

Kuwait

Ethnicity in Kuwait

Group selection

As of 2009, Kuwait had 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 and make up 11% of the total population. Here, 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 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, these incidents did not shift political power significantly. In both cases, the Emir reacted harshly and successfully managed

to suppress the opposition ⁽²³⁹⁸⁾. Sunni Muslims and the ruling al-Sabah family were still firmly in charge as of 2017 ⁽²³⁹⁹⁾.

²³⁹⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

²³⁹⁹ [US Department of State, 2016]

Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)

The Shi'a were free to conduct 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 showed that the number has fallen by half since 1981 for the already under-represented group ⁽²⁴⁰⁰⁾, 221). Nevertheless, they were represented in high government positions, such as in the cabinet, the National Assembly or in the military ⁽²⁴⁰¹⁾. The Kuwaiti Shi'a group is thus coded Junior Partner.

²⁴⁰⁰ [Tetreault, 2000]

²⁴⁰¹ [US State Department, 2000]

Despite the clampdown of the Arab Spring, Kuwaiti Shia are reportedly still well-integrated in the state apparatus, and therefore keep their junior position ⁽²⁴⁰²⁾.

²⁴⁰² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

Bedoon

Bedoon is the Arabic word for "without" as in "without citizenship". The Bedoon were stateless people, many of whom traced their ancestry to the nomadic Bedouin of the Kuwaiti and Arabian deserts, having lived on the territory for centuries before the establishment of the Kuwaiti state. But since they did not apply for citizenship when the state was formally established, they lived under poor conditions, without access to public services and benefits or opportunities for education and employment ⁽²⁴⁰³⁾. As a result, they remained in a way hostage within Kuwait: they did not have passports to leave the country, neither did they have the citizenship rights enjoyed by the Kuwaitis. 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 ⁽²⁴⁰⁴⁾, 136). Therefore, the Bedoon are coded as discriminated.

²⁴⁰³ [Bacik, 2008]

²⁴⁰⁴ [Bacik, 2008]

The situation of the bedoon has somewhat improved recently, yet most of them are still denied citizenship status ⁽²⁴⁰⁵⁾, ⁽²⁴⁰⁶⁾. Their status therefore remains Discriminated.

²⁴⁰⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

²⁴⁰⁶ [Human Rights Watch, 2017]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2017

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

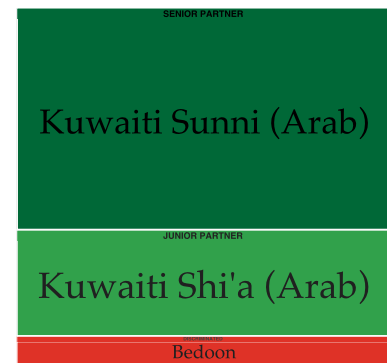


Figure 496: Political status of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Kuwait

From 1961 until 2017



Figure 497: Map of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2017.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Kuwaiti Sunni (Arab)	1960	Regional & urban
■	Kuwaiti Shi'a (Arab)	1960	Regional & urban
	Bedoon		Dispersed

Table 170: List of ethnic groups in Kuwait during 1961-2017.

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			