

Kuwait

Ethnicity in Kuwait

Kuwait declared its independence in 1961. Despite the fact that its political system has been relatively stable (conflicts were often carried out through institutional channels like the parliament), the very presence of the Bedoon has always been a problem for the country and for the group itself. Bedoon is the Arabic word for “without”, as in “without citizenship”. These are Bedouins of various origins who did not apply for citizenship when the country was formally established in 1961. As a result they remain in a way hostage within Kuwait: they do not have passports which enable them to leave the country, neither do they have the citizenship rights enjoyed by the Kuwaitis. Further, it should be mentioned that the division of Sunni (70%) and Shi’i (30%) also exists in Kuwait. But that division has not negatively affected the stability of the political system as in the case of Bahrain, and has not led to the blatant discrimination targeting a specific group as in the case of Saudi Arabia. Still, individuals of foreign descent, who live permanently in Kuwait, or Bedoon, have severely limited rights (cf. ¹⁷⁵³).

¹⁷⁵³ [Human Rights Watch, 2001]

Group selection

As of the end of 2009, Kuwait had a total population of 3.5 million people including approximately 1.12 million Kuwaiti citizens, 2.2 million non-Kuwaiti nationals, and 100.000 stateless persons, the aforementioned Bedoon. The Muslim population is estimated at 85 percent (with 70 percent Sunni and 30 percent Shi’a among Kuwaitis), with sizable Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist communities. The national census does not distinguish between Sunni and Shi’a adherents. But the majority of citizens, including the ruling Al-Sabah family, belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. The total Sunni Muslim population is approximately 1.8 million, 742,000 of whom are citizens. The remaining 30% of Muslim citizens (approximately 380,000) belong to the Shi’a denomination. We can deduce the following sizes for the politically relevant groups: Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab) 23%, Kuwaiti Shi’a (Arab) 11% and Bedoon 3%.

Power relations

Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab): Kuwait is a constitutional, hereditary Emirate ruled by princes (Emirs), drawn from the Al-Sabah family. The Al-Sabahs have governed the country in consultation with prominent commercial families and other community leaders for over 200 years. The 1962 Constitution provides for an elected national assembly although it also permits the Emir to suspend any or all of its provisions by decree. The Constitution and law provide for a degree of judicial independence; however, the Emir appoints all judges, and renewal of most judicial appointments is subject to government approval. The Kuwaiti Sunni - mostly around the ruling al-Sabah family - are clearly the strongest power in Kuwait. They have enjoyed this privileged status for two centuries, but at least since Kuwait's independence from Britain in 1961. Members of the (Kuwaiti) Shi'a minority are generally underrepresented in high government positions. The Kuwaiti Sunni group is therefore coded as senior partner.

Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab): Shi'a are free to conduct their traditional forms of worship without government interference; however, members of the Shi'a community have complained about the scarcity of Shi'a mosques due to the Government's slowness or failure to grant approval for the construction of new Shi'a mosques as well as the repair of existing mosques. With regard to their political influence, they are also constrained. "For example, since 1981 direct representation of Shi'i Kuwaitis in the parliament has fallen to half of the already underrepresented proportion of the population" (1754, 221). Nevertheless, they are still represented in high government positions, such as in the Cabinet, the National Assembly or in the Military (cf. 1755). The Kuwaiti Shi'a group is thus coded as junior partner.

¹⁷⁵⁴ [Tetreault, 2000]

¹⁷⁵⁵ [US State Department, 2000]

Bedoon: The Bedoon are stateless people, many of whom trace their ancestry to the nomadic Bedouin of the Kuwaiti and Arabian deserts, having lived on the territory for centuries, thus since before the establishment of the Kuwaiti state. But since they did not apply for citizenship when this state was formally established they live under poor conditions, without access to public services and benefits or opportunities for education and employment (cf. 1756). Without a doubt, the presence of the Bedoon has seriously limited Kuwait's ability to consolidate its sovereignty. The legal and political framework that rules the relationship between the Bedoon and the state lacks almost all the modern pillars of statehood. Instead, "the government employs primordial instruments, such as the use of force and discrimination" (1757, 136). Therefore, the Bedoon are coded as discriminated.

¹⁷⁵⁶ [Bacik, 2008]

¹⁷⁵⁷ [Bacik, 2008]

2010-2013: The protest wave of the Arab Spring as well as an invigorated parliamentary opposition have caused political turmoil in Kuwait. On both fronts, the Emir's regime reacted harshly and, for the time being, successfully. However, nothing of this has seriously affected the ethnic distribution of political power. Sunni Muslims and the ruling al-Sabah family are still firmly in charge. Kuwaiti Shia are also "well-integrated" in the state apparatus, yet clearly in a junior position (¹⁷⁵⁸). The situation of the bidoons has somewhat improved, yet most of them are still not granted citizenship status (*ibid.*). Therefore, I still code them as discriminated.

¹⁷⁵⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

Bibliography

- [Bacik, 2008] Bacik, G. (2008). Hybrid sovereignty in the Arab Middle East: The cases of Kuwait, Jordan, and Iraq. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014] Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2014). BTI 2014: Kuwait country report. Retrieved on 29 May 2014 from www.bti-project.org/reports/country-reports/mena/kwt
- [Human Rights Watch, 2001] Human Rights Watch. (2001). World report, Kuwait. Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k1/mideast/kuwait.html>
- [Tetreault, 2000] Tetreault, M.A. (2000). Stories of democracy. Politics and society in contemporary Kuwait. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [US State Department, 2000] US State Department. (2000). Kuwait country reports on human rights practice. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/nea/796.htm>

Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2013

| Group name | Proportional size | Political status |
|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab) | 0.23 | SENIOR PARTNER |
| Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab) | 0.11 | JUNIOR PARTNER |
| Bedoon | 0.03 | DISCRIMINATED |



Figure 421: Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2013

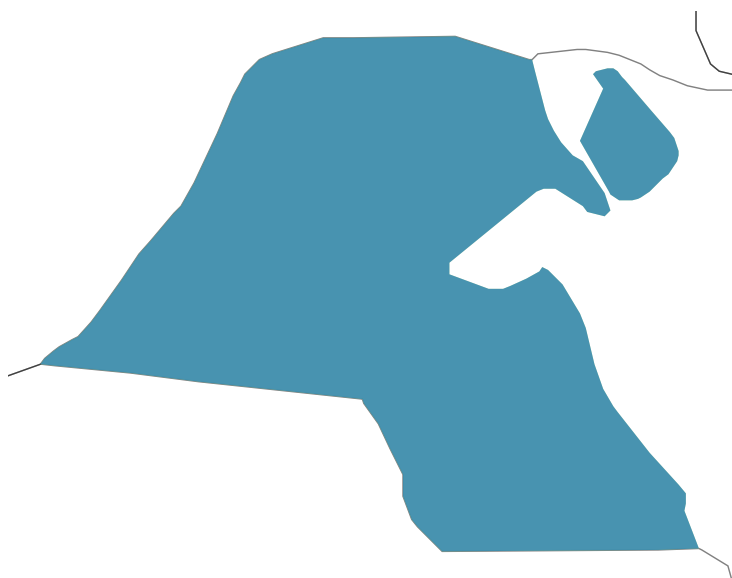


Figure 422: Map of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2013.

| | Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| ■ | Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab) | 16 758 | Statewide |
| ■ | Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab) | 16 758 | Statewide |
| | Bedoon | | Dispersed |

Table 126: List of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2013.

Conflicts in Kuwait

Starting on 1990-08-02

| Side A | Side B | Group name | Start | Claim | Recruitment | Support |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------|------------|-------|-------------|---------|
| Government of Iraq | Government of Kuwait | | 1990-08-02 | | | |