

KUWAITI SHIA AS A LEVER OF BALANCE FOR THE RULING FAMILY OF KUWAIT

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Kuwait is an exceptional country among the sheikhdoms, and its Shia also has special status compared to the Shia of neighboring countries. The present study, based on the theory of "weak state" and using descriptive-analytical method, examines the unique position of Shia in the equations of the ruling family to maintain power. The main question of this research is what effect the presence of Shia in Kuwait has on the survival of the Al-Sabah family. Given this question, the research hypothesis is that Shia, especially after 1990, has played the role of a lever of balance, and if they had not been in Kuwait, Al-Sabah dynasty would most likely have faced a destructive crisis putting their survival at severe risk. The results of the study show that the rulers of Kuwait use the social classifications of the country, sometimes by approaching the Shia and sometimes by expressing hostility towards them to prevent their own decline. In this way, they have been able to overcome major crisis, although they lose the integrity of society. This study helps to understand the situation of the Shia in Kuwait and to adopt an appropriate approach towards the Kuwaiti government and its Shia.

Keywords: *Shia, Kuwait, Al-Sabah, political stability, balance lever*

1. Introduction

Kuwait, with an area of 17,820 square kilometers (Gall & Gall 1999: 333), is a small country, but its strategic location as well as its rich oil and gas resources are of great importance. Kuwait is an exceptional country among the sheikhdoms in terms of its formation, social structure, historical experience and the type of ruling system. Consequently, the Shia of Kuwait have a different condition from the Shia of other countries. The important point is that Shia have a special place in terms of number, historical presence and role in shaping the history of Kuwait, and they are considered part of the main identity of Kuwait. Without proper cognition of the structure and nature of Kuwaiti society, the situation of Kuwaiti Shia, will not be recognized. The Works related to Kuwaiti Shia often introduce mosques and different organizations related to them, the presence of some Shia figures in the Kuwaiti parliament, and the like. Thus, focusing on the special characteristics of Kuwaiti society and its state, introducing Shia as a genuine part of the body of Kuwait – while, for example, Shia despite its long history in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia does not have such a feature in that country – and expressing the role of Shia in creating balance and stability in the country, as well as explaining how the ruling family wisely uses this Shia capacity, are among the innovations of this article.

The present study based on the theory of “weak state” and also using descriptive-analytical method, examines the unique position of Shia in the equations of the ruling family to maintain power. In his book *Strong Societies and Weak States*, Joel S. Migdal, by studying several Third World countries, examines the nature of weak states and how they respond to crises, as well as how they manage their problems. In a weak state, politics is based on survival strategies. In such governments, rulers are often unable to manage their various parts. According to him, when the state is so weak that it cannot dominate the society under its power, it is likely to resort to sectarian manipulations in order to control crises and national threats. Thus, a weak government is highly prone to exploit sectarianism and identity gaps for political domination. A common tactic in these societies is to take advantage of political and social divisions and rule on the basis of division. This gives the rulers more maneuverability in the short term, but often leads to the destruction of social unity. From this, it can be seen why government activists themselves are a major factor in creating identity conflicts in multicultural societies (Migdal 1988: 9–15).

Given the non-ideological nature of the Kuwaiti regime and the recognition of the existing threats, our hypothesis is that, especially after the liberation of Kuwait in 1990, Shia act as a lever of balance for the ruling

dynasty and if Shia had not been in Kuwait, Al-Sabah family would most likely have been overthrown by internal dissidents and foreign enemies. The importance of this research is that it shows the extent to which the Kuwaiti government needs the presence of its Shia. There are two things that make this subtle point difficult to understand. One is that the rulers of Kuwait do not admit the existence of such a policy but they attempt to hide it, and the other is that this role is not so much related to the specific activity of the Shia, but to the very nature of their presence and how the rulers use the presence of Shia. According to what has been said, in order to understand the position of Shia in Kuwait, one must examine the unique characteristics of Kuwait and the ruling family.

2. Different Formation of Kuwait

Until the eighteenth century, Kuwait had been a place of passage and had no inhabitants (Ember & Ember 2001: 1229). Then, different tribes migrated there from Najd. The migration of these tribes led to the formation of a new tribe called Bani Utbah. They migrated south to the Persian Gulf in search of water until they finally settled in the Kuwaiti region (Crystal 1990: 18). This land was initially dominated by the powerful tribe of Bani Khalid, although they themselves did not live there. Bani Khalids were peaceful and hospitable, and they allowed Bani 'Utbah to stay there. Soon, Bani Khalid's support for Bani Utbah turned the region into a commercial city (Al-Hatam 1980: 11). The rise of Wahhabism and Bani Khalid's internal divisions weakened their rule and led to the autonomy of many of the tribes under their rule, including the inhabitants of Kuwait (Abu Hakimah 1984: 26–27). Thus, unlike other sheikhdoms that were formed by military aggression and war and bloodshed, Kuwait was built peacefully.

3. Different Rulers

Immigrants to Kuwait had to choose an emir to protect them. Therefore, Sheikh Sabah I was elected in 1718. The important point is that the emir came to the emirate with consultation and a kind of democracy, not by force and domination. The reason for choosing Al-Sabah to the emirate was not the fighting power or the people's fear of them, but because their most important characteristic was their power of negotiation and diplomacy (Behbehani 2012: 162). The sheikh had a reputation for treating people fairly and being capable to protect them from external dangers, so the people allowed Al-Sabah to take over their leadership. The sheikh always consulted with the leaders of the primitive tribes, the elites and the merchants about what was

in the best interest of the people, and he never made important decisions arbitrarily. States such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia dominated their territory by military domination, but the Al-Sabah dynasty was elected to the emirate by the people from the very beginning. This is like a key to the open political atmosphere and the tolerance of the rulers of this country.

4. Political Structure of Kuwait

Kuwait has been based on a kind of democracy and consultation since the beginning of its establishment and has the most active political life in comparison to other Sheikdoms. Kuwait experienced parliament even before its independence; a parliament in which different political groups openly express their views. The Kuwaiti constitution enables people to exercise their power through the House of Ummah (Parliament), which has a legislative role, being formed by 50 members from different groups. The parliament has the task of legislating, and eventually the laws must be approved by the Emir. Emir's orders are first presented to the parliament, and if the parliament does not approve them, those orders will not have legal status. Emir is also in charge of removing and installing the prime minister, who is the head of the cabinet. The Prime Minister is responsible for selecting the members of the Cabinet who are his ministers. The government cabinet consists of several members of the royal family and a few others who are in line with the policies of the ruling family. Cabinet ministers are also members of parliament, bringing the total number of members to 65 (The Constitution of the State of Kuwait, internet).

5. Dangerous Neighbors

Kuwait is located between the three countries of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and it makes things difficult for Kuwait because, in terms of population, geographical depth, historical and civilizational background, it is nothing compared to them and creating a balance for this country is very difficult among its neighbors (Yousef Jamal 2005: 20). In the eighteenth century, Kuwait needed to establish good relations with the Ottomans in order to maintain its autonomy. Hence, in 1871, it came under Ottoman protection and the Sheikh of Kuwait became the deputy of the ruler of Basra in Kuwait (Group of Authors 1967: 413). This led to the later claim of ownership of Kuwait by Iraq and at various times, Iraq demanded the annexation of Kuwait to its territory. Features such as a long coastline near the Persian Gulf and massive oil wealth have always been tempting for Iraq (Terrill 2007: 10).

Saudi Arabia also coveted Kuwait in the past and at various times sought to occupy its territory, and several wars broke out between them, the most important of which were the Battle of Al-Sarif (1900) and the Battle of Jahra (1920). King Abdul Aziz imposed economic sanctions on Kuwait in 1923–1937 due to tax evasion and put it in a tight spot (Behbehani 2012: 167). The two countries had extensive land disputes. In addition, Saudi Arabia increased its influence in Kuwait by migrating large numbers of its nomadic Wahhabis to Kuwait.

Although Iran did not seek to invade Kuwait, pan-Arabic and Arab nationalists' propaganda in the middle of the last century always focused on Iranophobia, and it was propagated that the Shah of Iran sought to dominate the region and revive the Persian Empire to destroy Arabic nature of the sheikhdoms. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, despite Iran's efforts to prove its goodwill at various times, Iran continued to be presented as a serious and even greater threat to the Arab world than before.

These external threats beside the internal ones caused the Kuwaiti rulers to seek the support and heartfelt consent of their citizens in order to support the government in times of need (see: AlShayegi 1988). According to what has been said, Kuwait is different from other sheikhdoms both in terms of its formation and the characteristics of its rulers, as well as the threats posed to it. Because of these characteristics, it has been a different country since its inception and it has been based on a kind of democracy and consultation. In Kuwait, public opinion is considered more important than in other sheikhdoms, which is why Kuwait has the most active political life (see: Pollock 2015). This, in addition to its positive points, also creates difficulties for a fragile state such as Kuwait, and makes maintaining the stability and balance of society a challenging task.

6. Demographic Composition

In recent decades, Kuwaiti society has found a new composition that is problematic for the domination of the rulers on the one hand, and on the other hand, helps the ruling family to take advantage of the gap between different groups to maintain itself. The following are the most important categories available.

6. 1. Badus

In Kuwait, there are two main and significant social classifications creating social disputes; one is the religious division between Sunnis and Shias, and the other is the division of *Hadhar* (urban) and *Badu* (the Bedouins), which

are originally from Bidoon (stateless, without nationality). Bidoon means a person without a birth certificate and without a national identity. There are two categories of Bidoons. The first group are Iraqi immigrant tribes who mainly have not yet been able to obtain Kuwaiti citizenship. The second group are the Saudis who were migrated to Kuwait from Saudi Arabia to change the demographic structure. Initially, the Al-Sabah dynasty supported these tribes in order to have them adhere to the ruling family, due to their traditional nature of being submissive to the ruler, against the urban class (*Hadhar*), Arab nationalist, liberal and Shia currents (Behbehani 2012: 191). After the independence of Kuwait, these Saudi Wahhabi tribes acquired the citizenship of Kuwait and because they settled on the outskirts of the cities, they are known as *Badu* (Ghabra 2014: 3). This policy worked in the 60s and 70s, but the problematic side of it became apparent in the 1980s. These tribes settled on the outskirts of the City of Kuwait and gradually merged with the urban community and grew in terms of education and specialization, and many of them became prominent university professors, engineers, doctors, lawyers and businessmen. Today, these tribes are estimated at about 60 per cent of Kuwait's population. Their dissatisfaction with their social status led them to seek representatives to express their demands. This paved the way for the extremists to penetrate into these tribes. Since the late 1990s, these tribes have become major part of the opposition (see: Tétreault et al. 2011). Musallam Al-Barrak, a leading figure of this group, delivered a sharp speech against the ruler in October 2012, sparking widespread protests. For the first time in the history of Kuwait, he addressed the Emir of Kuwait directly in a sharp tone and said: "We will not allow you to rule in the name of people but to behave as you wish" (Al-Barrak 2012). In such an atmosphere, the ruling family had to return to the urban and liberal class, as well as the Shia.

6. 2. Merchants

When Kuwait was founded, merchants formed the country alongside the ruling family. At a time when economy was largely based on maritime trade, merchants were wealthier than the ruling family, and the government relied on them financially. Hence, in the past, merchants had a lot of political influence (Crystal 1989: 427). Emir's economic dependence on businessmen required him to consult with them on political affairs and the administration of the country, hence, he could not make authoritarian decisions. The discovery of oil in the 1950s weighed heavily on the political balance in favor of the Emir and reversed the economic relationship between the ruler and merchants. Under the new circumstances, merchants did not have the same influence as before and had to adopt new ways of finding their place. In

doing so, they employed a set of strategies, such as the media and chambers of commerce, and infiltrated the liberals as an old opposition group. They always use their lobbies to influence the implementation of government decisions and policies, so that the government feels that opposing them will entail heavy costs. Merchants are not a homogeneous group and have exhibited various political actions.

6. 3. *Liberals*

Liberals are an old opposition in Kuwait, and an important part of them are merchants. Although Kuwait is a relatively free country, liberals are not satisfied enough with existing freedom and they demand for a democracy in the true sense of the word, so that people play a role in the government members' elections and other governmental affairs. They oppose the inclusion of Sharia in the law, which is the wish of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups. Although they have sided with the Islamist opposition in some positions, such as demanding a change of prime minister in 2008, they are often intimidated from Islamists and sometimes back down and side with the state to prevent Islamists from strengthening (Tétreault & al-Ghanim 2009).

6. 4. *Salafis*

Salafis have been active in Kuwait since the mid-1960s, focusing on non-political issues, such as education and charity. In the late 1970s, Salafis gained followers in Kuwaiti society, especially among Merchants' families. During the occupation of Kuwait, most Kuwaiti Salafis fled to Saudi Arabia, where they joined Saudi Salafi networks and were strongly influenced by the thoughts of al-Qa'ida. For this reason, after returning to Kuwait, they have been more radical than before (Freer 2015: 7). The Salafis want to reform Kuwait's political system in order to gain more political participation, especially in the appointment of government ministers and the use of sharia as the sole source of legislation. This movement is a critic of the government and is increasingly dominated by new tribal figures. The Salafist movement played an active role in numerous demonstrations in the early 2000s and from 2008 to 2013. The Salafis of Kuwait were the main supporters of jihad and al-Qa'ida, and later became one of the most important centers of intellectual and financial support for the Takfiris of Iraq and Syria (McCants: 2012).

Due to the popularity of this trend among a significant population of society, the government is reluctant to restrict them. The Kuwaiti Salafis were seriously looking for an opportunity to bring the sedition of the religious war from Syria and Iraq to Kuwait, and to flame up fierce Sunni-Shia

battle, which were largely defeated by the wisdom of the state and the restraint of Shia.

The Salafis called on the Kuwaiti parliament to hold the prime minister accountable for not sending troops to join the Peninsula Shield Force, which entered Bahrain on March 14, 2011 (Behbehani 2012: 302). The Kuwaiti government refused to send troops, relating it to the refusal of the Shia forces in the Kuwaiti army to join the repression of the Bahraini people. The Kuwaiti government, unwilling to intervene in the street repression of the Bahraini people, simply blamed the Shia and instead sent its navy, which could not be used in the street repression. On the one hand, the Salafi spectrum strongly criticized the government for not sending troops to Bahrain, and on the other hand, Shia representatives asked the Foreign Minister why Kuwait had sent its navy to intervene in Bahrain (Katzman 2014). These bilateral protests helped the state to take the middle ground and to justify their own stance. This story is an example of the role of Shia in the policy makings of the Kuwaiti rulers.

6. 5. Muslim Brothers

Muslim Brotherhood became active in Kuwait in 1951. For the first three decades, the Brotherhood, like its counterparts in other Arab countries, focused mainly on culture and religious issues, and for this reason, strongly opposed the left and nationalist movements that seemed too secular. They supported the policies of the ruling family during the 1960s and 1970s, and this led to their growth, but gradually they became tense with the government. These tensions continued until the occupation of Kuwait in 1990. The formation of resistance groups by the Brotherhood at this juncture helped them achieve a dominant position (Brown 2007: 7). They support political freedom, but the issue of culture still remains as their red line. The Brotherhood, as the most organized political bloc, played a strategic role in the massive 2006 demonstrations calling for a reorganization of the elections. The Brotherhood was one of the most important pillars of the opposition during the Arab Spring. In the last three decades, when traditional allies such as the Bidoons, Salafis, and the Muslim Brotherhood have joined the opposition, the royal family has been actively seeking more participation of Shia citizens (Hatem & Gildea 2011: 20).

6. 6. Kuwaiti Shia

Shias have a significant population in Kuwait and before the arrival of the Bidoons they accounted for almost half of the country's population. To-

day, they make up at least 35% of the population of Kuwait. Shias have long been a staple of Kuwaiti society. They have contributed significantly to the economic, social, military and educational development of Kuwait (see: Yusuf Jamal 2005). Kuwaiti Shias are divided into Arabs and non-Arabs who are Iranians in terms of race and ethnicity. In the past, the religious aspect of people in Kuwait was less viewed. Iranians as well as Shias lived as citizens of Kuwait and were an active and positive part of Kuwaiti society until the middle of the last century when, with the rise of the Arab nationalist movement, some sensitivities arose towards them (Al-Mudayris 1999: 20).

The position of the Arab nationalist groups that were the enemies of non-Arabs affected not only non-Arabs but all Shias of Kuwait and led to their socio-political isolation. The ruling family also took advantage of this situation for its own political interests and used the Shias to strike at political opponents. In 1938, for example, the legislature sought to take oil wealth out of the hands of the ruler and make it available to the parliament. As a result, the ruling family, with the popular support of the Shias and other traditional allies, dissolved¹ the assembly (Al-Hatam 1980: 59). Since Kuwait's independence in 1961, Shias have been a major supporter of the ruling family. In response, the government allowed them into governmental jobs. Some Shia families had close ties to the ruling family and became very wealthy merchants (Yom 2011: 225). The ruling family also guaranteed them protection against Sunni attacks. Thus, the distance between Shias and Sunnis served the interests of the government more than the creation of social unity.

After the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the sheikhs of the region, fearing a similar revolution in their territories, began to propagandize against it, introducing it as a communist revolution provoked by the Soviets, and said that the next target were the Arab countries of the region. During this period, the royal family's relationship with the Shia became strained. In order to stay away from the influence of the revolution, they incited sectarian tensions so that the majority of the Sunni community would be vaccinated against the effects of the Iranian revolution. At this time, any revolutionary movement in the Arab world was accused of being Shiite and was ousted.²

1 According to the Kuwaiti constitution, the emir can dissolve parliament and re-elect within two months (Salem 2007: 5–6).

2 A few months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, an extremist group of Salafis, led by a man named Juhayman al-'Utaybi, occupied Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and took worshippers hostage. They claimed that the savior of the apocalypse is among them and that they have risen to free the Muslims from corruption and destruction and that they will soon be victorious with the help of God. Saudi government clashed with them, and two weeks later, with the help of French forces, they managed to liberate the Masjid al-Haram and capture the rest of the occupiers who were not already killed. The clashes

Under the 1962 constitution, Kuwait had ten constituencies, from which five representatives were elected. In 1979, at the same time the Islamic Revolution in Iran formed, the Kuwaiti government changed the constituencies to 25 areas with two representatives from each. In fact, it was a move to increase the government's influence on candidates and to allow them to buy more votes. The Shia believed that the change was aimed at reducing the number of Shia representatives in the parliament, given the diagram of the Shia population in these areas. As a result of this change, the majority of Shia in the new constituencies disappeared, and those who won ten seats in the 1975 election sent only four members to parliament in 1981. The law changed again in the 2000s, and constituencies were reduced to five. Some analysts believe that the first step was to reduce Shia representatives for fear of their connection to Iran (DRI 2008: 26), just as the ruling family desired to increase Shia representatives in the new period, they restored the previous structure. This is another example of the royal policy of taking advantage of the presence of Shia in Kuwait.

The Iraqi war against Iran also increased sectarian tensions in Kuwait. Kuwait provided Saddam with all-out financial, logistical, and media support, and treated the Shia cruelly, even questioning their Kuwaiti affiliation (Yusuf Jamal 2005: 13–15). There was no evidence of betrayal by the Shia, however, the government treated them as a threat and removed them from important positions. Since then, the informal policy of discriminating and isolating Shia has been pursued; Shias have been fired from key positions in the police and army, and tight security controls in their neighborhoods plagued Shias. Since then, one of the serious problems facing Shias in Kuwait has been proving their loyalty to the country. This approach caused the Shias in Kuwait to preserve a kind of defensive, passive and conservative culture.

This atmosphere continued until Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990. Many Kuwaiti Sunnis were on holiday abroad in those days, and many fled the country after the occupation and some joined Saddam's occupying forces (Gall & Gall 1999: 339). Most Kuwaiti Salafis reportedly fled to Saudi Arabia, where they joined Saudi networks (Freer 2015: 7). Meanwhile, the Shias were the vanguard of the resistance, and many of them were killed, tortured and imprisoned by Iraqi forces. Shias' defense of the country led to their recon-

of two weeks were very bloody and many people were killed, but the Saudi government never stated the real number of victims. Surprisingly, at the time, this movement was also introduced at the instigation of Iran and as a Shiite movement (Ahmad 2011: 12). It was while, Juhayman was strongly anti-Shia who considered one of the reasons for the illegitimacy of the rulers of Al-Saud family to be that they allowed the Shia to live in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia and contaminate its soil while, they either had to be killed or enter the Sunni Islam or leave Saudi Arabia (Al-Huzaymi 2012: 113).

ciling with the government and Sunnis, and they found a better place in society. The sacrifice of the Shias in defending Kuwait had two consequences; one was that doubts about their loyalty to the country disappeared, and the other was the establishment of unity between Shia and Sunni and erosion of sectarian tensions (Hatem & Gildea 2011: 24).

In October 1990, Sheikh Jaber, the ruler of Kuwait who had fled to Jeddah, met with the opposition and agreed to further reforms (Yetiv 2002). This was an irreplaceable opportunity to oust the ruling family; however, Kuwaitis wanted the Sabah family to return. Instead, they expected the Emir to adhere more to the constitution and revive parliament. The weak ruler had to tolerate different social groups and create a freer atmosphere. After its liberation, Kuwait took a more liberal approach, which on the one hand helped to improve the situation of the Shias in Kuwait and on the other hand strengthened the opposition groups.

In the 2000s, the government was forced to grant more civil liberties under social pressures, but public demands continued, until the government eventually broke its red line and allowed the impeachment of the prime minister. The ruling family in the new era had lost its traditional allies, and this increased the importance of the Shias for it, especially since in some sensitive issues it was possible to take advantage of sectarian differences.

In 2011, amid the Arab Spring, Kuwait also witnessed street protests, mainly demanding the removal of the Prime Minister and the reform of Kuwait's political structure, and the prevention of the ruling family from influencing the selection of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Prime Minister. In such an atmosphere, the 2012 parliamentary elections were held, and the opposition, which was mainly Sunni Islamists and Badus, won 35 of the 50 seats. This result reflected the dissatisfied situation in the country. The ruler dissolved the parliament on the pretext of not observing the election regulations and issued a call for a new election. The opposition was outraged by the move and boycotted the election. In this sensitive situation, it was the Shias and some merchant families who once again brought the ruling family out of the great crisis and by participating in the elections resulted in a 40% turnout (Matthiesen 2014: 138). If Shias had not come to the scene, the ruling family could have faced a real impasse, and it was likely that they would have faced a different fate. In fact, this is one of the most important developments of the last decade in Kuwait, which has not received the due attention.

In comparison, Sunni opposition to the rulers is more explicit and harmful, while Shias' political activities are easily controlled and isolated. According to the Shias, the main concern of the state is with the Islamists and the Badus, not the Shia (Hatem & Gildea 2011: 23). Fuller believed that if political freedoms had been increased, Sunni elements, both liberals and Islamists,

would likely have opposed the royal family more than Shia. In such an atmosphere, Shias could take advantage of this situation, as they did in the 1930s, by supporting the ruling family (Fuller & Francke 2005: 339). The developments after the Arab Spring confirmed the validity of the first claim as the ruling family came under heavy pressure from the non-Shia opponents. However, concerning the second claim, what happened was the advantage the ruling family took from Shia without the Shias receiving much interest for their services. The ruling family was relieved since the Shias were forced to support the ruling family against the extremist Salafis. Thus, the ruling family was more concerned with their own problems than anything else and in such circumstances, they did not want to be accused by the Salafi opposition of being close to the Shias. However, the Salafi faction criticized Al-Sabah family-Shia relations. One of the tribal MPs said: "Our problem is not with the Shias, but with the Iranian influencers who have infiltrated all key positions as well as the ruling family. They are trying to disintegrate our country from within. They are more dangerous than ISIS. The Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Jaber Al-Sabah, is a good man, but they deceive him with sweet words. Emir wants to be everyone's father and he is good to them. We know that the problem is out of his hands" (Al-Hatlani 2015). The narrator found that there is a connection between Shias and the ruling family, and that the Emir has advisers from the Shias. Then, in analysis, according to the common pessimism towards the Shia, he judged that the Shias have the Emir under their influence, while the reality is the opposite, and it is the Emir who enjoys the capacity of his Shias to control and restrain other oppositions.

Kuwaiti analyst Shafeeq Ghabra believes that although the Kuwaitis failed to change the political structure, it is inevitable given the country's characteristics, and the change is only a matter of time. The most important reason for this point is the semi-democratic structure of Kuwait, which is critical. In the past, the government took control of affairs by shifting its coalition in parliament, but the most serious problem they encountered in the Arab Spring was the formation of a strong opposition coalition inside and outside the parliament (Ghabra 2014: 7–8). Given the current situation, the rulers of Kuwait need the presence of Shia in this country more than before.

Despite all the discriminations and hardships that Shias have endured in Kuwait since the formation of the Arab nationalist movements in the early last century until today, the Kuwaiti Shias are still proud of being Kuwaiti, while this is not the case with the Saudi or Bahraini Shias. The Kuwaiti cabinet has had at least one Shia minister since 1975 and was promoted to two in subsequent years (Human Rights Report 2009). Until, after widespread protests by the anti-Shia Salafi opposition in recent years, the new prime

minister appointed only one Shia minister. It should be borne in mind that not all discriminations against Shia are at the behest of the ruling family, as the lower echelons of the government are often in the hands of the middle class, with many fanatical Salafis, who may have a discriminatory attitude towards Shia citizens despite the royal policies. Due to all these issues, following the developments of recent years, Shias have become closer to the ruling family and are less inclined to join the opposition. They are reluctant to even mention the extensive services and the many sacrifices they rendered to Kuwaiti society during and after the occupation, lest they should be considered a sectarian issue. Some Shias also believe that the ruling family has always tried to use the Shia community to prevent the emergence of political unity in front of the family so that they arbitrarily deepen the gaps between Shia and Sunni (Fuller & Francke 2005: 320). The author's personal interview with several Kuwaiti academics and intellectuals also confirmed this point.

However, Shias are realistically aware that the ruling family, with all the cruelty it may sometimes express towards them, is much better than the pro-Saudi current, which is gaining more and more power. If one day the Al-Sabah family is overthrown, it will be the anti-Shia Salafi current that will take most of the power. This Salafi current is so powerful due to the support of Saudi Arabia that even the government is not willing to confront them and prefers to appease and compromise with them as much as possible.

The important point already mentioned is that the balancing role for a section of society like Shias is where freedom of expression and public opinion exist, otherwise in a country like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, issues can be resolved with pressure. Kuwait is an open and relatively liberal society, and if the state can keep 35% of the population satisfied, it will contribute to its social stability. The government does not clash with the Salafis and the Brotherhood because they have strong institutions. Although Shias do not have such powerful institutions, they share part of the public opinion, and this public opinion must be kept satisfied and aligned with the state, especially since the Shias, as a big minority being under pressure from their rivals, are very quick to be satisfied.

7. Conclusion

The combination of issues related to Kuwait's geographical location, wealth and political structure, its external and internal threats, and the characteristics of its rulers place Kuwait as a weak state in which maintaining security and stability is one of the main concerns of its rulers. Taken together, these issues reduce the possibility of coercive and authoritarian treatment of internal opposition groups and increase the need to strike a balance between

the relations of different sections of society and the state. Al-Sabah family uses sectarian manipulation and social and religious divisions for their political domination and to control national and security crises and threats. The ruling family uses its Shia as a leverage to maintain social balance. This means that when opposition groups who are anti-Shia as well, create problems for the state, it seeks the help of Shias to confront them, and at other times, when Shias become a problem, it uses anti-Shia opposition groups to suppress them and to make them give up even their legitimate demands, or when the royal family does not need support of Shia, it temporarily goes towards the anti-Shia opposition by expressing anti-Shia approach to make the other party satisfied; like the fake story of Abdulji cell in 2015. On the other hand, the royal family can use the presence of Shia to put pressure on its Sunni section, and by giving some concessions to Shias, warn the Salafis and other opponents, that more freedom will be given to Shias if they try to harass the ruling family. Therefore, the Shias should not be completely united and intertwined with the Sunni section of the society, because in that case, they may all unite against the ruling family. Although the royal family does not want to unite the different groups of the society, at the same time it tries to deal with any kind of religious conflict between Shias and Sunnis and always tries to keep them at a level of balance. Hence, the royal family must keep a strong relationship with the Shias, while maintaining the necessary distance that does not arouse the sensitivities of opposition groups such as the Salafis as well as Saudi Arabia. Shias' being minority and charged by permanent suspicions in the Arab world, make it often hard for Shias to unite with the Sunni section of society against the ruler. Even when, at some junctures, the conditions of the time bring them together, like during the occupation of Kuwait, this does not last long and their relationship is easily divisible.

Another aspect of the balancing role of Kuwaiti Shia is their relationship with Iran and with post-Saddam Iraq. The point is that Kuwait is afraid of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and in the meantime Iran can help Kuwait stabilize against them. Here, Kuwait needs to have a balanced relationship with Shias in order to maintain Iranian support. Relations with the new Iraq are also better maintained while respecting the Shias, although the existing Iraq poses little threat to Kuwait. The presence of Shia in Kuwait can help improve the country's relations with Iran and, in due course, make them liaisons and mediators to gain Iranian support. On the one hand, Kuwait can make demands on Iran by putting pressure on its Shias, and on the other, they can be considered and condemned as a means of exerting Iranian influence in Kuwait. The presence of the Shia helps the Kuwaiti state to sometimes shy away from some of Saudi Arabia's extravagances under the pretext of their

presence. If the Shias were not present in Kuwait, the Sunni and Salafi spectrum of Kuwait could provide more ground for Saudi Arabia's widespread influence in Kuwait.

What makes this hidden policy somewhat difficult to understand is that the Kuwaiti government is reluctant to explicitly state this role of the Shia in maintaining their survival, and the effectiveness of this policy is in essentially keeping it secret. On the other hand, Shias themselves do not have a voice and, given the totality of the problems and threats they have, they prefer not to look at the issue demandingly. Were it not for Shias in Kuwait, the ruling family would often have failed to face serious challenges in maintaining its power. The key point is that this characteristic owes more to the demographic, financial, cultural, social, political, regional and geopolitical structure of Kuwait than to the Shias and their special abilities. Therefore, the Shia of other sheikhdoms do not have such a function. Thus, in order to recognize the importance of Shias' presence in Kuwait and their role in maintaining the stability of this country, it is necessary to understand these important and different characteristics of Kuwait.

Here we can mention a supplementary question to this article, which requires an independent research. That is, in order to reach a solution that will lead to their maximum integration in the Kuwaiti society and prevent their isolation, what position the Kuwaiti Shia should take, given their existing capacities, towards the ruling family, the Sunni majority of society, and other sections, including opponents and supporters of the royal family, and towards Iran as well.

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Uloga šiita u Kuvajtu u održavanju ravnoteže u politici vladajuće porodice

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Kuvajt je uticajna zemlja u oblastima u kojima vladaju šeici, a šiiti u toj zemlji takođe imaju poseban status u poređenju sa šiitima iz susednih zemalja. U ovom radu, koji je zasnovan na teoriji „slabe države”, koristeći opisno-analitičku metodu ispitujemo jedinstveni položaj šiita u političkim računicama kuvajtske vladajuće porodice, usmerenim na održavanje moći. Glavno pitanje u ovom radu glasi kakav uticaj ima prisustvo šiita u Kuvajtu na opstanak porodice Al Sabah na vlasti. Uzimajući u obzir ovo pitanje, hipoteza istraživanja glasi da su šiiti, posebno nakon 1990. godine, imali ulogu elementa ravnoteže i, da njih nije bilo u Kuvajtu, dinastija Al Sabah bi se najverovatnije suočila s destruktivnom krizom koja bi predstavljala ozbiljan rizik po njihov opstanak. Rezultati ovog rada pokazuju da vladari Kuvajta koriste socijalne klasifikacije u zemlji, ponekad se približavaju šiitima, a nekad izražavaju neprijateljske stavove prema njima i sve to rade kako bi sprečili svoj politički pad. Oni su na taj način uspeli da prebrode ozbiljnu krizu, iako gube integritet u društvu. Ovaj rad pomoći će u boljem razumevanju položaja šiita u Kuvajtu i u definisanju adekvatnijeg modela odnosa s kuvajtskom vladom i njenim šiitima.

Ključne reči: *šiiti, Kuvajt, Al Sabah, politička stabilnost, održavanje ravnoteže*