Letter from Kuwait

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S
ome ten years after a sudden, brutal occupation, Kuwait gives, at first sight, the appearance of having returned to normal. Virtually all the damage done to buildings has been repaired, the oilfields are functioning and the state has normal diplomatic relations even with states such as Jordan, Yemen and Sudan with which it was at odds in 1990–1991. The trio of al-Sabah rulers who have held office since the late 1970s—the Amir Jabir; Shaykh Sa’d, the prime minister and crown prince; and Shaykh Sabah, the foreign minister—remain in office and in power. There are even some positive consequences of the occupation: the impact of sandstorms has been greatly reduced by the debris of the oil fires that the Iraqi army ignited as it departed. Oil prices are up, and businessmen and the envoys of every Middle Eastern state throng the lobbies and anterooms.

Yet beneath the surface of this city, the trauma of that invasion remains, and is in some ways more intense. The shock of a sudden invasion, even one that came when over a third of the population was out of the country at the height of the summer heat, hit everyone: thousands lost their lives, and offices, official buildings and private houses were despoiled. At the Kuwait Research and Studies Center they produce a wealth of literature on the occupation based on the half million documents left behind as the Iraqi forces fled: testimonies of Kuwaiti resistance from the documents of Iraqi intelligence officers, maps of the eastern parts of Saudi Arabia for use in a possible thrust down the coast, plans for the destruction of the oil field and lists of goods to be taken back to Iraq (those who sacked the National Museum knew what they were looking for). They took the animals from the zoo. Billions of dollars worth of planes were also taken, some to be destroyed on the ground in Iraq, some flown to Iran and then returned, after protracted negotiations, by Tehran.

A deep, enduring insecurity remains: Saddam Hussein has not changed one jot, everyone knows it, and many think he could try to start the whole thing again. Throughout the city signs point people to the nearest air raid shelter. Maneuvers at the UN to negotiate a partial lifting of sanctions unsettle Kuwaiti diplomats. Above all, there is the gnawing issue of the missing: thousands have returned, but over 600 remain “disappeared,” their names listed, their faces on posters. There is, nearly ten years on, no news at all about them: the Iraqis refuse to confirm or deny that they are alive. The hope that some may be alive is sustained by the conditions in which they were rounded up, near the end of the war, and by the recent revelation that Iraq held Iranians for years after the Iran-Iraq war without anyone knowing. Every family is touched directly or by near kinship.

Resistance to Reform

Returning after 28 years I am, however, struck by other changes that accompany and predate the Iraqi invasion. From the 1930s to the 1970s the main axis of conflict in Kuwait was between the al-Sabah ruling family and the merchants of Kuwait City. Some supported the al-Sabah, while others were Arab nationalists who pressed for greater freedom and greater control of the country’s finances. In 1975 and again in 1986 the Amir dissolved the elected parliament rather than face continued criticism. Above all, pressure for accountability after the stock market crash seems to have spurred the second dissolution. But from the 1960s onwards the state began to draw into the political system the more tribal Bedouin parts of the population. This was accentuated by the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88: in that war Kuwait supported Iraq—“we had no choice,” said one official—and relations with the 25 percent or so of the Kuwait population who are Shi’ai deteriorated. There was an attempt on the life of the Amir in 1985 and other incidents: the Shi’ai lost influence in the armed forces and the administration, in favor of the tribal elements. Although in 1990 the Shi’ai population, mindful of the fate of their counterparts in Iraq, was prominent in the resistance, the invasion placed greater strain on the society and pushed this process of conservatism further. The result was what one sociologist calls the “desertification” (tasbir) of Kuwait society.

The position of the Shi’ai is better than in any other Sunni Arab state. A recent reform of the legal system has given them their own court of appeal. They have their own MPs. The improvement of relations with Iran after 1990 has also helped. The Iranian ambassador is reported to have recently told Shi’ai prayer leaders he did not
want any trouble from them: Iran needed good political, and financial, relations with Kuwait.

But the rise of a Sunni fundamentalism, backed to a greater or lesser extent by Saudi Arabia, worries the Shi’a as it does the liberals. The more cautious Muslim Brotherhood, organized in al-baraka al-dusturiyya al-islamiyya, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, claims to have broken since 1990 with their associates elsewhere (who for the most part supported Iraq). The more militant salafis have links to Saudi Arabia and publish a monthly, al-Minbar. The prime minister recently called for the closure of the sanadidq khayriyya (charity boxes) which the fundamentalists position around the country. The response of one Islamist leader was to say that if the closure took place, he would call for the closure of all unlicensed churches and Shi’i gathering places, or husayniyyas, in the country. When the government introduced a measure to ban women wearing the face cover, or niqab, from driving, there were calls for a violent response. Inexorably an extra-parliamentary Islamist opposition is growing. There is much denunciation of al-ghazw al-thaqafi (cultural aggression), and of taghrib, literally “Westernization,” but also any form of approximation (even to Shi’i).

Still No Women’s Suffrage

This triangular conflict has now crystallized around women’s suffrage. Since independence in 1961 only Kuwaiti males have had the right to vote and stand in elections. During the Iraqi occupation the Amir promised that women, who were part of the national resistance movement, would be given the vote after liberation. The political class prevaricated, so last summer, after dissolving parliament and calling new elections, the Amir issued a decree, one of sixty, concerning the parliament. When I met the minister, ’Adil Khalid al-Subayh, he promised to find out why the book had been banned, and to write to me. Maybe there had been a mistake in the translation, he said. I may never know, as a few days afterward al-Subayh was relieved of his post.

But other issues that might have been expected to arouse concern did not: one publisher displayed a set of translations of books by Che Guevara. The Bahraini poet Qasim Uthman, who, along with another writer, was the object of a trial relating to stories she had written ten years ago. Recently two political scientists, Ali Baghdadi and Shamlan ‘Isa, were also objects of judicial proceedings.

Kuwaiti Politics Adrift

The failure to get the women’s suffrage measure through parliament and the general climate of harassment of free speech highlights what is an underlying sense in the country of political drift, or, as it is put in Arabic, rukud (stagnation). Three examples: the new National Museum has not been reopened after 1990, reportedly because of quarrelling within the royal family; a decision on building an aluminum smelter has been stalled for years, because of lack of authorization of terms and uncertainty about the midsummer reliability and price of electricity; negotiations with foreign oil companies about opening up new oil fields in the north are marooned for lack of agreement on concession terms.

Those who do speak out may encounter discrimination. There has been no repeat of the assassination attempt on a critical left-wing MP soon after liberation, but less abrupt forms of pressure, as much from below as from above, persist. In ministries and academic institutions, there is a noticeable frustration with the lack of change. A classic case of paralysis is the English-language Kuwaiti TV news: this is a parody of official Arabic broadcasting, as endless wooden and padded statements about the actions of the rulers are read out in deadpan American English by announcers clad in dishdashes. One person who taught in an English literature department told me that they could not work on writers from America or Australia because this was not recognized as “English.” The list of books and poems that teachers are allowed to give their students to read is narrowing, as more and more come under a vague, unofficial but inexorable Islamist ban. No Iris Murdoch, for instance, because she favors gays and lesbians. A safe canon remains—Chaucer, Herbert, Joseph Conrad.

However, Kuwait has, in marked contrast to its neighbors, a climate of extensive religious tolerance. There are no Sunni mosques in Tehran, nor are there Shi’i places of worship in Saudi Arabia. The latter allows no signs of public Christian worship. In Kuwait, by contrast, the two Islamic sects live side by side, and Christians practice openly. At the cluster of churches near the Sheraton Hotel, mass is said in English, Arabic (Latin and Maronite
rites) and the tongues of the Asian south—Tamil, Tagalog, Konkani, Malayalam. At al-Ahmadi in the south, worshippers visit “Our Lady of Arabia.”

Relations with the outside world are now largely proper, but given the neighborhood, tense. The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, which distributed money widely before 1990 only to see many of its major recipients support Iraq, still declines to give aid to Jordan, Yemen and Sudan. Aid goes instead to Bosnia and Albania. But during my visit in December 1999 the Yemeni and Sudanese ambassadors arrived to present their credentials to the Amir. Kuwait adds its voice to the Palestinian cause, and the press publishes archaic attacks on Zionism, even as attitudes to Palestinians remain harsh: the support given by some of the 300,000 Palestinians resident in Kuwait to Iraq led to the mass expulsion of nearly all after March 1991, a process in which Amnesty International reports some were tortured and killed. Relations with Britain and America are close, but there is nervousness about the intentions of future US presidential candidates and the fickleness of Western public opinion. Saudi Arabia is not universally regarded as a friend, either. Few forget that it was the Saudi forces that annexed two-thirds of Kuwaiti territory, a forcible action ratified by Britain in the Treaty of ‘Uqayr of 1920.

Intense, Inward-Looking Prosperity

The trauma of the 1990–91 war has intensified, rather than clarified, the tendency to geopolitical paranoia in these parts. Many a claim is made about the US encouragement of the invasion in August 1990. Britain is also held to account for reports, allegedly found in released Foreign Office documents, about a willingness by then Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd to allow Iraq to take over in the late 1950s. Most people hold, in some way or another, that “the West” is keeping Hussein in power—otherwise they would get rid of him, surely. There is speculation about the role of the US ambassador—the “High Commissioner” as he is called in a harking back to colonial times. He has, I am told, been instructed to stay for an additional year, because something is being hatched for Iraq. Jordanian Prince Hasan is mentioned as a possible future king of Iraq, restoring the Hashemite dynasty ousted in 1958. Both Britain and the US are, needless to say, preparing their own candidates for succession within the royal family. For its part the Islamist opposition rails against globalization, designed to corrupt Arab and Islamic morals, and against the free trade being enjoined by the World Trade Organization.

Kuwait lives an intense, often inward-looking and precarious prosperity, the beneficiary of oil revenues of around $7 billion and of an at least comparable return on its investments over the past fifty years. It has a ruling family that maintains its privileged access to this income, and to other levers of power, but which has opened debate and cultivated a culture of tolerance unknown elsewhere in the Gulf. A welfare state that pays people not to work, where telephones are free, where there are no taxes, where much of the country leaves when it becomes too hot, where a million South Asian and other workers keep things running, is a rare island of stability. Yet this is the hottest, and in some ways physically most inhospitable, city on earth. When the oil has all run out, the ferocious heat and environment may reclaim the glass tower blocks and boulevards. The carefully nurtured gardens may wither. Yet whatever the long-term economic prospects, the entire Kuwaiti population, and most of those of good sense elsewhere, have an interest in Kuwait’s survival, against regressive bigots from within and the brutal aspirations of the regime across the border.

THE PHILIP SHEHADI NEW WRITERS AWARD

A $500 prize and publication in Middle East Report will be awarded for the best article on the Middle East by a new writer.

The Philip Shehadi prize was established by the family and friends of Philip Shehadi, a long-time contributing editor of MER who was killed in 1991 while serving as a Reuters correspondent in Algiers.

The purpose of the award is to generate new thinking on the Middle East and to provide a forum for the growing number of writers and students specializing in the Middle East. Articles should focus on the contemporary period. Topics can include political and social transformation, the state and society, popular culture, gender relations and environmental issues.

Articles should address the general public as well as those with expertise in the region. Submissions should be 3,000 to 5,000 words in length and reflect an innovative approach, new thinking and an ability to communicate ideas effectively. The deadline for submissions is August 30, 2000. Essays submitted to MER by first-time authors during the preceding 12-month period are automatically considered for the award. Write for complete guidelines or see the MERIP website at www.merip.org.