, which would include swimsuits on beaches.”¹¹⁹

Islamists have had to adopt a degree of flexibility in their social positions to maintain relevance in the most politically liberal state of the Gulf, however. For example, as early as 2005, when women were granted the right to vote and run for parliament, which the ISA opposed, ISA member of parliament Ali al-Omair stated that although “my religion does not permit women to serve in the assembly, if a lady is elected into parliament, we have to deal with her. We can’t isolate ourselves in parliament.”¹²²

As discussed earlier, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be more influenced by activist Salafism than branches elsewhere.¹²³ Kuwait’s Brotherhood has maintained its commitment to Islamic social values, at least in rhetoric, as have Salafis in parliament. Where they differ is primarily in their willingness to cooperate with outside groups: the Kuwaiti Brotherhood is willing to work with Shi’ite coalitions in parliament and has traditionally held a more measured view of the

United States and the West more generally after Kuwait's liberation from Iraqi occupation at the hands of an American-led coalition.

Although the domestic influence of Kuwait's Islamists in the past was felt primarily through legislation concerning social and educational reform,¹²³ today the country's Islamists are more willing to advance broader political goals, even if this requires them to form coalitions with secular blocs and even if it provokes further government crack-down. Though much of this is likely a tactical change to give such actors greater license to pursue their social policies in the future, the experience of working with non-Islamists to liberalize Kuwait's politics may have lasting effects on the ways Islamists think about the state and the protection of individual liberties, as it has in Tunisia and Morocco.