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Palestinians and the Political Situation in Kuwait

In the following interview, a friend of MERIP who has been living in Kuwait for several years, discusses with Sheila Ryan and Joe Stork the current situation of the large Palestinian population there. The interview was conducted in late November 1976. See MERIP Reports no. 51 for background information on the dissolution of the Kuwaiti parliament.

How do the Palestinians in Kuwait figure in the recent crack-down by the regime on opposition politics?

During the summertime the Kuwaiti press, especially the press loyal to the government, raised the question of whether Kuwait, having a sizeable Palestinian community, would become another Lebanon. *As-Siyasa*, which is very close to the government, raised this issue in a major headline. The next day the minister of state responded that Kuwait would never be another Lebanon because Palestinians living in Kuwait are not there as refugees; they are here as brothers; they have helped to build the state.

Very shortly thereafter the same newspaper ran an article indicating that when the city of Kuwait was planned, it was planned with security very much in mind. Kuwaiti areas were separated from the residential areas of non-Kuwaitis. That was the first time it came to my attention, but if you look at a map of the city, which I did after I read the article, you see how a highway divides the Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti areas. This is rigidly enforced. If you think about it, you see that with a couple of tanks occupying some traffic circles non-Kuwaitis can be easily controlled, and Kuwaitis' freedom of movement will hardly be affected.

Another factor in the September events is the role of the Saudi government. The Saudi government, ever since the last days of the Faisal regime, has been playing the role of the big power, and is behaving as such. The Kuwaiti development is not accidental. Before that there was the dissolution of the Bahrein parliament. And a permanent constitution has still not materialized in the United Arab Emirates. And we notice that Saudi diplomacy is very active in the Gulf these days. Every other day you hear that a top Saudi official is coming to Qatar or leaving Dubai or heading for Oman or visiting Bahrein and so on. Kuwait's inclination to accept the Saudi pressure is understandable, in the sense that Iraq puts pressure on Kuwait. Iraqi troops are now inside the Kuwaiti borders. And the

Kuwaitis want to offset the Iraqi pressures by aligning themselves with the Saudis. I believe these two factors led to the developments in Kuwait. But I think the Palestinian factor is more important in terms of local security.

Palestinians are the largest non-Kuwaiti community—between 250,000 and 300,000 persons. Relatively speaking they are more organized than the other communities. They occupy key positions, whether in the government sector or the private sector, education or finance. And the Kuwaitis worry that, if worse comes to worse, the withdrawal of the Palestinians from the infrastructure of Kuwait could literally paralyze it. That, or a military uprising, is their major worry. It would be fatal to Kuwait.

So they can control the Palestinians militarily, but it would be devastating nevertheless to the economy.

Yes. And now in Kuwait, in some departments, they are talking about quotas, a Palestinian quota. It's not official—but the trend—you feel it. "There are too many Palestinians here. Let them go somewhere else." Now each department is cautious, aware of its Palestinian employees.

There have been similar situations in the past, where developments for the Palestinians elsewhere in the Arab world had repercussions in Kuwait. But has this summer's events in Lebanon been quite different in magnitude? Different from June 1967, or September 1970? Are the Kuwaitis more worried now than they have been at similar times in the past?

Yes. I think the newspaper reports I referred to earlier, about whether Kuwait might become another Lebanon, was the other side of the Lebanese coin: if they can kill the Palestinian movement in Lebanon, the Palestinians in the Gulf will have to be liquidated in one way or another. Or they will have to be put in disarray, pushed into a corner, to the point where the Palestinians will say, "We lost in Lebanon; there is nothing to do now but sit, work, feed our families." I personally don't believe the Palestinians would resort to violent actions in Kuwait. Almost 100% of the Palestinians in Kuwait are there to make money. It's not like the situation of the Palestinians in Lebanon. Second, the government does not prohibit Palestinians from fundraising or going to the PLO office,

or prohibit the PLO from conducting the school system, or going to meetings, lectures. It has not interfered with this, even after September.

The PLO has its own school system?

The Palestinians used to have their own school system, but this year the system was integrated into the one set up by the Kuwaiti government. But this had been in the works before September; it was not a result of September.

The PLO schools stemmed from a stupid decree of the ministry of education, saying that those persons who came after 1963 could not send more than two of their children to school. So, in effect, illiteracy was increasing in Kuwait. And when you say just two kids of a Palestinian family, that means eight kids don't get to school, since they can't afford to go to private schools. The PLO realized this was creating a new generation of illiterates at a time when we are trying to eliminate illiteracy. So it took the initiative. I think the decree was less of an anti-Palestinian move than just a stupid effort to save half a million dinars. Last year they calculated that the Ministry spends half a million dinars on coffee and tea each year.

The PLO used to use the established school buildings. In the morning it would be occupied by the government schools, and in the afternoon the PLO would use them. The PLO hired Palestinians and paid them to teach. The kids would be in school until late at night—nine or nine-thirty p.m. This caused problems. Integrating them into the system was not a major financial commitment for the government, maybe another half million dinars. Peanuts.

Were there concrete developments that led the newspapers to speculate about Kuwait becoming another Lebanon? Was there any reason to think this?

Kuwait has a strong national—even tribal—identity that to a large extent cuts across class lines. When you come right down to it, they are more Kuwaiti than they are Arab. The Kuwaiti intellectual is even more parochial than the traditional Kuwaitis. Practically everybody, and particularly the university graduates, those who have accomplished something, are benefitting from the system and the system can accommodate them. And they cannot really but comply with it. They may differ, but it's like the differences between Democrats and Republicans. This national sense of identity should not really give a false impression when you are talking about the National Bloc in the Parliament. They make sense, they talk, but in the final analysis they are not alienated from the system. They may say "Why shouldn't we integrate those kids, the Palestinian kids, into our educational system." The government would say "We don't have the facilities." "Well, get some more facilities." It's a debate within the family. But it should not be mistaken as any kind of radical movement.

Does the National Bloc defend the Palestinians in Kuwait?

Well, they are defenders of the Palestinians in Kuwait, but you can say that people within the government are also sympathetic. In numbers, the government provides the PLO with more money and support, like medical support, than the opposition bloc.

The opposition bloc, independent of the government, also gives financial support?

Yes. They held a massive rally last summer, in support of the Palestinian movement, condemning the Syrian regime. They came out very strongly against the Syrian intervention. And they tried to enlist recruits, called for donations, and the government did not stop that.

The Palestinians wouldn't have been able to do that?

No, they couldn't.

Can you identify the groups in the opposition bloc and the relationship of these groups to the Palestinian community?

The bloc is not a party. It's literally a club, a group of intellectuals, educated mainly at Arab universities. They mingled with Arab students outside Kuwait. They were exposed to pan-Arabism, and some of them as individuals, belonged to the Arab Nationalist Movement. But they are no different than the Kuwaiti students in the US, mingling with other Arab students on the campus, making campaigns, or demonstrations and things like that. No more, no less. They have some connections with Palestinian intellectuals in Kuwait and that made them appear to be more sympathetic to the Palestinians. They are all native Kuwaitis. A naturalized Kuwaiti can vote only 15 years after naturalization, which itself takes 15 years.

Aside from the right to vote, which obviously is of limited utility, what does it mean to be a citizen?

Only a citizen can own property. A non-Kuwaiti cannot own any real estate or shares unless he gets a permit from the ministry of commerce. He cannot go and trade in stocks. If you want to start a company, you can do so only with the permission of the government.

A non-Kuwaiti can only own moveables: a car, a TV. A citizen can get practically interest-free loans from the government for 15, 25 years. He can get land practically free for an industrial project. He gets preference in employment, and can climb up the hierarchy very quickly. His salary will be two or three times above the expatriate salary, for the same job, same qualifications, same experience. A Kuwaiti can become a deputy undersecretary in two years time, while a Palestinian will stay in the same position he started in.

Is there preferential treatment in services as well?

The Kuwaiti gets preference in health care. And if they can't care for him in Kuwait, he gets sent anywhere in the world at government expense. In education, the Kuwaiti can work for six months and then get a scholarship immediately to study abroad, while collecting a salary.

Many people have the impression that despite these handicaps, the Palestinians are quite well off in Kuwait.

By and large this is true. The government is subsidizing almost all basics: food, electricity, roads, education, medical services,

no taxes. Now they have rent control. But salaries have not been keeping up with inflation, which is running at 20-30% a year, although the government just decreed a wage hike.

Can non-Kuwaitis belong to trade unions?

No. The law doesn't specify this, but anyone who risks joining a union can find his employment terminated. I'm not aware of any Palestinians belonging to trade unions.

What's the basis for reports of expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait?

There have been no mass deportations. There were deportations that were conducted smoothly, very quietly, and included Palestinians and non-Palestinians as well. An Egyptian writer for one of the Kuwaiti papers was asked to leave.

Were these politically active people?

Some of these were political figures. Some had written articles unfavorable to some of the Arab governments. For example, someone would write an article attacking Syria. Well, some Syrian is going to respond and they have to publish that article. So they say "We don't want to become another Lebanon, with people buying the press, and lobbying for articles and counter-articles. This was happening during the war, and especially during the siege of Tel az-Zaatar.

Was the only reaction to Tel az-Zaatar in the newspapers?

I wasn't there exactly when Tel az-Zaatar fell, but before I left Tel az-Zaatar had become like our daily bread, for Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis alike. Everyone was talking about Tel az-Zaatar, on the hour.

You mentioned that the PLO was anxious to avoid a clash in Kuwait. Is there a general conviction among the Palestinians in Kuwait to avoid serious conflict with the government by a careful course of action?

Yes. The intelligence service of the revolution was aware that some foreign elements might create a problem and blame it on the Palestinians. The Jordanians, perhaps, or some Phalangists might come into Kuwait, or some Chamoun people, or some American might want to intensify things, throw a bomb in one of the residential areas, and implicate the Palestinians. Because of the tense situation, such an accusation would give the government an excuse to crack down on the Palestinians, especially those who are active politically. That's why they worked very hard during that period, and they watched all suspicious elements. They protected the Kuwaiti government more than the Kuwaiti police did.

When you talk about preserving the ability to participate in political action what does that really mean?

The Palestinians are policing themselves so as to not interfere in Kuwaiti politics. They continue to recruit, organize and raise funds. But they should not reach beyond their limits in the Kuwaiti community. That's not their business. This is the

message the government wanted to get across. If you want to stay busy with your people, do it. Don't make any trouble for us; we won't make any trouble for you.

Are all the Palestinian organizations represented in Kuwait?

Yes, and they went to see the minister of interior and explained to him that they saw what's happening now in Kuwait as Kuwaiti business, internal affairs, and that they hoped it wouldn't affect their operation. But where it has affected them is in the area of information: access to newspapers, for example.

I'd like to pursue the whole question about the possibility of avoiding serious problems with the Kuwaiti government. Can you foresee circumstances in which this kind of contradiction becomes an unavoidable problem? Do you believe that even in these cases the Palestinians with discretion can avoid a real showdown?

Well, I am positive that the Palestinians are trying their best to avoid it. But if what's happening in Kuwait is linked to the Lebanese situation, I would say that the position of the Kuwaiti authorities vis-a-vis the Palestinians will be determined by the outcome of the Lebanese situation. If they could control or neutralize the PLO, the Kuwaiti authorities would have a clear hand to go further. Not only in Kuwait but in the other Gulf states too. If the PLO survives this trouble in Lebanon, I think the position of the Kuwaiti government will be maintained at that level.

Is the Palestinian or non-Kuwaiti community, as a whole, growing in size by more than the natural rate of increase? Is there much immigration?

There is immigration and emigration. In the last year or so there has been a tremendous movement of labor and skills into Kuwait and from Kuwait down the Gulf. The Gulf states are now offering more attractive salaries, benefits, particularly housing, to the point where now Kuwait is really in competition with those states to attract skilled workers and professionals to stay on. The movement is a very sizeable one. There are, though, more coming in than going out. There is no doubt that the native Kuwaitis are far outnumbered by expatriates.

Have there been many Palestinians coming to Kuwait from Lebanon?

Initially there was a sizeable influx of Palestinians, and some Lebanese. At one point in time the government stopped admitting those people by restricting the issuance of entrance visas, limiting them to businessmen. Now you can only get a visa from the Kuwaiti embassy in your home country and this has the effect of making it difficult for them to come to Kuwait.

I think what's going to determine the course of action is the situation in Lebanon. It is part of the Sinai agreement, the Golan Heights disengagement, the status of the PLO in general: all this affects the status of Palestinians in these countries. And also those countries' approach to Palestinians in particular and expatriates in general is a security issue for them.

They cannot take risks. They can sacrifice industrialization and construction for the sake of security. They can manage without. You know that the major industrial projects in the Gulf area are capital intensive rather than labor intensive.

What do the planners project to be the role of the non-Kuwaiti labor force ten years from now?

It's always an issue for the Kuwaitis: what to do with the non-Kuwaitis. It's an issue socially, because they are introducing new values that the Kuwaitis were not familiar with. It's an economic issue, a political issue, a security issue, because the mingling brings in new ideas and disrupts the traditional way of thinking and social control. But what to do about it? Non-Kuwaiti workers are indispensable.

Could you speak more specifically about the problems of relations between the communities? In the social sphere, is there Kuwaiti resentment against the introduction of new social mores?

There used to be a strong reaction, but now it is subsiding. Ten years ago there used to be very strong and very open hostility. It's changing. They understand that they cannot do everything. Kuwait is not a nation in that sense. They don't have a working class. Take the expatriates out, there are no Kuwaitis that can construct, build, repair, maintain, be plumbers. You cannot find a Kuwaiti tailor, for example, or a hair stylist, or barber, or nurse, or lab technician. A good number of them are aspiring now to be a general manager of a company, or sit on the board of directors. In real estate, construction, contracting and sub-contracting, joint ventures with foreign companies, the foreign company provides managers, consultants, and everything, and the Kuwaitis can have the title.

You mentioned that you don't think the parliamentary opposition amounts to very much. Do you see any signs of this changing in the future, of political organizations, tendencies, currents, anything that would be a potential ally for the Palestinian community in Kuwait?

I really don't, even in reaction to the dissolution of parliament. They are not doing anything, really. Maybe they will get together for a gin and tonic and reminisce about the old days. Business still goes on. They still work their deals and transactions.

What about other expatriates in Kuwait? Are there any forms of political or social cohesion among them?

No. There's the Palestinian community. Then there's the Egyptians, Iranians, Syrians, Lebanese, Indians, some Saudis. There used to be a sizeable community of Iraqis but it's dwindled in the last five years. Then there are Europeans, Americans, Japanese. The Japanese are very cohesive. Most are on assignments, providing technical services, consulting, marketing agents. In construction now you have major Kuwaiti contractors. But when it comes to huge deals like the liquified gas project, they can not undertake this, but they will do some subcontracting. Some of the Kuwaiti firms now have consultants, architects, who can do this.

Can you tell us anything about the situation in the lower Gulf? There is now some talk of a political crisis in the United Arab Emirates.

I don't have a thorough knowledge of the lower Gulf region. I do know that Bahrein is the most volatile. That's always been the case. In the UAE, if it's going to come apart, it won't be due to mass pressures, but because of tribal feudalism and the antagonisms between the ruling sheikhs. There are no trade unions or student movements there. I think the situation in Bahrein is worse than anywhere in the Gulf because the opposition movement there is less a part of the system, is more opposed to the regime. The women's movement, the student movement, are mature enough not to be taken over by the establishment. But Bahrein has no sizeable population to create that much of a problem.

Living in Kuwait, have you seen any signs of competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Kuwait?

This is an extremely sensitive topic for two reasons. Kuwait has a sizeable Iranian community, mostly workers. And there are also Shi'a Iranians who migrated a long time ago who are now native Kuwaitis. Their affinity though is with Iran rather than the Arab world. When you live there you can feel this. One of the Kuwaiti families originally from Iran will only hire Iranian workers. The Iranian community numbers about 200,000. In the last Parliament there were nine Shi'a members. They speak Arabic and Farsi. It's manifested itself in their architecture too, which has a definitely Iranian flavor.

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Survival in Kuwait means moving defensively. Keep in mind always that the people in Kuwait are there to make a bundle. They are there because they had little choice in their land of origin.

EYES OF THE WORDS: REVOLUTIONARY EGYPTIAN SINGER SHEIKH IMAM ON RECORD FOR FIRST TIME!!!

The first long-playing record of "Sheikh Imam", the revolutionary Egyptian singer, is now available from the non-profit organization: CARREFOUR INTERNATIONAL, 4258 de Lorimier, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Sheikh Imam, a popular singer, has been forbidden from singing publicly in Egypt; his songs cannot be broadcast there. So far, they have circulated on home-made cassette recordings, made during informal gatherings at his home in Egypt.

The songs on this record are written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic by the poet Ahmad Fouad Negm. The record, 'OYOUM EL KALAM (The Eyes of the Word), has been produced in stereo by Le Chant du Monde of France. It includes these songs: Notes on a prisoner's file, Daddy Nixon (about Nixon's visit to Egypt), Song for Vietnam, Palestinian, Song of a brick-layer.

The record comes two ways: One has an introduction in French, the Arabic lyrics and French translation on an accompanying text (\$7.00) or without the text (\$6.00). Profits from the sales will go to Sheikh Imam.

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