Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations: Kuwait

Cultural Field Guide

Country

Kuwait is a multi-ethnic country, with a population of approximately 2.3 million. Kuwaiti Arabs make up approximately 40 percent of the population; foreign workers make up the remainder, divided among non-Kuwaiti Arabs (25 percent) and South Asians (35 percent).

Kuwait is essentially a city-state. Most Kuwaitis live in Kuwait City, which has grown from a small sea-town into a modern, cosmopolitan city.

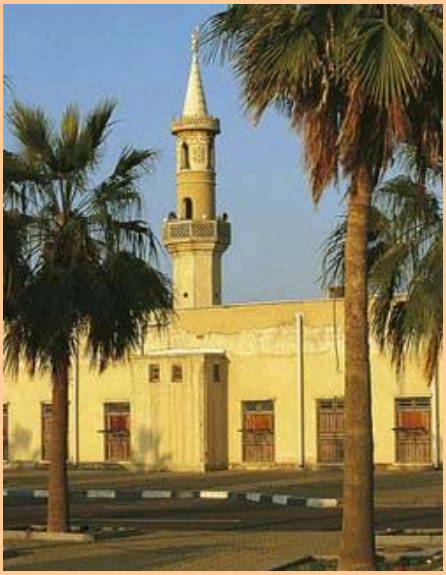
Since the late 1950s, Arab and South Asian workers have outnumbered Kuwaitis. The Kuwaitis' prosperity, coupled with their unwillingness to engage in certain professions, created a situation in which Kuwait became highly dependent on imported labor to sustain its rapid pace of modernization.

Kuwait has constructed a complex set of policies for the control of migrants. The native Kuwaiti citizen has almost complete authority over the expatriate worker. Kuwaitis contrast their affluence, leisure, and power to expatriates' economic need, labor, and dependence.

Religion

Divisions: Kuwait is a Muslim country. Kuwaiti Arabs are divided between Sunni (approximately 70 percent) and Shia (approximately 30 percent). Non-Kuwaiti Arabs are mostly Sunni Muslims. South Asian workers are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are predominantly Muslim. Indians are mainly Hindu, and Sri Lankans are primarily Buddhist.

Islam is more of a unifying than an excluding factor in Kuwait, and the Sunni-Shia division has caused fewer problems there than in neighboring states. As a mark of identity, religious affiliation is less significant than citizenship and ethnic origin. However, there is a close association between Islamic values and Kuwaiti cultural identity.



Kuwaiti Mosque

Adherents of religions other than Islam practice their religion quietly, observing festivals and practicing rituals in private. These communities recognize that conspicuous displays of religion—in the form of temples or marriage processions—can be provocative in Kuwait.

Geographic Differences: There are no major geographic differences with respect to religion because most of Kuwait's population lives in and around Kuwait City. However, foreign workers—whether Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian—are largely segregated from Kuwaitis in residential neighborhoods.

Egyptian

Ethnic Group

Summary: Kuwaiti Arabs constitute approximately 40 percent (950,000) of the population in Kuwait. Non-Kuwaiti Arab workers make up 25 percent (600,000). Of these about half are Egyptian. Syrians, Lebanese, and Jordanians make up the rest. Until the 1991 Gulf War, Kuwait had a large Palestinian population. Included in the 600,000 non-Kuwaiti Arabs are 113,000 *bidun jinsiyyah* (stateless people), recently settled nomads with Iraqi, Syrian, or Saudi roots.

Indian

The relationship between Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti Arabs is characterized by cultural proximity, and economic and social distance. Both groups speak Arabic, and follow either Sunni or Shia Islam. However, full social, political, and economic rights and benefits are not available to non-Kuwaiti Arabs, and it is very difficult for them to become Kuwaiti citizens.

South Asian laborers make up approximately 35 percent (750,000) of Kuwait's population. Indians are the most populous, numbering more than 300,000. There are also Sri Lankans (approximately 175,000), Bangladeshis (about

150,000), and Pakistanis (about 100,000). Kuwait's South Asian worker population is divided among Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics. South Asian workers in Kuwait speak Hindi, Bangla (Bengali), Malayalam, Urdu, Sinhalese, and English.

Kuwaiti Man in the Desert

Culturally different from Kuwaitis, South Asian workers do not assimilate into Kuwaiti society, but remain focused on their respective homelands. South Asian workers' relationships with Kuwait are contractual, based on an exchange of labor for wages. Social, political, and economic rights and benefits are not available to South Asians in Kuwait.

Ethnic Description

Physical Appearance: Both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti Arabs tend to be dark haired with brown eyes, and olive or dark skin. However, no specific racial or physical description defines Arabs in Kuwait. Because of centuries of migration and contact with other groups, Arabs can exhibit Persian, Turkish, Indian, African, and South Asian features. South Asian workers in Kuwait exhibit a range of physical characteristics both among and within South Asian groups. However, they tend to share characteristics of slight stature, dark eyes, and dark complexion.

Kuwaiti Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah, the founder of modern Kuwait

Cultural History: In the late 17th Century, a prolonged drought caused several families of the Adnani tribe of the Anaza to leave their home territory of Najd in northern Arabia for the coastal areas along the Persian Gulf. After traveling a roundabout route through Qatar, in 1716 they settled in a tiny fishing village known as Qorain, later named Kuwait. Kuwait, a diminutive of the Arabic word *kut*, means small castle or fort.

Liberation Tower

The clans that migrated to Kuwait came to be known collectively as the Bani Utub. The name Utub comes from the Arabic word for wander (*atab*). The journey to Kuwait established a strong sense of community and identity among the migrating clans. By the time they arrived in Kuwait, these families thought of themselves as members of a new tribe.

Throughout the 19th Century, Kuwait grew rapidly into a center for maritime and desert trade, which linked Kuwait to the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, and India and gave the city a cosmopolitan flavor. Unlike many of its neighbors, Kuwait was not established by foreign powers in the wake of World War I.

Prior to the 20th Century, much of the sense of community among Kuwaitis derived from the need to maintain their autonomy against external dangers, especially those posed by neighboring Arabian tribes. In the spring of 1920, Kuwaitis built a great wall—the gates of which are preserved—around the town for protection. The wall and the collective effort that went into building it occupy a central place in Kuwaiti memory and remains a symbol of a determined and united Kuwaiti community. The battle of Jahrah in October 1920, which established Kuwait's independence from Saudi Arabia, similarly reinforced the city-state's national identity. Until the 1990 Iraqi invasion, 1920 was the most significant year in Kuwait's history.

Modern Kuwait City

The discovery of oil and the development of the oil industry in the mid-20th Century changed Kuwait profoundly. Kuwait opened its doors to foreign workers to work in the oil industry and to carry out the modernization projects financed by the new oil revenues. Arab migrants brought with them potentially threatening ideologies, and the Kuwaiti government became uneasy about their presence. It responded by using social policies and nationality laws to create a rift between expatriate Arabs and Kuwaitis. It also began turning to South Asians as a more politically reliable and less expensive labor source.

The 1990-91 Iraqi invasion and occupation fundamentally transformed Kuwaiti society and culture. In the course of the Iraqi occupation, nearly 60 percent of the Kuwaiti population (approximately 1.3 million people) fled. Kuwaitis had long unified against external danger, and the Iraqi invasion and occupation strengthened Kuwaiti national identity. For those who remained in Kuwait, the common experience of brutal Iraqi occupation erased ethnic, religious, and class divisions. However, as a result of its brutality, the Iraqi occupation created an significant psychological division between those who had stayed in Kuwait and those who had fled, including the royal family.

After the war, the government made it official policy to diversify the expatriate population. Kuwaitis believed that many Arab workers were unreliable, and that many had collaborated with the Iraqi invaders. Accordingly, the government restricted the nationals of those countries that had supported Iraq—Palestinian, Jordanian, Sudanese, Yemeni, and Iraqi—while giving preference to the workers of those states that had supported Kuwait, such as Egypt. Because of the exclusion of many Arabs, South Asian migrants have dominated the labor market since the war.

Population

Age Breakdown: 0-14: 25 percent; 15-29: 26 percent; 30-44: 34 percent; 45-59: 11 percent; 60 years and older: 4 percent.

Language: Both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti Arabs speak Arabic. The Arabic language—a Semitic tongue that is spoken by about 200 million people—exists in three forms: the Classical Arabic of the Koran; Modern Standard Arabic, used in books, newspapers,

television, and radio; and the spoken language, which in Kuwait is Gulf Arabic. Gulf Arabic is also spoken in Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Because of Kuwait's trade-based economy, Kuwaiti Arabic is infused with Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and African words and phrases. Dialects used by Arab workers in Kuwait include Egyptian Spoken Arabic and South Levantine Spoken Arabic.

South Asian workers in Kuwait speak, Hindi, Urdu, Bangla (Bengali), Punjabi, Sindhi, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Malayalam, among other languages, depending on their country of origin and ethnic group.

Many Kuwaitis and foreign workers also speak English. English is the language used among the large numbers of South Asian workers, as well as between these immigrants and virtually all other foreigners and the local Arab inhabitants.

Influence on Culture: Language is an important aspect of Arab identity. The Arabic language embodies an entire culture that links Arabs throughout time.

Holidays: There are two major annual Islamic holidays: *Eid-al-Fitr* is the end of Ramadan and is celebrated on a different day each year, depending on the lunar calendar. The celebration usually lasts three days. *Eid-al-Adha* is the Festival of Sacrifice. Like most other Islamic holidays, the exact day of celebration varies depending on the lunar calendar.

Customs

Greeting: Arabs often greet each other with a number of ritual phrases and fixed responses. Elaborate greetings and inquiries about health and well-being often take up large amounts of time, but are necessary in establishing friendly relations. These elaborate greetings originate from Bedouin tradition where the nomadic lifestyle led to frequent encounters with strangers. Arabs will often shake hands every time they meet and every time they depart. Arabs will rise when shaking hands as well as when an esteemed person enters a room. Handshakes are generally long in length and may involve grasping the elbow. They usually do not possess the same firmness as those of Americans.

Namaskar or *Namaste* is the most popular form of greeting among Indians. Both palms are placed together and raised below the face. It is a general salutation that is used to both welcome somebody and to bid farewell. Other forms of greeting common among India's various communities include the Sikh *Sat-Sri-akal* and the Tamilian *Vannakkam*.

Handshakes are the common form of greeting between two Pakistani males. Close friends and relatives may embrace. Women may greet each other with a kiss or an embrace.

Ayubowan, which means "May you live long," is the customary Sri Lankan greeting. Palms held close together against the chest denotes welcome, goodbye, respect, devotion, or loyalty. Gifts should be given or received with both hands.

When greeting non-Muslims, Bangladeshis use the Indian *Namaskar* greeting. When greeting fellow Muslims, they use *Asalaam walaikhum*, which means "peace be upon you."

Gestures/Hand Signs: Arabs, like most people, use gestures and body movements to communicate. It has been said that "To tie an Arab's hands while he is speaking is tantamount to tying his tongue." However, Arab gestures differ a great deal from American ones.

Arabs may make the following gestures/hand signs: Placing the right hand or its forefinger on the tip of the nose, on the right lower eyelid, on top of the head, or on the mustache or beard means "it's in front of me," "I see it," or "it's my obligation." Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest immediately after shaking hands with another man shows respect or thanks. Touching the tips of the right fingertips to the forehead while bowing the head slightly also connotes respect. Holding the fingers in a pear shaped configuration with the tips pointing up at about waist level and moving the hand slightly up and down signals "be patient" or "be careful." Flicking the right thumbnail on front teeth can mean "I have no money."

Visiting: Arabs are, in general, hospitable and generous. Their hospitality is often expressed with food. Giving a warm reception to strangers stems from the culture of the desert, where traveling nomads depended on the graciousness and generosity of others to survive. Arabs continue this custom of showing courtesy and consideration to strangers. Demonstrating friendliness, generosity and hospitality are considered expressions of personal honor. When Arabs are visiting an installation or office, they will expect the same level of generosity and attention.

Indians offer flower garlands to visitors as a mark of respect and honor. Visiting is an important part of Pakistani culture, and hospitality is the mark of good family. Guests are offered refreshments and perhaps invited to share a meal. However, because most Pakistani workers in Kuwait share small apartments, it is difficult for them to follow this custom.

Negotiations: Arab culture places a premium on politeness and socially correct behavior. Preserving honor is paramount. When faced with criticism, Arabs will try to protect their status and avoid incurring negative judgments by others. This concept can manifest itself in creative descriptions of facts or in the dismissal of conclusions, in order to protect one's reputation. This cultural trait will generally take precedence over the accurate transmission of information.

The desire to avoid shame and maintain respect can also contribute to the tendency to compartmentalize information. One common manifestation of this behavior comes in the form of saying "yes" when one really means "no." Arabs try to take the personalization out of contentious conversations, which can lead to vagueness and efforts to not speak in absolutes. It is also considered disrespectful to contradict or disagree with a person of superior rank or age.

Conflict Resolution: In Arab society, community affiliation is given priority over individual rights. Consequently, familial and status considerations factor significantly into the processes and outcomes of conflict resolution. This emphasis on community helps explain the dominance of informal over contractual commitments and the use of mediation to solve conflicts. Many disputes are resolved informally outside of the official courts.

Business Style: In business meetings formal courtesies are expected. Cards—which should be printed in both English and Arabic—are regularly exchanged. Meetings may not always be on a one-to-one basis and it is often difficult to confine conversation to the business at hand. Many topics may be discussed in order to assess the character of potential business partners. There is a strong preference within Arab culture for business transactions to be based on personal contacts.

Sense of Time and Space: Past and present are flexible concepts in Arab society, with one shading over into the other. In general, time is much less rigidly scheduled than in Western culture. However, it is considered rude to be late to an appointment as is looking at one's watch or acting pressed for time. Additionally, Arabs believe that future plans may interfere with the will of God. Commitments a week or more into the future are less common than in Western culture.

Olfaction functions as a distance-setting mechanism. Standing close enough to smell someone's breath and body odor is a sign that one wants to relate and interact with them. To stand back and away from someone indicates a desire not to interact with them and may offend the individual. Additionally, Arabs feel very comfortable when surrounded by people in open spaces, but can feel uncomfortable or threatened when enclosed within walls in small physical spaces.

Arabs also have a non-Western view of property and boundaries. Traditionally Arabs do not subscribe to the concept of trespassing. Arabs have conformed to the Western imposition of country boundaries, but do not place the same boundary restrictions within their country as it relates to city, town, village, property, and yard.

Hygiene: Personal hygiene is extremely important to Arabs for both spiritual and practical reasons. Because meals are frequently eaten by hand, it is typical to wash the hands before and after eating. Formal washing of the face, hands, and forearms, called *wudhu*, and general cleanliness of the body and clothing is required before daily prayers or fasting. A formal head-to-toe washing, called *ghusi*, is required after sexual intercourse, ejaculation (for men), and menstruation (for women). *Ghusi* is also recommended following contact with other substances considered unclean, including alcohol, pigs, dogs, or non-believers.

Gifts: Small gifts and candies are considered appropriate gifts for those invited to Arab homes. It is customary that gifts are not opened in front of people. Unlike Westerners, Arabs do not feel it necessary to bring gifts when visiting someone's home. It is the responsibility of the host to provide for a guest in Arab culture.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: It is insulting to ask about a Muslim's wife or another female family member. Don't stare at women on the street or initiate conversation with them. If meeting a female, do not attempt to shake her hand unless she extends it. In addition, never greet a woman with an embrace or kiss. Avoid pointing a finger at an Arab or beckoning with a finger. Use the right hand to eat, touch, and present gifts; the left is generally regarded as unclean. Avoid putting feet on tables or furniture. Refrain from leaning against walls, slouching in chairs, and keeping hands in pockets. Do not show the soles of the feet, as they are the lowest and dirtiest part of the body.

Lifestyle

Kuwaiti Family at the Beach

Role of Family: In Kuwait, the family, rather than the person, is the basic unit of society. Kuwaitis envision their state as a family. Kuwaiti families are large, but it is rare for three or more generations to live together in the same household. However, many Kuwaitis have relatives living close by.

Arab families in general are patriarchal and hierarchal (with respect to gender and age). The father possesses complete authority and responsibility. Fathers generally remain aloof from the task of raising children in their early years. The Arab family is the society in miniature: the same patriarchal and hierarchical relations and values also prevail at work and in religious, political, and social associations.

Arab men and women continue to place a high value on their family affiliations and their roles as generators of new families. This emphasis is particularly powerful in Kuwait given that Kuwaitis make up a minority of the state's population. Large families add to the population, and help ensure the survival of Kuwait's culture. Although rising educational levels among Kuwaiti women and their increased participation in the workforce have reduced fertility rates somewhat, Kuwaiti families still average more than six children. Government policies support high fertility by subsidizing the cost of children.

Arab and South Asian workers in Kuwait also value family. However, most foreign workers do not have families in Kuwait. Labor migration in the Gulf is primarily contract based and most foreign workers fall below the salary ceiling necessary for sponsoring family members. Those with families tend to leave them at home in the care of other relatives, and send remittances home to support them. When economic conditions in Kuwait have deteriorated, migrants with families have not hesitated to send them home.

Role of Women: Through the 1950s, Kuwaiti women were secluded, veiled, and largely illiterate. Since then, gender roles in Kuwait have undergone significant changes. Kuwaiti women are educated and employed as a result of modernizing policies instituted during the era of rising national income. The government has supported a degree of equality between the sexes, and Kuwaiti women have access to state services such as education. Oil revenue has enabled Kuwaiti families to hire nannies and servants to perform many of the tasks

historically carried out by women. In the Kuwaiti social pecking order, Kuwaiti women are above expatriates of all ethnicities but below Kuwaiti men.

Arab expatriate women in Kuwait are generally dependents, and tend not to participate in the labor force. South Asian females dominate the female labor force in Kuwait, concentrated in the two or three occupations that are considered culturally appropriate for women, such as domestic servants and hotel and business cleaners.

Role of Men: Men are privileged in Kuwaiti Arab society, wielding all authority. Typical masculine values and virtues—dating from the nomadic past—include bravery, a willingness to bear hardships to come to the aid of family and friends, and fathering children (preferably sons). Traditionally, a man's overarching responsibility has been to lead, protect, and provide for his family.

Male Arab workers are relatively privileged in Kuwaiti society. They are above other immigrant workers, but below Kuwaiti women in the social hierarchy. They tend to share the values of Kuwaiti Arab men.

Dating and Marriage: Kuwaitis tend to marry at a young age. Although divorces are not common, there are no social barriers to remarriage for widows or divorcees. Marriage is encouraged, and payments and subsidies are made to parents encourage having large families. Traditionally, Kuwaiti Arab marriages have been family and communal decisions more than individual ones. Kuwaitis' degree of freedom to choose spouses varies according to education, socioeconomic status, age, and gender. However, families still strongly prefer their children marry individuals whose social and religious backgrounds and kinship networks are familiar to them. Although polygamy is legal in Kuwait, it is rare.

Intermarriage between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis remains limited. Kuwaitis who do marry non-Kuwaitis favor fellow Arabs. Men and women in the Asian population generally are not related through marriage. To the extent that South Asian workers are married, they are usually not accompanied by their spouses. This influences both the duration of their stay and Kuwaiti perceptions of their moral and sexual behavior.

Role of Children: The hierarchical structure of the Arab family requires children to obey their elders and meet their expectations. Sons are especially welcome in Kuwaiti Arab families because they are the carriers of the family tradition, and because their economic contribution is usually greater than that of daughters. Sons are usually taught to be protectors of their sisters and to help the father with his duties inside and outside the house, while daughters are taught to defer to their brothers, and to help the mother to take care of household chores. During adolescence, there traditionally is a separation of sexes. Traditional child-rearing practices in Kuwait place few demands and behavioral constraints on boys but many on their sisters.

The cornerstone of educating a child in Arab families is teaching him or her complete obedience to authority. Arab families also teach their children to attach tremendous importance to blood ties and bonds of loyalty. Arab children are taught to feel shame as an excruciating punishment and to avoid it in any way possible. Indeed, there is no real prohibition against distortion or fabrication to avoid shame.

Kuwaiti Boy

Many non-Kuwaiti Arab workers do not have children in Kuwait. Those who have children adhere to similar values and expectations as Kuwaitis. Most South Asian workers also do not have children in Kuwait. Both Arabs and South Asians who have children in their country of origin send money home to support them.

Man's 3-Piece Headcovering

Clothing

Headwear: Iraqi Arab men often wear a three-piece head cover. The bottom piece of this head covering is a white cap that is sometimes filled with holes. This cap, called *keffiya*, is used to hold the hair in place. On top of it is a square cloth called a *ghutra*. On top of this is the *agal*, which is a black band surrounding the top of the head to hold everything else in place. For male children, wearing the head covering is a sign of entering manhood. Inside the house, the head covering is not needed, although when a man has guests in his house he often wears it as a sign of respect.

Many Arab women cover their hair in public. The hair covering can range from a gauzy veil draped around the head and neck to a thick kerchief folded so that the front lies low on the forehead and the rest of the head is securely swathed. Some women wear a scarf-like cover called *hejab* that covers the hair but not the face.

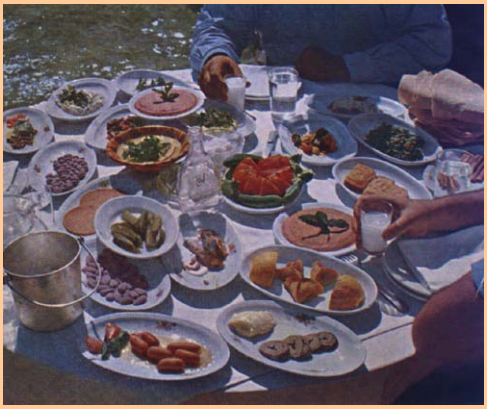
Men in Kuwait wearing dishdashas

Garments: Traditional Kuwaiti male attire consists of a long-sleeved, one piece dress—called a *dishdashah*—that covers the whole body. This garment allows the air to circulate, which helps cool the body. During summer, it is usually made of cotton; in winter, it is made from heavier fabric such as wool and comes in darker colors. Traditional Kuwaiti female attire consists of the *abaya*, a long-sleeved, coat-like over-garment that covers one from neck to ankles. Beneath a robe, a woman may be wearing a traditional dress or casual Western clothes.

Not all Kuwaitis dress in the traditional manner. Urban, educated Kuwaitis often dress in Western clothes. The quality and style of the clothes is directly related to the status one has within Kuwaiti society.

Dress is a major mark of identity in Kuwait, symbolizing prestige and power. Only Kuwaitis (and other Gulf Arabs) wear the *dishdashah* and *abaya*. Although the *abaya* and the headscarf are part of the Islamic tradition and related to female modesty, they are less a symbol of piety than of ethnic identity. Expatriates workers wear either their native clothing or western-style dress. (Among male foreigners, the wearing of non-European style clothes is associated with low-paid, unskilled labor.)

Diet



Arab Dishes

Type: The Kuwaiti diet is characterized by a high intake of grains (especially rice), vegetables (especially beans, cucumbers, and tomatoes), and fruits (particularly apples, bananas, dates, watermelon, mangoes and oranges). The major dairy products are yogurt, feta cheese, and whole and skim milk. One of the most common Kuwaiti dishes is *machbous*, saffron rice topped with either chicken or lamb, served with a tomato paste sauce.

Many non-Kuwaitis prefer foods from their native lands. Depending on the size of the community, these foods are generally available in Kuwait. Wheat, dates, rice, and olive oil are main ingredients in the Arab cuisine. Lamb and mutton are popular meats. Milk from cows or goats is usually converted to *laban* (yogurt), or made into cream cheese, *labneh*. Specialties of Arab cuisine include *hummus* (a pureed chick pea dip flavored with lemon and garlic), *ghuzi* (roast lamb with rice and nuts), and *warak enab* (stuffed vine leaves). Desserts include sweet pastries such as *baklava*. Because of religious restrictions, Arabs do not eat pork. Many Arabs prefer to buy meat from *halal* butchers, who sell meat only from animals that have been slaughtered according to Koranic ritual.

Interior of a *Diwaniyyah*

The South Asian diet includes *biryanis* (rice with saffron, meat, fish, or chicken), *dhal* (a lentil-based soup), and several types of bread. Cows are sacred to Hindus; chicken and lamb are the most commonly consumed meats. The Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan diets contain more rice and fish than the Indian and Pakistani diets.

Influence on Culture: Because of their long association with the sea, Kuwaiti cuisine reflects Indian, Chinese, Persian, and Arabian influences. In recent years, Western influences—such as fast food and carbonated beverages—have become apparent as well.

Alcohol/Drugs: Because Islamic law prohibits alcohol, alcohol products are forbidden. Among the Kuwaiti and foreign population, alcohol consumption depends on the degree of an individual's religious faith and customs.

Dwelling Types

Arab houses are constructed to maximize privacy. There is a correlation between the size and grandeur of a person's house and their social position within the community. Kuwaitis view their home as a sanctuary into which outsiders never enter unless explicitly invited.

Kuwaiti House

The typical Kuwaiti house consists of one hall. Wealthier families establish a second hall or specify one room for the *diwaniyyah*, a common area to receive guests and meet neighbors to discuss current events and exchange views. The main doors of the *diwaniyyah* are open all day to receive guests. It contains comfortable furniture, such as cushions arranged in a specific way to be used as armrests. The floor is covered with woven Persian carpets. Sometimes the *diwaniyyah* includes a guest room for guests staying overnight.

Until the late 1950s, Kuwaitis and expatriate workers lived together within the walls of Kuwait City. In 1957, the walls were torn down and Kuwait built carefully planned residential districts that segregated natives and foreign workers, and laid the groundwork for legal and political distinctions between Kuwaitis and expatriates.

Many foreign workers share a house or even a room in a house to the point of overcrowding. Selection of co-residents follows criteria of ethnicity, nationality, religion, and local origin. Poorer migrants often furnish their rooms in a squatter-like fashion: thin foam mattress, pillow, and blanket. Often residences do not meet health and hygiene standards, so workers spend minimal time in these rooms. Since most Arab workers earn better incomes than their Asian counterparts, the houses they live in are in better condition and fewer people share them.

Societal Framework

Self/Group: Instead of asserting their separateness and privacy as independent individuals, Arabs tend to interact as members of a group. As a result, they are subjected to immense family and community pressures to conform to group norms. Conformity is related to and reinforced by a reverence for tradition. Loyalty to the group is highly valued, and responsibility generally falls upon the group rather than on any particular individual. Due to

the primacy of the group, obligations of group members to one another are wide, varied, and powerful.

Tribe/Clan: The original settlers of Kuwait—the Bani Utub—were composed of nomadic tribal families, and tribal values continue to play a significant role in Kuwait. However, after they reached Kuwait, the Bani Utub gave up their nomadic lifestyle. Through the mid-20th Century, Kuwait supported the nomadic lifestyle, leaving its borders open to nomad migration. In addition, the boundary between settled Kuwaitis and nomads was porous, due to intermarriage.

Kuwait has a substantial population of *bidun jinsiyyah* (stateless people). *Bidun* are recently settled nomads with Iraqi, Saudi, or Syrian roots; most Kuwaitis did not consider them true Kuwaitis. In 1961, however, facing a growing population imbalance and the threat of Iraqi territorial expansion, the government granted *bidun* citizenship in large numbers, offering social services, housing, and other benefits in return for military service.


Patriotic Kuwaiti

The government took the opportunity provided by *bidun* settlement to strengthen tribal identification for political purposes while simultaneously weakening the tribes' internal social and political cohesion. It settled the *bidun* away from grazing land; to weaken clan ties it mixed tribal and clan affiliation in housing. It distributed land titles individually not collectively, with no relation to tribal patterns. New marriage laws encouraged the formation of nuclear families. Because the state increased its points of contact with the individual tribesmen, the tribal sheikhs' role declined. At the same time, a process of political re-tribalization occurred. The state encouraged tribes to run National Assembly candidates, whom they selected through tribal primaries. In exchange for economic benefits and social services, Bedouin provided voting loyalty for the ruling family. Tribal leaders tend to be intermediaries in patron-client relationships between the ruler and people. Overall, tribes have readily adjusted to, and taken advantage of, Kuwaiti political culture.

The growing involvement of the recently settled nomads in Kuwaiti politics has contributed to the "desertization" of Kuwaiti society: the dilution of urban cosmopolitanism through the importation of tribe members and their traditional, hierarchical values into the mainstream of Kuwaiti life.

Modern Nation State: Kuwait is unusual among its neighbors in that it has a history as an autonomous nation and, as a result, a well-established national identity. It emerged as a result of the shared experience of migration and common effort to build a new society in Kuwait. Kuwaiti national identity is also a function of its small size, which has made it internally more cohesive, but also more vulnerable to its larger neighbors. Since its founding in the 18th Century, a sense of external threats has bound Kuwaitis together.

Kuwaitis identify with a territorialized community, previously the town and today the state, rather than with a particular leader. As a result, they share a cultural understanding of citizenship similar to Westerners. In contrast, recently settled Kuwaiti tribesmen understand nationality and citizenship in the sense of allegiance to a leader (in this case, Kuwait's ruling family). They are subjects of the ruler, personally tied to him by bonds of status and obligation. This leader-follower bond requires a leader to reward his followers materially and reaffirm his worthiness to retain their allegiance.

Younger Sheikh Jabir

This tribal conception of citizenship, with its focus on actual or fictive blood relationships arranged in a hierarchy topped by a leader is the basis of citizenship favored by Kuwaiti rulers.

Overall, Kuwaiti law and custom draw a sharp distinction between those who belong to the national community and those who do not. Arab and South Asian workers live in two worlds, one related to Kuwait and the other to their home country. Since most will eventually return to their country of origin, these workers generally remain attached to their respective homelands, not to the Kuwaiti state.

Centers of Authority: The principal center of authority in Kuwait is the ruling al-Sabah family, which has governed Kuwait since the mid-18th Century. Until the mid-20th Century, the al-Sabah shared power and authority with an oligarchy dominated by the Bani Utub merchant elite. The development of the oil industry following World War II enabled the ruling family to reverse its historical dependence on the merchants. In return for a share of the oil revenues, the merchant families gave up political influence. In addition, the regime used economic entitlements and social benefits to buy popular support. The oil revenues allowed the ruler to create a welfare state, shifting the allegiance of the population from the merchants to the regime.

Kuwaiti Arabs have an ambivalent attitude toward authority. On the one hand, since Kuwaitis were traditionally mobile, they developed attitudes favoring personal independence, a refusal to tolerate excessive authority, and a readiness to move away from oppression. In addition, the extensive and regular face-to-face interactions among Kuwaitis—facilitated by the country's small size—tend to ameliorate authoritarianism both by transmitting information and by connecting the ruling family directly to the population.

On the other hand, Kuwait, like most Arab states, has a history of strong central government. Arab culture favors centralization of authority, which is generally related to age and gender. Arabs associate age with experience and wisdom. In general, the authority figure is usually the oldest competent male. Projecting a paternal image, the al-Sabah family securely occupies the top of the pyramid of authority in Kuwait.

Traditionally, political legitimacy and authority in Arab culture is also based on a symbiosis between Islam as a belief system and the tribe as a basic unit of social organization. The rulers of Kuwait have sought to legitimize their rule on the basis of both Islamic and tribal traditions. With respect to the former, Kuwait's ruling family adheres to the Islamic principles of consultation (*shura*) and consensus (*ijma*).

Rule of Law: Kuwait is stable, and its government is more transparent than that of many of its neighbors. It has been ruled by the al-Sabah family since its founding in the 18th Century. The ruling family governs on the basis of traditional rights and values and distribution of oil wealth among Kuwaiti citizens. A complex legal structure has developed, partly Islamic and partly Western, embracing commercial, labor, administrative, and criminal regulations. The lengthy British presence in the country left its mark in Kuwait's perception of itself as a constitutional monarchy, with an elected parliament and commitment to the rule of law.

By many measures, Kuwait has a healthier civil society than elsewhere in the region. It has a critical press and traditions of consultation and public debate. Private space, such as the home or the mosque, is relatively free from state intervention. Although political rights are limited to adult male citizens, Kuwaitis have a voice in how they are governed, and a public platform from which they can present their views.

Despite occasional incidents, Kuwait has a stable foreign workforce. South Asian workers generally accept their subordinate status and adhere to the rule of law in Kuwait. Most South Asian workers are unwilling to engage in activity that would jeopardize their jobs, and by extension, their residence in Kuwait.

Role of State vs Role of Ethnic Group: Kuwaitis are part of the larger Arab culture in the Middle East. Kuwait also has a specific Gulf Arab identity, which it shares with Arabs from Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Carried and shaped by traders, this identity mixes the Islamic and Arab cultures with elements of African, Indian, and Persian cultures.

Kuwaiti Arabs are synonymous with the Kuwaiti state. Citizenship gives Kuwaitis social privileges and material benefits, which the state has used to build a Kuwaiti national identity. Kuwait's extensive welfare state has discouraged Kuwaitis from seeking other forms of identification. Overall, Kuwait's economy, laws, and customs emphasize the distinction between citizens and foreigners, and reinforce feelings of loyalty toward the state.

By denying social and economic benefits to foreign workers, the government prevents social integration and reinforces a sense of separate identity for both groups. Arab and South Asian migrants are acutely aware that they do not have rights and benefits because of their status as non-Kuwaitis. It is difficult for the migrant communities in Kuwait to develop formal group identity because of the high rate of turnover, the strict legal and social constraints imposed on them by the government, and because they come to Kuwait with individual, not collective, goals.

Attitudes toward United States: Kuwait has had a close relationship with the United States since the 1950s. In general, Kuwaitis are visibly pro-American because of the successful U.S.-led campaign to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991. While public support for the United States generally remains strong after Operation Iraqi Freedom, there are some small extremist elements in Kuwait that advocate the removal of the United States from all Muslim countries.

Attitudes toward the United States among Arab workers in Kuwait are mixed. These attitudes tend to reflect the general state of relations between their homelands and the United States. Despite close cooperation between the United States and some Arab states, such as Egypt and Jordan, Arabs view America unfavorably on a number of issues. At the same time, many Arabs are attracted to the democratic principles and economic opportunities represented by the United States.

Other Ethnic Groups: Because of cultural and linguistic familiarity, Kuwaitis tend not to consider Arabs (especially those from the Gulf) to be foreigners. Rather, they are perceived as merely non-Kuwaiti. As a rule, Arabs workers are better paid and employed than non-Arabs, and enjoy a higher social status. However, in the private sphere, Kuwaitis and other Arabs do not generally mix.

Since World War II, there has been a substantial South Asian population in Kuwait. South Asians occupy the bottom of a hierarchy based on ethnicity, religion, and gender. Kuwaitis have responded to the increasing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the population with concerns for cultural survival.

Arab and South Asian workers in Kuwait are aware of their subordinate status and defer to Kuwaitis. Arab workers consider themselves superior to Asian workers. Arab expatriates tend to see non-Arabs as an undistinguishable group, distinguishing only between Asians and Westerners. Asian workers are aware that they are below Arab workers in Kuwait's ethnic and occupational hierarchy. South Asians and non-Kuwaiti Arabs do not mix socially.

Neighboring States

Iraq: Kuwaitis and Iraqis have long standing cultural, familial, and economic ties dating back several centuries. However, Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations have long been marred by border disputes. As a result of the brutality of the Iraq's 1990-91 invasion and occupation of Kuwait, Kuwaitis continue to detest most Iraqis.

Iran: Hostility between Arabs and Iranians (Persians) has been an enduring feature of the Gulf region. At the same time, Iranians have been economically linked to Kuwait since its founding in the 18th Century, as the Gulf was a porous frontier between Arab and Iranian trade, lineages, and culture. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Kuwait has been suspicious of its larger neighbor. However, recently Kuwait has seen Tehran as a responsible diplomatic and economic partner and as a counterweight to Iraq. Kuwait currently emphasizes its friendly relations with the Iranian government.

The Gulf States: Kuwait has close cultural, economic, and familial connections to the other Gulf sheikhdoms: Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Bahrain's ruling family is part of the Bani Utub, the tribe that originally settled Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia: Kuwait has long had an ambiguous relationship with Saudi Arabia. Before both states' borders were drawn in 1922, Kuwait had to resist several incursions from Saudi Wahhabi tribes. The Saudis continued to harass Kuwait militarily through the 1920s, and imposed an economic blockade from 1923 to 1938. Over the past several decades, the Saudi-Kuwaiti relationship has generally improved. Recently, however, Kuwait-Saudi relations have been hampered by different approaches to Gulf security, as well as renewed efforts to export Wahhabism to Kuwait and other Gulf states.

Other Arab States: Immediately following the Gulf War, Kuwait had poor relations with those countries that supported Iraq, including Jordan, Sudan, and Yemen. These relations have since improved.

Regional Powers

Turkey: Kuwaitis regard Turkey with ambivalence. Through World War I, Kuwait was officially part of the Ottoman Empire, linked administratively and economically through Basra in southern Iraq. However, Ottoman administrators largely neglected the city-state, allowing it to act more or less independently. Kuwaitis lived comfortably and autonomously under Ottoman rule.

Israel: Kuwait has been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and sentiment against Israel has grown over the past several years.

Arab and South Asian workers in Kuwait have positive feelings toward their respective homelands. In fact, most are more concerned with developments there than in Kuwait. Their attitudes toward other Arab states and regional powers vary according to specific circumstances.

Downtown Kuwait City

Cultural Economy

Since Kuwait has no agriculture to speak of, subsistence historically depended on trade. Kuwaitis have oriented themselves less to their original tribal ranges in Arabia than to the Gulf coast and the Indian Ocean. Pearl diving was especially important to Kuwait's cultural economy prior to the discovery of oil.

The discovery and production of oil in the mid-20th Century completely and immediately transformed Kuwaiti cultural economy. The visible and material effects of the oil boom on Kuwait include: the rapid transformation of living standards, massive infrastructure

development, generous welfare-state provisions, a huge influx of immigrant labor (skilled and unskilled), and the adoption of a western, consumer-oriented lifestyle.

Because of oil revenues, Kuwaiti citizens were given social and economic benefits—such as free education, health care, a variety of subsidized goods and services, including housing, and guaranteed employment. Kuwaiti affluence, leisure, and power stood in increasing contrast to expatriate economic need, dependence, and labor. The dichotomy between Kuwaiti leisure and privilege and non-Kuwaiti labor is central to cultural dynamics in Kuwait.

Shepherd with Sheep Outside of Kuwait City

Different types of intermediary linkages exist between the prospective migrants and the labor market in Kuwait. In the private sector, an Arab worker finds an employer through personal contacts either with Kuwaitis or with fellow countrymen already in the emirate. In the public sector, recruitment takes place through bilateral agreements between a Kuwaiti institution and its Arab counterpart. Most South Asians find employment through recruiting agencies, to which they pay a fee.

Cultural Geography

Unlike neighboring states, Kuwait has had a well-defined territorial nucleus since the 18th Century.

The geographical pattern of residence in Kuwait reflects the ethnic divisions of the population. Kuwait City, where most of the population is located, has residential areas identified as "Kuwaiti," "mixed," and "rural." The Kuwaiti areas are inhabited by wealthy Kuwaitis. Mixed areas are inhabited by less wealthy Kuwaitis and expatriates of all nationalities. Rural areas are populated by settled nomads and unskilled migrant workers. Some areas are identified with one particular expatriate group. Overall, residential patterns followed class rather than ethnic lines. The central and eastern parts of Kuwait are considered wealthier than the western parts.

Immigrant areas tend to contain high-density apartment blocks surrounded by poorly cared for streets. Maintenance and repair is a constant problem. Non-Kuwaitis are not permitted to own land.

Urban vs. Rural Culture: Kuwaitis have been mostly settled since the early 18th Century. Through the 20th Century, there was constant coming and going between the desert and Kuwait town. Nevertheless, there was a clear social and cultural dichotomy between long-settled Kuwaitis and nomadic tribesmen. Overall, the nomadic element, though not insignificant, has played a relatively minor role in the evolution of state and society.

Culture's Effect on Warfare

Cultural Style of Warfare: Kuwait's small territory and population have made it necessary to seek help from the outside to defend itself. Beginning in 1899, Great Britain guaranteed the security of Kuwait, and trained its armed forces. Kuwait's rulers consistently have seen the state's military weakness as a fundamental situation that they cannot alter. As a result, they continue to rely on outside powers for protection.

Kuwaiti Soldiers

Since they are transient and remain focused on their respective homelands, Arab and South Asian workers in Kuwait have nothing for which to fight in Kuwait. During conflict, foreign workers will most likely attempt to return to their countries of origin, as they did during the 1990 Iraqi invasion, and prepared to do in the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

Conventional Warfare: Cultural factors have made it difficult for Arab militaries to adopt Western war-fighting doctrine. Western warfare has emphasized offensive action and shock effect, whereas Arab warfare has emphasized standoff, attrition, deception, and surprise. Martial traditions also influence which military units are most prestigious. Fighter squadrons and commando units, for example, perform raid-like missions, which have a high profile in Arab-Islamic history.

Arab militaries have not been effective in the modern era. Arab culture encourages patterns of behavior that are not conducive to modern military operations. Arab officers (especially junior officers) are hesitant to exercise independent judgment, frequently lack extensive technical training, and are prone to selectively transmit information to avoid the loss of face. These types of Arab cultural behavior patterns cause Arab militaries to have weak information flow. Arab military personnel often cannot take full advantage of their weaponry and equipment, and have difficulty maintaining it.

In training, Arab armed forces teach their soldiers that there is only one right answer to a military problem and only one right way to handle a situation. This approach was employed in battle regardless of other factors such as terrain, mission, forces available, or the enemy's strength or disposition.

Unconventional/Tribal Warfare: Arab warfare stems directly from nomadic traditions and experiences. Although the nomadic population of Kuwait has dramatically decreased in the 20th Century, the image of the nomadic warrior has remained powerful. Because the extended family is the fundamental unit of political and social action, a kin group traditionally has looked first to its own fighting men, not to the state's armed forces, to ensure its protection and promotion of its interests. The conduct of a struggle is considered

as important as its outcome. To show honor during a military operation is praised, regardless of the outcome.

Historically, sedentary and nomadic units were skeptical of outside groups, fearing competition for scarce resources. It was once common to engage in military forays to usurp and plunder resources belonging to a weaker tribe or neighbor.

The glory of the raid—whether against another nomadic tribe, settled enemy, or caravan—is a key aspect of Bedouin tribal warfare. In many cases, the raids were carried out with minimal violence. However, they could become a flash point for a larger tribal conflict. Although it varied greatly as to numbers involved and distances traveled, raiding followed certain norms. Raiding tribes traveled light, avoided detection, moved quickly, minimized bloodshed, and took camels only—no captives or other spoils. When raiding led to a larger conflict, the objective usually was not to force submission, but to restore the balance of honor or the balance of livestock. Tribal warfare tended to become more intense and bloody when central authorities tried to impose political control on a rural population.

Tribes commemorated their raids through poetry and song. Participation in a raid was considered a dramatic test of courage, skill, and dedication to the goals of the tribal group. The resort to combat usually bestowed honor on both sides. For Arab tribes, honor is the dominant value. In the collective sense, honor means defense of the tribe, the group, or the society as a whole against its challengers. Lost honor, according to tribal tradition, must be retrieved by violence. A man's failure to fulfill his duty as a fighter results in shame.