

Terrorist Violence in Kuwait

By Mary Ann Tétreault | February 23, 2005

Largely unnoticed with the focus on the war and insurgency in Iraq, and overshadowed by an upsurge in violence in Saudi Arabia, terrorist violence is also on the increase in neighboring Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government had been concerned that the preparations for the invasion of Iraq that began in late 2002 would spur an increase in violent attacks directed at either U.S. or coalition troops. During the run up to the invasion in March 2003 the Kuwaiti government ordered a large area along its border with Iraq vacated, and worked with Americans and others to keep the visibility of foreigners at a low level. In spite of this, there were several violent altercations between locals and individuals associated with military preparations for attacking Iraq. Several persons were injured and at least two died. The attacks were attributed to Kuwaiti “Afghans”—returnees from the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. But others also were implicated. A member of the national guard confessed to passing military information to Iraq, planning bomb attacks against utility installations, and plotting to assassinate Kuwaiti officials.

The start of the Iraq war in March 2003 overshadowed these apparently random threats and attacks but in the past two months they have returned with a vengeance. By the end of January 2005, about a dozen persons had died in gun battles fought in Kuwaiti streets and residential areas. Shootings and arrests continued in February, with scores of suspected militants arrested while caches of weapons, diagrams of military installations and shopping malls, and bags of explosives have been found on security sweeps by Kuwaiti investigators. In mid-February, Minister of Justice Ahmad Baqr announced that “about 35 people accused of acts of terrorism are in custody, 15 of whom are Kuwaiti nationals.” Kuwaiti government officials have linked the militants with al-Qaida, the al-Haramain group in Saudi Arabia, and a local extremist group, the Peninsula Lions. A Bahraini student hit in crossfire, along with one Saudi militant, are among the dead. So is Amer Khlaif al-Enezi, the presumed spiritual leader of the movement, who was arrested last week and, shortly afterward, was reported to have died while in custody.

Government security forces have been on high alert since the fall of 2003, when warnings of possible terrorist attacks were posted on the U.S. State

Department and U.S. embassy websites. Even before the new wave of shootings, investigations had led to the arrest and questioning of several military officers, the highest-ranking a lieutenant colonel, along with several non-Kuwaitis (most reported to be Saudis), in connection with plots to attack U.S. and other coalition troops stationed in Kuwait during the mid-January Eid al-Adha holiday. A few days later, news filtered out of two impending courts martial of Kuwaiti military personnel for their role in these plots, recalling the involvement of national guard members in the anti-U.S. attacks before the war had started. Other reported targets include shopping malls popular with both Kuwaitis and foreigners.

Political Conflict

This apparent spillover of terrorism from Iraq and Saudi Arabia into Kuwait has evoked several strands of interpretation. From one perspective, Kuwait is an unlikely place for citizens to erupt into violent militancy. Despite the tendency to put all the gulf monarchies into a single box labeled “dictatorships,” Kuwait is very far from that designation. Since 1992, it has had regular elections for members of parliament (While women do not yet have the vote, the



parliament may debate such a measure in March); Kuwaiti citizens enjoy significant civil liberties protections; they are well-traveled and well-read—with five Arabic- and two English-language dailies, along with weeklies spanning a wide range of interests and viewpoints, most Kuwaitis are very well-informed about events and their fellow citizens' reactions to them. They also have satellite access to news and other programming from around the world, along with internet access. Kuwait is far from the poster-child example of a nation suffering under state repression. Indeed, it has the most vibrant civil society of anyplace I have ever lived, including the United States.

From another perspective, things are not so rosy. The appearance of security forces among the accused militants reflects the large number of foreigners and bidun (bidun jinsiyya, “without nationality” or stateless persons) in these organizations. Neither group enjoys the same civil and economic rights as the Kuwaiti citizens who rely on them for protection. Envy and exclusion might well play a part in their attraction to militant organizations.

Another source of concern stems from more than a quarter-century of government leniency toward religious extremists. Not only have Kuwaiti leaders appealed for popular support by sounding religious themes and seeking political allies among the clergy, but they also have been reluctant to move against Islamists because of the respect religious leaders have among much of the population. As a result, Islamists occupy strategic positions throughout the government and increasingly in the private economy. Islamists in government “colonize” ministries critical for advancing their political agendas. This includes not only the ministry responsible for charities and endowments but also the ministry of education, where they preside over the production of graduates who are well-indoctrinated in religion but lack the competencies needed to get a secular job. Youth unemployment is a problem in Kuwait (although less so than in most other Arab countries) but it is far more severe among those without scientific, analytical, or technical skills who constitute another pool of potential recruits for militant activists.

Like kids everywhere, young Kuwaitis also are idealistic and for some, the appeal of defending fellow Muslims against infidel attackers is strong. This is where the Kuwaiti “Afghans” came from in the first place. Their numbers are augmented today by the scores of Kuwaiti youth returning from their experiences driving over the border to join Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah. Regardless of their social and national backgrounds, the “Fallujans” are likely to be similar to the “Afghans,” radicalized by what they saw and traumatized by what they did. In addition, some Islamists who were arrested for preaching against the war were radicalized by their experiences in detention, while the photographs from Abu Ghraib scandalized many, including religious youth.

Despite social and cultural commonalities between Kuwait and its neighbors, the differences remain at least as important. It is difficult for a Kuwaiti to have a secret life in a small country where, even if the cliché that everybody knows everybody else (and talks about them constantly) is not literally true, it's true enough. Too, although memories of the occupation are fading, they are sufficiently vivid to elicit a strong distaste for violence, especially when it is aimed by Kuwaitis at Kuwaitis. The successes of Kuwaiti police in flushing out militants rest on information from citizens as well as on forensic techniques and international sources of intelligence. The occupation of Kuwait by Iraq during the second gulf war also offers a lesson for militants, that Kuwaitis are tough and willing to take risks to protect what they value. Kuwait is too precious to Kuwaitis for them to let it be stolen without fighting back.

Having said that, it also is true that Islamists have made headway in Kuwait, and part of the government's reluctance to crack down on them rests on their popularity. A prolonged occupation of Iraq or attacks on other Muslim countries is likely to advance the Islamist cause. How the extension of political rights to women would affect the situation is unpredictable. On the one hand, half or more of Kuwaitis oppose political rights for women and, because most rationales for female disenfranchisement are religious, this could add to citizen disaffection. A better bet for maintaining Kuwaitis' allegiance to their government and to one another is the strengthening of

institutions of accountability, such as the parliament and the Audit Bureau. The latter is probably the most respected government body in Kuwait. Confidence that government corruption can be exposed and halted is essential if unemployed youth are to believe that they have a reasonable hope of achieving the jobs and adult status they so desire.

It is true that the longer the occupation goes on and the more Iraqi casualties accumulate, dissent and dissatisfaction among Kuwaitis will increase as well. Still, most Kuwaitis remember their acute vulnerability to Iraqi aggression and are grateful that Saddam no longer threatens their country and their individual lives. At the same time, greater openness in politics, including party competition, could bring Islamist ideas into sharper focus in a critical forum.

Interestingly, in early February, the hard-line branch of the Sunni Islamist Salafi movement launched what the group is calling a political party, Hizb al-Ummah. Kuwaitis outside the government have greeted the new group with mixed feelings. Liberals and Shi'ite moderates agree that legalizing political parties would be a democratizing step but find it hard to sympathize with Hizb al-Ummah's radicalism, such as its proposal to Islamize the state. Yet the new party and reactions to it show the utility of the public square. A program is proposed and criticized with the whole nation as audience, a different proposition from the privileged position Islamists now enjoy to impose demands on a frightened government from behind closed doors. A public debate on the impact of religiously dominated education on future employability or one on public performances, a favorite target of Islamist ire, would let everyone learn together the location and extent of the Kuwaiti "middle," and contribute to policies that comport with community rather than communal interests. Political liberalization offers a way to disagree without violence, something to be cherished in a country that has suffered too much violence already.

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