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Middle East Research Institute. Kuwait: MERI Report. Middle East Research Institute Routledge Revivals. New York: Routledge, 2015.

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**Middle East Research Institute. *Kuwait: MERI Report*. Middle East Research Institute
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The 1990 Iraqi invasion is without a doubt the defining moment in the modern history of Kuwait. The event ushered in a new era for the small Gulf emirate and the modern Middle East. Remarkably, the factors that contributed to Iraq's 1990 invasion and the consequences resulting from the first Gulf War were already incubating a decade earlier in Kuwait's domestic and regional affairs. Indeed, during the 1980s Kuwait was facing the very same threats that would permeate the region over the next several decades: border tensions, Iraqi and Iranian regional threats, domestic anxieties over Iranian-motivated Shī'ī agitations, Sunnī-Shī'ī suspicions, the rise of conservative Islam, the importance (and dangers) of oil revenue, the reliance on regional and international powers for defense, addressing the status of Palestinian expatriates in the region, and resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Intriguingly, these very same challenges facing Kuwait during the 1980s were examined in depth 30 years ago by the Middle East Research Institute in its 1985 Report on Kuwait, reissued recently by Routledge. Studying the 1985 MERI Report on Kuwait strikingly reveals that the Gulf state at the time was an incubator of domestic and regional tensions that would not only lead to the 1990 Iraqi invasion but would also foreshadow the regional challenges facing the Middle East today. Routledge's republication of this study is thus a timely and welcome endeavor that would aid our understanding of how the transformative challenges experienced by Kuwait during the 1980s would come to fuel events in the 1990s and drive the crises of the present.

The 1985 MERI Report on Kuwait delves into the political, social, economic, and security dimensions of the small Gulf state during the 1970s and early 1980s. The report examines the challenges, both historical and contemporaneous, that faced the Kuwaiti ruling monarchy and how these challenges affected the state and its policies. It also provides intelligent and sobering assessments on Kuwait's future security prospects at the time.

The report is divided into four parts. Each part is further divided into many short subsections ranging from one to four pages. The fourth and final part of the report is a 70-page statistical appendix. The report has a table of contents but no index or bibliography. Furthermore, the text is not supported by sources or footnotes, although the authors cite the sources for each table in Part IV.

The first part of the report provides helpful background information on Kuwait. (It would have been helpful if Routledge had provided an up-to-date introductory essay to provide some historical context, one that would inform the reader of the changes and developments that Kuwait has since experienced, considering it has been three decades since the report was initially published.) One important statistic on Kuwait's demography is the fact that Kuwaiti citizens in 1980 constituted only 41.5 percent of the population. A sizeable Palestinian minority comprised 22 percent of the population, in addition to a significant Shī'ī minority of 250,000 (the estimated population of Kuwait in 1980 was 1.36 million [p. 3]). These powerful minorities, according to the report, would come to play a significant part in the political and economic calculus of the al-Şabāḥ family at both the domestic and the regional level.

Part II of the report constitutes, to any student of the modern Middle East, the most important and prescient section of the work. The study details the political structure of Kuwait, recent (early 1980s) developments in the emirate, and problems hindering stability, such as domestic, regional, and international threats. On the domestic side, the authors convey the

growing threat of radical Islam and Shī'ī grievances. Most significantly, though, is the study's informative analysis of the regional threats facing Kuwait during that period – Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The report correctly deciphers these two neighbors as the major threats to and determinants of the government's foreign and domestic affairs. For a long time, Iraq has asserted claims over territories in northern Kuwait. This had previously led to many skirmishes and even exchanges of fire (and, of course, the eventual 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait). Post-1979 Iran, on the other hand, represented another serious regional threat, especially through its policy of encouraging Shī'ī agitation in Kuwait. This, the report explains, resulted in one of the most serious threats to Kuwait's stability: the 1983 coordinated bombings of foreign targets in Kuwait that were masterminded by Iraqi Shī'ī residents (although the report fails to mention that these attacks included an assassination attempt on the ruling amir himself, Shaykh Jābir al-Ṣabāḥ). The Iranian threats were further compounded by Kuwait's support of Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War, leading to direct Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti territory and on oil tankers bound to Kuwait in the Gulf waters. The report links the Iranian threats to domestic religious tensions in Kuwait, where Sunnī-Shī'ī suspicions began to escalate after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, while Shī'ī Kuwaitis began to face discrimination in employment, army positions, and government posts.

The report also describes in this section the sizeable domestic Palestinian minority and how the government attempted to neutralize their grievances. It is noted frequently throughout the study that the Palestinians faced discrimination in housing and employment. They were also barred from becoming Kuwaiti citizens. In order to appease this important minority (and out of genuine belief in the Palestinian cause), there was strong Kuwaiti support for the PLO both regionally and internationally. Palestinians also formed a sizeable part of Kuwait's growing middle class, thus benefiting from the state's prosperity despite legal barriers to citizenship.

The part continues to discuss socio-economic destabilizing elements within Kuwaiti society. Although the government has a sizeable hand in the economy as a "merchant state" and provides a comprehensive welfare system to Kuwaiti citizens, it was not able to fully absorb the economic and social shocks of the 1982 al-Manākh stock market crash that resulted in rising class divisions and resentments within Kuwaiti society. In concluding this part of the study, the authors argue that oil, money, and the constant search for allies for defense purposes continued to shape the state's domestic and regional policies.

Part III and IV of the report deals with Kuwait's economy. The report here is detailed and full of statistics for political economists to mine through, while keeping language accessible to the untrained reader. Central to the Kuwaiti economy is of course its oil revenue, especially considering how little it costs to extract it (in 1983, the cost of production is only 25 cents on a \$29 barrel of oil!). The report provides macro-economic analysis explaining how oil sales remained the major revenue source and stimulant for the al-Ṣabāḥ government. A section is dedicated to development planning, including analysis of infrastructure building, followed by an examination of the petroleum and industrial sector, agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. The labor market is examined next in a section that illuminates the problems of limited Kuwaiti manpower and the over-dependence on foreign labor (one major industrial firm had only 12 Kuwaitis in its workforce of 3,000 [p. 89]). The penultimate section in this part of the report deals with Kuwait's highly developed financial sector, while the final discussion addresses international transactions. Part IV's 70-page statistical appendix provides a reservoir of data on almost all aspects of the state; it neatly complements Part III.

The report's detailed analysis of Kuwait during the 1970s and 1980s should certainly be

applauded. Even 30 years after it was first published, the study still presents a prescient picture of the state's challenges that poignantly unveils the conditions that had led, as we now know, to the Iraqi invasion in 1990, and which continue to fuel the conflicts of our day. Nothing indicates the report's accurate prognosis more than the following quote: "Kuwait is ... vulnerable to external events, particularly the outcome of the Iran-Iraq war ... Because of these destabilizing forces, Kuwait will likely experience greater unrest than in previous years" (p. 17), a prediction that would come to fruition only five years later with the 1990 Iraqi invasion.

An important issue absent in the discussion is the plight of South Asian migrant workers in Kuwait. It is well known that this group experiences particularly harsh labor conditions and even far greater discrimination than Palestinians or Shī'ites. Moreover, the plight of the citizenship-less Bedouins ("*Bidūn jinsiyya*") sedentarizing in Kuwait is not addressed, an issue that is confronting Kuwaiti society today. Regrettably, the form also detracts from the content. There is neither an introduction nor a conclusion in the report. Sources and footnotes are also absent throughout the first three parts. Neither does the study include any maps, a particularly striking omission, and the somewhat dated statistical appendix would benefit from graphs and pie charts. Furthermore, the lack of diacritics is very distracting to any scholar of the Middle East. The absence of diacritics prevents the reader from knowing the *proper* pronunciation of an Arabic name or region. For example, Shuaiba on page 16 should be spelled "Shu'ayba." On the other hand, the island of "Bubayan" should be spelled "Būbayān." Overall, though, these minor matters should not detract too much from the insight of this work, especially in its excavation of the major challenges that Kuwait had to deal with during the 1970s and 1980s, ones that proved highly consequential to the history of both Kuwait and the entire region in the subsequent decades and down to our present day.

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