

Kuwait

Ethnicity in Kuwait

Group selection

Kuwait has a total population of 3.5 million people including approximately 1.12 million Kuwaiti citizens, 2.2 million non-Kuwaitis, and 100,000 stateless people, called Bedoon. The total Muslim population was estimated at 85 percent, with sizable Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist communities in addition. The large share of non-citizens is excluded from this dataset. Among the native population, we identify the following groups as politically relevant: The **Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab)**, who constitute the majority of citizens, including the ruling Al-Sabah family. The total Sunni Muslim population is approximately 1.8 million, 742,000 of whom are citizens. This is equivalent to 23% of the total population. The **Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)**, of whom approximately 380,000 are citizens make up 11% of the total population. It should be noted that the national census does not distinguish between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, however, we distinguish these groups due to their varying access to power. Lastly, the stateless **Bedoon** account for 3% of Kuwait's population.

Power relations

Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab)

Kuwait declared independence in 1961 and became a constitutional, hereditary Emirate ruled by the Sunni Al-Sabah family. The Al-Sabahs governed the country in consultation with prominent commercial families and other community leaders for over 200 years. The 1962 Constitution provided for an elected national assembly although it also permitted the Emir to suspend any or all of its provisions by decree. The Constitution and law provided for a degree of judicial independence, however, the Emir appointed all judges, and renewal of most judicial appointments was subject to government approval. Due to the extensive power of the ruling family and their Sunni circle of power, the Sunni had privileged access to political power. The Kuwaiti Sunni group is therefore coded as Senior Partner.

Recently, the protest wave of the Arab Spring as well as an invigorated parliamentary opposition caused political turmoil in Kuwait. However, political power did not experience significant shifts. In both cases, the Emir reacted harshly and successfully managed to contain the opposition (²⁸⁸¹). Sunni Muslims and the ruling Al-

²⁸⁸¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

Sabah family were still firmly in charge as of 2021 (²⁸⁸², ²⁸⁸³).

²⁸⁸² [US Department of State, 2016]

²⁸⁸³ [US Department of State, 2019a]

Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)

The Shi'a were free to exert their traditional forms of worship without government interference; however, members of the Shi'a community 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. Further, their political influence was constrained. Figures of direct representation of Shi'a Kuwaitis in the parliament show that the number fell by fifty percent between 1981 and 2000 for the already under-represented group (²⁸⁸⁴, 221). Nevertheless, they continued to hold high government positions in the cabinet, the National Assembly and in the military (²⁸⁸⁵). The Kuwaiti Shi'a group is thus coded Junior Partner.

²⁸⁸⁴ [Tetreault, 2000]

²⁸⁸⁵ [US State Department, 2000]

Despite the clampdown of unrest in the course of the Arab Spring, Kuwaiti Shia reportedly remained well-integrated in the state apparatus (²⁸⁸⁶) and, therefore, maintained their Junior Partner position until 2016. In the elections taking place that year, however, the number of Shia cabinet member was reduced to 1 out of 16 (no information about his specific role was found). Further, they remained underrepresented in governing positions with only six of 50 elected members in parliament, one of six Amiri Diwan advisors, and also with regards to senior officers in the military and police force (²⁸⁸⁷). On the other hand, independent Salafists and Islamists - which are both attributed to the Sunni branch of Islam - won seats in the parliamentary elections (²⁸⁸⁸). While there are no reports of political discrimination of the Kuwaiti Shia group, these developments clearly indicate their de facto marginalization in the political sphere. Thus, they are considered powerless after the 2016 elections.

²⁸⁸⁶ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

²⁸⁸⁷ [US Department of State, 2019b]

²⁸⁸⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

Bedoon

Bedoon is the Arabic word for "without" - as in "without citizenship". The Bedoon are stateless people, many of whom trace their ancestry to the nomadic Bedouin of the Kuwaiti and Arabian deserts, inhabiting the territory for centuries before the establishment of the Kuwaiti state. However, they did not apply for citizenship when the state was formally established, and henceforth lived under poor conditions, without access to public services and benefits or opportunities for education and employment (²⁸⁸⁹). They were kept in a way hostage within Kuwait: they did not have passports to leave the country, neither did they have citizenship rights within the country's borders. The legal and political framework that formed the relationship between the Bedoon and the state lacked almost all the modern pillars of statehood. Instead, the government employed primordial instruments such as the use of force and discrimination, in order to deal with this group (²⁸⁹⁰, 136). Therefore, the Bedoon are coded as Discriminated.

²⁸⁸⁹ [Bacik, 2008]

²⁸⁹⁰ [Bacik, 2008]

The situation of the Bedoon has steadily improved in recent years. In 2011, the administrative body in charge of Bedoon affairs started issuing temporary ID cards (²⁸⁹¹, ²⁸⁹²). Moreover, the government announced in April 2017 that descendants of former Bedoon soldiers “would again be allowed to enlist in the armed forces, thus offering stable and well-paid employment to thousands of Bedoon” (²⁸⁹³). However, the assessment of eligibility for services and whether applicants for ID cards hold another nationality remained opaque (²⁸⁹⁴) and the above mentioned concessions to some segments of the Bedoon community did not yet account to remove their status as Discriminated.

²⁸⁹¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

²⁸⁹² [Human Rights Watch, 2017]

²⁸⁹³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

²⁸⁹⁴ [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

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). Transformation Index BTI 2014. Kuwait. Retrieved on 29.05.2014 from: www.bti-project.org/reports/country-reports/mena/kwt
- [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020] Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2020). Transformation Index BTI 2020. Kuwait. Retrieved on 20.08.2020 from: <https://www.bti-project.org/de/berichte/country-report-KWT.html>
- [Human Rights Watch, 2017] Human Rights Watch. (2017). World Report 2017. Kuwait. Retrieved on 11.09.2017 from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/kuwait>
- [Human Rights Watch, 2020] Human Rights Watch. (2020). World Report 2020. Kuwait. Retrieved on 20.08.2020 from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/kuwait>
- [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). Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000. Kuwait. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Retrieved from (date unknown): <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/nea/796.htm>
- [US Department of State, 2016] US Department of State. (2016). Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016. Kuwait. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Retrieved on 11.09.2017 from: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=265506>
- [US Department of State, 2019a] US Department of State. (2019a). Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019. Kuwait. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Retrieved on 20.08.2020 from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kuwait/>

[US Department of State, 2019b] US Department of State.
(2019b). 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom.
Kuwait. Office of International Religious Freedom. Retrieved
on 24.08.2020 from: [https://www.state.gov/reports/
2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/](https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/)

Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2016

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

From 2017 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab)	0.23	DOMINANT
Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)	0.11	POWERLESS
Bedoon	0.03	DISCRIMINATED

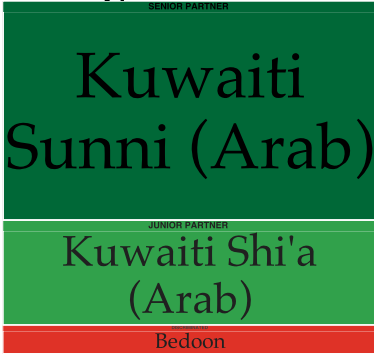


Figure 577: Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2016.

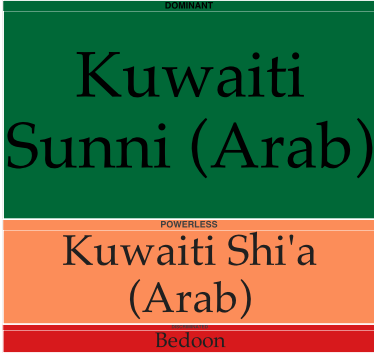


Figure 578: Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 2017-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2021

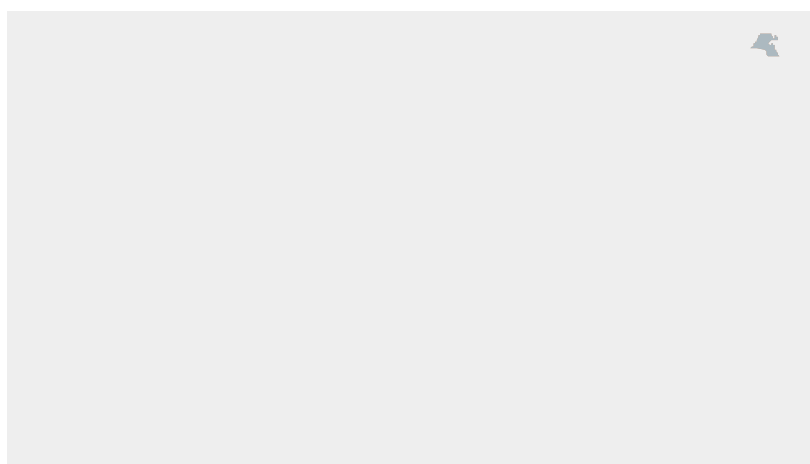


Figure 579: Map of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2021.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)	16 751	Regional & urban
■ Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab)	16 751	Regional & urban
■ Bedoon	0	Dispersed

Table 211: List of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2021.

Conflicts in Kuwait

Starting on 1990-08-01

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Iraq	Government of Kuwait		1990-08-01			