The rise of pragmatic Islamism in Kuwait's post-Arab Spring opposition movement

WORKING PAPER

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SUMMARY: In the face of a government crackdown, Kuwait's diverse Islamist opposition—composed of a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate and various Salafi groups—has emphasized compromise and gradualist reform over radical domestic political transformation. Particularly after the Egyptian coup and the rise of ISIS, Kuwait's Islamists have put aside their strict social agendas and worked more closely with non-Islamist opposition to advance common democratic aims, suggesting that exclusion can in fact spur the moderation of mainstream Islamists.

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The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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BROOKINGS

Kuwait presents a unique microcosm featuring a variety of strands of political Islam. While undoubtedly a rentier state, reliant primarily on oil wealth and providing handsome disbursements to nationals, Kuwait also houses a vocal parliament in which political blocs openly compete in elections. It is therefore something of an anomaly– hardly characterizing the more authoritarian government systems which typify rentier states of the Gulf while also lacking the poverty which has contributed to the creation of strong Islamist movements elsewhere in the Middle East. Kuwait contains arguably the widest variety of Islamist political actors of any state in the region, with an active Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, four primary Salafi blocs, and two major Shiite political organizations.

Despite featuring such a diverse range of Islamist political blocs and experiencing some of the largest protests in the Gulf during the Arab Spring, Kuwait's political system has not changed dramatically. The chaos that erupted throughout the region brought back to Kuwait memories of the disarray of Iraqi occupation. Above all else, as Kuwaiti political scientist Sami al-Farraj put it, "Kuwait doesn't have the luxury to be unstable."[1] This overarching concern for stability may have led Kuwait's ideologically driven Islamist parties to seek compromise and gradual reform over a strictly Islamist social agenda or radical political transformation – at least in the domestic political environment. This desire for stability has become even more pronounced since the 2003 Iraq war and Arab Spring. In the face of regional instability following uprisings of 2011 as well as region-wide denigration of the Ikhwan, the Muslim Brotherhood and certain Salafi strands have endeavored to advance political reforms more broadly, aside from simply pushing a platform that was previously dominated by controversial policies to Islamize society.

Following the Muslim Brotherhood's short-lived political successes in Egypt and Tunisia, many feared that Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood sought to "run the country."[2] In the face of recent region-wide backlash against the Muslim Brotherhood after the fall of the Morsi government in Egypt, the Kuwaiti government has endeavored to maintain a balanced stance. Though it has been forced to support moves against the Brotherhood taken by the Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi governments, at least in rhetoric, it has not restricted activity of its own Brotherhood affiliate, which continues its calls for political reform. Still, rumors abound about purges of Brotherhood members from government,[3] and an Egyptian Brotherhood member was arrested in Kuwait in March 2014 after the Sisi government issued an international warrant for his arrest.[4] Aside from these measures, however, the Brotherhood does not appear to be singled out by the Kuwaiti government as a political or security threat. The same could be said of the variety of Salafi political blocs in Kuwait, which have been largely allowed to continue promoting their platform. If anything, Kuwait's government has been accused of being too lax in restricting the activities of Islamist organizations in the state – particularly in terms of their involvement with violent organizations abroad.

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[1] Sami al-Farraj, interview, November 13, 2013.
[2] (British diplomat in Kuwait) interview, November 14 2014.
[3] Nathan Brown and Scott Williamson, "Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood under pressure," *Foreign Policy*, November 20, 2013. http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/20/kuwaits-muslim-brotherhood-under-pressure/
[4] Sylvia Westall, "Egypt Says Two Muslim Brotherhood Members Arrested in the Gulf," *Reuters*, March 12 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/12/us-egypt-brotherhood-gulf-idUSBREA2B23V20140312.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Place in Kuwaiti Politics

Notwithstanding its commitment to conservative social mores, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood's political bloc, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), today is "politically more liberal than those who call themselves liberal."[5] In fact, the group's "leaders are frustrated because they feel that in a sense they have become more democratic than the political system in which they operate – and perhaps more than Kuwaiti society is ready for."[6] The Kuwaiti Brotherhood's agenda, at least on the part of the ICM, is shaped by local realities more than a desire to take over rule. As former ICM MP Usama al-Shahin explained, "we are 100 percent loyal to [the ruling family]. We want reform, repair, not change."[7] In fact, the amir meets with members of the Brotherhood and attends their *dīwānīa*, demonstrating that the Kuwaiti government, unlike others in the Gulf, "isn't in panic mode."[8] Though the Kuwaiti government has never legally recognized the ICM,[9] its approach in dealing with the bloc, and with the Brotherhood in general, is far more moderate than the repressive security-led approach seen elsewhere in the Gulf, primarily due to the organization's well-established place in the country's history.

One of the oldest Brotherhood branches in the Gulf, Kuwait's Ikhwan was formally founded a decade before the country's independence, in 1951. Beginning in the 1960s, members of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood's Jama'at Islah participated in parliamentary elections yet failed to make substantial gains until the 1970s with the decline of Arab nationalism. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Kuwaiti Brotherhood benefitted from government support through the nomination of many members to government positions, specifically in the education ministry, which housed a large number of Brotherhood supporters particularly in the curriculum development.[10]

Although members of the Brotherhood had contested seats in parliament since the 1960s, they did so as individuals, not as members of the organization.[11] In fact, some members of the older generation of the Kuwaiti Brotherhood argued that the formal group's entry into electoral political life in the 1980s represented a deviation from the mission of *da'wa* and incremental progress toward the ideal Islamic state as explained by Hasan al-Bana.[12] Reservations also remained about the appropriateness of Islamists contesting elections in a non-Islamic political order and the movement's ability to act effectively in the political realm.[13]

The 1980s thus marked the first time the Kuwaiti Brotherhood appeared as a major force in local policy and economy, guided primarily by the goal of Islamizing Kuwait society by taking measures such as pushing gender segregation in education, restricting the availability of

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[5] Sami al-Farraj, interview, November 13, 2013.
[6] Nathan J. Brown, "Kuwait's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A Setback for Democratic Islamism?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/brown_kuwait2.pdf, page 9.
[7] Usama al-Shahim, interview.
[8] ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Shayeji, interview, November 27, 2013.
[9] Nathan J. Brown, "Pushing Toward Party Politics? Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement," *Carnegie Papers*, no. 79 (January 2007): 15, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp79_brown_kuwait_final.pdf.
[10] David Commins, *The Gulf State: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 236.
[11] Sami Nasir al-Khalidi, *Al-Ahzab al-Islamia fi-l-Kuwaīt: al-Shiʿa, al-Ikhwan, al-Salaf*, (Kuwait: Dār al-Nabāʿ Lil-Nashar wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1999), p. 175.
[12] Ibid, p. 175.
[13] Ibid, p. 175.

alcohol, and limiting nationality solely to Muslims.[14] Kuwait's activist Salafis also became politically organized during this period, and the influence of both organizations was felt in new legislation.[15] With the dissolution of parliament in July 1986, opposition coalesced among Brotherhood and Salafi Islamists, merchants, the growing intelligentsia, and former parliamentarians, all calling for the restoration of the legislature.[16]

The spread of revolutionary Islamist ideology in the 1980s also led to an internal split in the Kuwaiti Brotherhood. Two trends emerged: the fundamentalist who rejected participation in a non-Muslim government and the more moderate which considered the practice of political work as a means of facilitating *da'wa*.[17] Former MP Abdallah al-Nafisi represented the extreme rejectionist fundamentalist stance. He considered a clash with the government to be inevitable, even proclaiming "[t]he greatest actual enemy to the Islamic movement is the regimes."[18] Prominent Brotherhood member Ism'il al-Shatti, on the other hand, advocated a more moderate stance. He referred to himself as a "gradualist reformer," who hoped to effect gradual change toward the Islamization of society through the political system.[19] Furthermore, he "explained that parliamentary work endowed the revivalists with societal credibility."[20] In 1987, al-Nafisi resigned from Islah, on grounds that the discipline of the political bloc was too tightly knit and not suited to the all-encompassing nature of Islam.[21] Although al-Nafisi had served as an MP, he came to believe that reform was too slow in changing society and favored radical reforms instead.[22] His "comments contributed to the emergence of a new generation of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement that began to clash with the methods of the traditional symbols of the movement in which they had been brought up in the seventies."[23] This internal division led the Brotherhood to take on inconsistent stances toward the regime, sometimes endeavoring to effect change through gaining ministerial positions and at other times joining the opposition to do so.

New circumstances under Iraqi occupation led the Muslim Brotherhood to focus increasingly on Kuwait's liberation rather than the social issues which the bloc had previously promoted.[24] The Brotherhood worked toward liberation by establishing a Committee of Social Solidarity inside the country, which aimed to increase living standards for Kuwaitis by disbursing treasury rations to

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[14] Sami Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait: Roots and Influence" (PhD diss., University of Portsmouth, 1999), p. 185.
[15] Al-Khalidi, *Al-Ahzab,* p. 176.
[16] Jill Crystal and Abdullah al-Shayeji,"The Pro-Democratic Agenda in Kuwait: Structures and Context," in *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World: Arab Experiences,* ed. Baghat Korany, Paul Noble, and Rex Brynen (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 105.
[17] Mustafa Muhammad al-Tahan, ʿAbdullah al-ʿAli al- Mutawa wa Qadaya al-Muslimin fi-l-ʿAlim, (Kuwait: Mustafa Muhammad al-Tahan, 2010), pp. 94-95.
[18] Abdallah al-Nafisi, Qtd. in al-Khalidi, 180.
[19] Joseph Kostiner, "Kuwait and Bahrain," in *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism: Diversity and Unity*, ed. by Shireen Hunter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 126.
[20] Ibid, 126.
[21] Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait," 192.
[22] Ibid., 192.
[23] Ibid., 193.
[24] Al-Khalidi, *Al-Ahzab,* p. 181.

markets of cooperative groups.[25] During Iraqi occupation, the Brotherhood was instrumental in "supervis[ing] the provision of basic services to the citizens."[26]

In March 1991, following the liberation of Kuwait, the Brotherhood established the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), also known by its Arabic acronym HADAS.[27] By creating a strictly political bloc, the Brotherhood hoped to gain more influence in the rebuilding of post-occupation Kuwait. At this time, the strand within the Ikhwan favoring gradual change over a dramatic clash with the government also gained primacy and became institutionalized through the ICM. Importantly, members of the Brotherhood did not consider the new emphasis on politics to be "a switch" from their past social work;[28] rather, it was seen as a maturation, which came about after Kuwaitis had effectively "run the country by themselves" under occupation.[29] Furthermore, because the movement had formally broken off relations with the international Brotherhood organization due to its refusal to support the liberation of Kuwait because of the involvement of Western troops, the Kuwaiti Brotherhood became more locally focused.

The creation of the ICM marked a new era of Brotherhood activity in Kuwait, characterized primarily by realism in dealing with Kuwaiti society. Its members began to focus on the gradual application of sharia above other, larger goals of acquiring greater say in the political system more broadly.[30] "[T]he main goal of the Movement until the end of the 1980s was to gain control of political power in the country. Today, however, the Movement's uppermost aim differs completely; it is satisfied with simply the implementation of Islamic *sharia'a* in Kuwait regardless of the ruler."[31] The ICM came to privilege the push toward political reform as part of the opposition above gaining power through ministerial positions, beginning to function increasingly as a check on government power rather than an instrument of it. In this shift away from aiming to gain government positions, the ICM became more flexible.[32] The organization also learned to work more effectively and often with other movements toward common goals[33] and seemed willing to accept middle ground, or an interim period in which shari'a was not fully applied, to push other gains. For example, "they became flexible enough to agree to deal with an economic system involving usury […] until such time as an Islamic system would demonstrate the advantage of a non-usurial system."[34] Such willingness to compromise demonstrated the failure of al-Nafisi's strand of the Brotherhood that advocated for more immediate political and social change.

As the 2000s progressed, most of the ICM's goals became more focused on domestic political reform, rather than on their traditional conservative social reform agenda. The organization pushes for constitutional changes such as an elected prime minister, the imposition of a single

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[25] Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Jamaʿat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fī-l-Kuwait* (Kuwait: Huqūq al-Tabaʿ wa-l-Nashar Maḥfūẓa, 1994), 40-41.
[26] Ibid, 40-41.
[27] In Arabic, the bloc's name is al-Harakat al-Dusturia al-Islamia, or the Islamic Constitutional Movement.
[28] Nasir al-Saniʿ, interview, 21 November 2013.
[29] Usama al-Shahin, interview, 24 November 2013.
[30] Al-Khalidi, *Al-Ahzab,* 188.
[31] Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait," 209.
[32] Al-Tahan, ʿ*Abdullah al-ʿAli al- Mutawa wa Qadaya al-Muslimin fi-l-'Alim,* p. 111.
[33] Al-Khalidi, *Al-Ahzab*, 189.
[34] Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait," 210.

electoral district to reduce government gerrymandering, the legalization of political parties, and, eventually, the creation of a constitutional monarchy. The organization also has more wide-ranging social and economic aims, in keeping with traditional and wide-ranging Brotherhood goals, such as "shap[ing] the Kuwaiti citizen according to his unique Islamic identity and true Arab loyalty," reforming the economic system "in line with the fair wealth distribution principles," as well as making it "a more productive system in accordance with the Islamic principles of containment and integration."[35] By and large, however, the ICM's agenda highlights political reform efforts above issues of social policy, making it more aligned with secular opposition parties.

Despite the fact that they share common goals, however, leftist political blocs and the ICM have often clashed over the issue of defending civil liberties. Ultimately, the ICM "supports liberalizing political reforms rather faithfully, but it draws the line when liberalization leads in a cultural direction."[36] For all its rhetoric about political freedom, the ICM has promoted measures that place limits on personal freedoms, such as the law on gender segregation in schools, rejection of female suffrage, the imposition of laws restricting hours when women can work, and legislation punishing religiously sensitive commentary. As one Kuwaiti liberal put it, the perception is that "the Brotherhood used democracy to establish laws that are unconstitutional."[37] As a result, secular leftist blocs often express their hesitance to ally with the Brotherhood. When asked about such issues, former ICM MP Nasir al-Sani' explained, "of course we want Islam to be our social norm and the government to respect Islam."[38] The group is therefore both staunchly pro-democracy (in terms of demanding more representative government) while maintaining its social conservatism. In recent years, however, it has stressed its commitment to political liberalism and reform.

Perhaps because of the Brotherhood's emphasis on political reform, more conservative Islamists have criticized the ICM for promoting a strictly political rather than religious platform, allowing for the growth of Kuwait's more conservative, and traditionally less politically active, Salafi movement.[39] The Brotherhood is considered the more moderate and flexible of the two strands. Indeed, the popular perception is that "you can speak reason with the Ikhwan. They're part of the system of elites, so they would never dream of overturning [the system]."[40] Although they ultimately desire the implementation of shari'a, members of the Brotherhood take a gradual approach to this goal, considering that "[t]he Quran came in stages."[41] This more moderate stance prevails today, as issues of government reform appear more urgent than the immediate implementation of shari'a and application of Islamist social policies. At times, such a stance has threatened ties with Salafi political blocs. When the two strands have been allied in parliament, ICM MPs have become "often saddled with responsibility for controversial stances [particularly

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[35] "ICM Vision, Mission and Objectives," *Islamic Constitutional Movement*, 3rd Edition, January 2007, 3-4.
[36] Brown, "Pushing Toward Party Politics?", 11.
[37] Shamlan al-ʿIsa, interview, November 17, 2013.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Brown, "Kuwait's 2008 Parliamentary Elections," 7.
[40] Ibrahim Hadhban, interview, November 14, 2013.
[41] Ismail al-Shatti, Qtd. in Shafeeq Ghabra, "Balancing State and Society: The Islamic Movement in Kuwait," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2, May 1997, p. 69.

regarding social policies], while the Brotherhood's inclination might be to take a more pliant or gradual approach."[42]

Despite the Brotherhood's popularity,[43] the most elected seats it ever won in parliament were six out of 50 in 2006. The Ikhwan has never contested a plurality of seats, preferring to form coalitions with other blocs that grant it a degree of political cover.[44] By tempering their demands for laws to Islamize society and for the implementation of shari'a, the ICM has come to hold a more powerful political position as a leading opposition bloc. Still, its more pragmatic approach has left space for the development of a Salafi current in Kuwait.

The Salafi Movement

The Salafi movement in Kuwait can be divided broadly between purist and activist strands. The purists are more powerful domestically, while the activists have more followers abroad.[45] Purist Salafis tend to be less political, preferring to focus primarily on "peaceful proselytization and daily religious practices." [46] Activists, on the other hand, favor "broader political involvement."[47] In Kuwait, this distinction is somewhat blurred, as members of both the purist and activist strands contest seats in parliament.

Kuwait's Salafi movement became organized in the mid-1960s among purists, "when a small group of youth adhering to the Salafia Da'wa came together and drew up a basic instructional program, aiming at awakening Kuwaiti society as to what the Islamic Movement in Kuwait had reverted to."[48] Like the Brotherhood, Kuwait's Salafis focused initially on apolitical issues, namely education and charity.[49] The Salafi movement from the beginning considered itself distinct from existing Islamist organizations. As Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Sabt explained, "[w]e know that these groups had closed themselves through narrow partisanship [....] That was one of the causes which have led us to reject these groups and establish for ourselves a real Salafia Da'wa."[50]

By the end of the 1970s, the Salafis had found a following in Kuwaiti society, in particular among merchant families.[51] As the 1980s began, the Salafi trend also gained a foothold in labor organizations and student unions and "achieved an unprecedented level of organizational development."[52] Kuwait's Salafis first became organized under the Society for the Revival of the

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[42] Nathan J. Brown, "When Victory Becomes an Option: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Confronts Success," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/brotherhood_success.pdf, page 17.

[43] There is no official membership list, though some 100 people are in leadership positions, suggesting a broad following. Furthermore, regardless of official membership, non-members often vote for the ICM due to its involvement in broader political coalitions.

[44] Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 51.

[45] Zoltan Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf, page 3.

[46] Ibid., p. 1.

[47] Ibid., p. 1.

[48] Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait," 232.

[49] Ibid, p. 238.

[50] Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Sabt, Qtd. in Awadh, p. 233.

[51] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 5.

[52] Ibid, p. 5.

Islamic Heritage (RIHS) in 1981, guided by the ideology of Egyptian cleric Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq.[53] While the RIHS's founding documents cite charitable purposes for its creation, it became an umbrella organization for Salafis in Kuwait and their primary institution for political participation.[54] RIHS also benefitted from state support and enjoyed funding from the Saudi religious establishment. Notably, 'Abd al-Khaliq "was one of the first Salafis who extensively wrote books and articles about politics and intended to reform Salafi jurisprudence about politics and participation in social protest and using new media."[55] In fact, Saudi 'ulama went so far as to pass a fatwa condoning Salafis' political activity,[56] which 'Abd al-Khaliq announced on the eve of the 1981 polls.[57] Kuwait's 1981 election marked the first time anywhere in the world that Salafis participated in parliamentary elections, with the RIHS winning two seats.[58]

With the dissolution of parliament in July 1986, members of RIHS, like the ICM, became more independent of the government, though they had never held as many posts as the ICM. RIHS followers began "serious participation with the other political powers to put pressure on the political decision-makers to return parliamentary life to the country. The realist camp greatly benefited from the decade of the eighties, engaging in political activity in various spheres in Kuwait."[59] Salafi MPs, along with the ICM, joined the Constitutional Movement, which urged reform and restoration of parliament.[60] A traditionally politically quiescent group, Salafi involvement in the Movement "was justified on the basis that the cause was a national one with no relationship to the nation's political or religious movements."[61]

During Iraq's invasion and subsequent occupation of Kuwait, most Kuwaiti Salafis fled the state for Saudi Arabia, where they became involved with Saudi Salafi networks.[62] Activist Salafis in Saudi Arabia were appalled by the Saudi government's decision to allow American military into the Kingdom and responded by creating the protest movement Islamic Awakening, or Sahwa, which demanded broad-ranging political reforms[63] and appealed to many Kuwaitis in the Kingdom during Iraqi occupation.[64] "Upon their return to their home country after the war, these individuals became pioneers of the activist wing of Kuwaiti Salafism." [65] Meanwhile, other Kuwaiti Salafis sided with the purist strand, represented by the Saudi 'ulama, who did not oppose Kuwaiti liberation at the hands of Western militaries, as it had been decided upon by their legitimate, and unquestionable, rulers.[66] The RIHS divided into purist and activist divisions

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[53] Bjorn Olav Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait," *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 19.
[54] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 6.
[55] Ibid, p. 6.
[56] Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 421-422.
[57] Will McCants, "Joining the Fray: Salafi Politics after the Arab Spring," *World Politics Review*, January 22, 2013, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12655/joining-the-fray-salafi-politics-after-the-arab-spring.
[58] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 6.
[59] Awadh, "Islamic Political Groups in Kuwait," p. 241.
[60] Ibid, p. 250.
[61] Ibid, p. 250.
[62] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 7.
[63] Ibid, p. 7.
[64] Ibid, p. 7.
[65] Ibid, p. 7.
[66] Ibid, p. 7.

following the Iraqi occupation, with the purists overtaking the RIHS under Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Sabt's leadership, while the activist strand was under the leadership of Shaykh 'Abd al-Khaliq.[67] Despite claims to the contrary, the RIHS is considered to maintain close ties with the Saudi 'ulama since this period and is sometimes criticized for being "a puppet of Riyadh" or "even cooperating with Saudi intelligence."[68]

The Islamic Salafi Association (al-Tagammu al-Islami al-Salafi), established in 1991 and linked to the purist RIHS, is focused on social morality. Its parliamentary agenda is primarily concerned with Islamizing laws, instituting shari'a as the sole source of legislation, and placing bans on "vices" such as music concerts and alcohol.[69] The ISA is the largest Salafi bloc in parliament, with members viewing their positions as a means of promoting da'wa and maintaining the place of Islam in Kuwaiti society.[70]

> "Despite being politically active, group members pursue predominantly purist aims in their parliamentary work. They always emphasize the need to obey the emir of Kuwait, and they are mostly concerned with the Islamization of social practices, such as segregating the sexes in public institutions and universities and obliging Muslim women to wear a headscarf when they appear in public."[71]

The ISA competes for followers from among the same pool of urbanized elites (or *hadhar*) as the ICM, yet touts itself as less politicized than the Brotherhood. Members even criticize other political figures whom they consider to have insulted the amir, who, as legitimate ruler, they consider to be above criticism.[72] More extreme passive Salafis of the Madkhali strand, however, consider the RIHS to violate the principles of Salafism by having an organizational structure and participating in elections.[73] "For them, participating in politics and creating formal organizations lead to the corruption of one's belief because these actions make people loyal to the organizations and their leaders instead of to God."[74]

In 1996, the Salafi Movement (al-Haraka al-Salafiyya) broke off from the ISA under the leadership of Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq, uniting people primarily on the basis of their dislike of purist Salafis, whom they regard as tools of an American-Saudi conspiracy to silence political demands in the Gulf.[75] Most such activists promote reform of the Kuwaiti political system to allow for further political participation, in particular in the appointment of government ministers, as well as the application of shari'a as the sole source of legislation.[76] The Movement has become vocal in its criticism of the government and is increasingly dominated by newly naturalized tribal figures (*badu*),[77] who consider it to be "a counterweight to

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[67] Ibid, p. 8.
[68] Ibid, p. 9.
[69] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 20.
[70] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 9.
[71] Ibid, p. 9.
[72] Ibid, p. 9.
[73] Ibid, pp. 9-10.
[74] Ibid, pp. 9-10.
[75] Ibid, p. 11.
[76] Ibid, p. 11.
[77] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 19.

Kuwaiti liberals" as well as an alternative to the ICM which holds appeal primarily among the *hadhar*.[78]

The Umma Party (Hizb al-Umma), the only political bloc that calls itself a party, emerged in 2005 largely from members of the *badu* population inspired by shari'a scholar Hakim al-Mutairi.[79] While al-Mutairi had hoped to convert the Salafi Movement into a political party, he clashed with his deputy Shaykh Hamad al-'Ali, who insisted on maintaining the group's loose structure.[80] Al-Mutairi thus left the Movement to found the Umma Party which focuses primarily on domestic politics.[81] Al-Mutairi, a spokesman for politically active, or nontraditional, Salafism, represents "a strong voice within the educated segment of Kuwait's Bedouin population, which is making its voice heard every more strongly and which is growing faster than the rest of the population."[82] Significantly, the Party was the first political bloc in Kuwait to call for popular sovereignty, with the parliament determining the members of government. [83] It is thus disliked by conservative Salafis, who believe al-Mutairi is guilty of "blurring the distinction between salafi and Muslim Brother thought and for compromising the strict adherence to the text by allowing too large a role for reason in its interpretation."[84]

Despite the establishment of new activist Salafi organizations in Kuwait (the Umma Party and Salafi Movement), the purist strand has remained more popular, with RIHS dominant –in large measure due to similarities between activist Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood.[85]

Activists usually have only one member in the parliament, Waleed al-Tabtabaie, while the Salafi Islamic Gathering [the ISA] has eight to ten members. The relative weakness of the activists is probably due to the fact that the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (Islamic Constitutional Movement), which traditionally has had a strong representation in the parliament, provides an appropriate platform for many who are attracted to activist Salafism. Unlike the Brotherhood in other countries, most of the cadres of the Islamic Constitutional Movement are influenced by Salafism, and their discourse is similar to that of the activists.[86]

Still, Kuwait remains a meeting place for activist Salafis and was seen, at least before the Arab Spring, as the only Middle Eastern country where Salafis could freely express their ideas. In fact, Shaykh 'Abd al-Khaliq claims that the idea that "Egyptian Salafis should participate in politics emerged during the meetings and workshops that these Salafis had attended in his house and mosque."[87]

The freedom granted to Salafi groups in Kuwait has extended to their charitable activities outside of the country, with serious consequences in recent years. Several Salafi charities fund

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[78] Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 180.
[79] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 19-20.
[80] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 11.
[81] Ibid, p. 11.
[82] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 23.
[83] Ibid, p. 22.
[84] Ibid, p. 23.
[85] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 11-12.
[86] Ibid, pp. 11-12.
[87] Ibid, p. 12.

some of Syria's most powerful extremist organizations, and Kuwait has become, in the words of U.S. Treasury Undersecretary David S. Cohen, "the epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria."[88] Kuwait criminalized the financing of terrorist organizations only in 2013, thereby allowing Salafi charities, of both the activist and purist strand,[89] a relatively free hand to finance groups such as Syrian Salafi militia Ahrar al-Sham and other violent organizations.[90] Salafi preachers have also spoken openly about the Syrian cause, even requesting donations for groups they support in that country.[91] The government has been hesitant to restrict such support for extremist groups largely due to the popularity of the cause. "According to one of the prime minister's advisers, the government would risk pushing the country into instability if it imposed any constraints on the bank transfers and other means of sending money to Syria."[92] By supporting the Syrian opposition, then, Kuwaiti Salafis have managed to gain a degree of popular support at home, while not threatening their position in domestic politics by becoming extreme in that arena.[93]

Inside Kuwait, Salafis' participation in parliamentary life "has diminished the ideological gap between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis that existed in an earlier period (when Salafis were suspicious that the Muslim Brotherhood was too willing to compromise on religious matters)."[94] In fact, their primary difference in recent times has been the ICM's willingness to form parliamentary coalitions with Shiite MPs, something Salafis refuse and which has resulted in Shiite Islamists voting with the populist, rather than Islamic, political bloc.[95] The Brotherhood, as a more politically pragmatic organization, has traditionally been willing to ally with any bloc that would advance its reform agenda, regardless of sect, while Salafis have been less willing to form such cross-ideological coalitions due to their more conservative ideology.

Development of Kuwaiti Islamism Today

Throughout the 2000s, Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood and activist Salafis came to resemble one another more closely, banding together with other opposition movements to advocate for broad-ranging political reform. The 2006 debate over reformulation of electoral districts brought both blocs into the opposition in the most public manner since the suspension of parliament in 1986. They cooperated with leftist groups that supported reformulation of electoral laws to divide Kuwait into five rather than 25 districts. Such redistricting, they believed, changed the nature of elections: "In the opinion of reformers, this matter would transform elections from occasions to buy votes and to launch campaigns to a race on the basis of program and ideology."[96] Not all Salafis supported the move, however, with many members from the tribal districts opposed, as

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[88] David S. Cohen, Qtd. in Karen DeYoung, "Kuwait, Ally on Syria, Is Also the Leading Funder of Extremist Rebels," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html.

[89] Ibid, p. 17.

[90] Will McCants, "A New Salafi Politics," *Foreign Policy*, October 12, 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/12/a-new-salafi-politics/.

[91] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 21.

[92] Ibid, p. 21.

[93] Ibid, p. 17.

[94] Nathan J. Brown, "Pushing Toward Party Politics?," 17.

[95] Ibid, p. 17.

[96] Al-Tahan, ʿAbdullah al-ʿAli al- Mutawa wa Qadaya al-Muslimin fi-l-ʿAlim,125.

they feared the new law could diminish their political power.[97] As the most organized political bloc, the ICM played a leading role in this "We Want Five" movement,[98] whose supporters organized large demonstrations throughout May 2006. In the midst of political upheaval, the amir was forced to dissolve parliament and call for new elections in June; the new, largely Islamist and opposition parliament, passed the reformulation of electoral law, a major coup for the newly united opposition.

The secular-Islamist opposition also became united in efforts to root out graft, which came to a head with their demands to interpellate Prime Minister Shaykh Nasir al-Sabah on charges of corruption in 2008. "The refusal of the Al Sabah to permit the prime minister to submit to questioning had also precipitated the unplanned election of 2006. Although the reasons for the confrontation between government and Parliament were different on that occasion, they were equally threatening to Al Sabah authority."[99] In November 2008, three independent Salafi MPs initiated a request to interpellate Prime Minister Shaykh Nasir, on charges of, among others, "'failing to perform his constitutional duties and achieving the wishes of the people.'"[100] Importantly, Salafi Movement MP Walid al-Tabtaba'i justified this interpellation not due to religious reasoning, but rather due to democratic constitutional governance. "In keeping his criticisms rooted to constitutional law, he appropriately focused the debate on the Prime Minister's ability to govern, not his religious affiliations."[101] Shaykh Nasir al-Sabah was finally grilled, behind closed doors, in December 2009 about his handling of the financial crisis and possible misuse of state funds, marking the first time a premier had been interpellated. Still, the government had only agreed to allow this questioning after new elections had led to a sympathetic National Assembly.[102] Predictably, Shaykh Nasir was not removed from office, as the vote of no confidence against the prime minister failed.

Such public displays of government manipulation united opposition movements further. Beginning in 2009, Walid al-Tabtaba'i sided with opposition, including members of the ICM, in calling for enhanced parliamentary power and the right of people to elect government.[103] Al-Tabtaba'i went so far as to proclaim in September 2012 "'we the people have decided that Jabir al-Mubarak will be the last prime minister from the House of al-Sabah.'"[104] Similarly, ISA MP Khalid Sultan during that period "became a steadfast supporter of the broad emerging opposition front that called for an 'elected government,' i.e., forcing the emir to choose his prime minister based on the parliamentary majority."[105]

By the late 2000s, as opposition gathered in Kuwait, members of the Brotherhood and activist Salafi strands became more involved in broader domestic politics, using Twitter to voice

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[97] Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament," 412-413.
[98] Brown, "Pushing Toward Party Politics?" p. 9.
[99] Mary Ann Tétreault and Mohammed al-Ghanim, "The Day After 'Victory': Kuwait's 2009 Election and the Contentious Present," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, July 8, 2009, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070809.
[100] Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament," 416.
[101] Ibid, p. 416.
[102] Kjetil Selvik, "Elite Rivalry in a Semi-Democracy: The Kuwaiti Press Scene," *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 479.
[103] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 20.
[104] Ibid, p. 20.
[105] Ibid, p. 20.

criticisms and participating in protests.[106] The February 2012 election, spurred by the government's resignation and dissolution of parliament in December 2011 in the midst of mass protests, planted the ICM and activist Salafis firmly with the opposition. It "produced a landslide victory for the opposition, mainly Islamist (Brotherhood and Salafi) and tribal candidates, who won 34 of the 50 parliamentary seats."[107] The Brotherhood and Salafi blocs each won all four seats they contested, with the Salafi strand becoming the most represented Islamist trend in parliament.[108] The fact that they contested so few seats in the legislature suggests their move to opposition: Sunni Islamists in Kuwait increasingly want to serve as a check on government power through limited involvement in parliament. The February 2012 parliament composed of opposition and Islamists agreed on a platform not focused on amending article two of the constitution to declare shari'a as *the* primary source of legislation, realizing that it was unpalatable to many Kuwaitis and focusing instead on more politically important issues.

This oppositional parliament was voided, however, four months later, as a constitutional court (composed of the emir's appointees) declared the dissolution of the previous parliament unconstitutional.[109] The court therefore reinstated the pro-regime 2009 National Assembly. The secular-Islamist opposition coalition widely protested the reimposition of the 2009 parliament, which ultimately never met because its reinstitution was so controversial. Several political blocs (including liberal parties along with the ICM and ISA), youth groups, and labor unions formed the National Front for the Protection of the Constitution in September 2012, which also comprised the Majority Bloc of some 34 opposition MPs elected in February 2012. In October 2012, "[w]arning of the threat of 'chaotic sedition that could jeopardize our country (and) undermine our national unity,'" the amir had the cabinet change voting rules ahead of the December 1st elections.[110] In addition, the amir "issued a decree to change the electoral process, abolishing the country's complicated system that allowed each voter multiple votes. This move disregarded the court's previous ruling on the matter, as well as the opposition's demands of complying with the 2006 electoral law."[111] The opposition, to which the ICM and most Salafi groups belong, boycotted December 2012 poll, leading to a low 39 percent turnout rate (compared to 60 percent in February) and returning a pro-government National Assembly.[112] Sunni Islamist representation was the most drastically affected, decreasing from 23 MPs to four, thereby taking the ICM out of the legislative body for the first time since the bloc's creation.[113] Considering the inability of parliament to advance the Brotherhood's agenda, the ICM did not consider the boycott to diminish its political capital more broadly. Still, the

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[106] Sylvia Westall, "The Quiet Influence of Kuwait's Salafis," *Reuters*, June 27, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/27/us-kuwait-salafi-idUSBRE85Q0Y220120627.

[107] Sharmaake Sabrie and Pekka Hakala, "Policy Briefing: Kuwait's Political Crisis Deepens," *European Union*, January 2013, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2013/491461/EXPO-AFET_SP%282013%29491461_EN.pdf, page 10.

[108] Mohammed Badri 'Aid, "Al-Tayar al-Salafi fi-l Kuwait: Al-Waqa' wa-l-Mustaqbal," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, May 29, 2012, http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/05/201252912302826133.htm.

[109] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Kuwait's Balancing Act," *Foreign Policy*, *The Middle East Channel*, October 13, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/23/kuwait_s_balancing_act.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Sabrie and Hakala, "Policy Briefing: Kuwait's Political Crisis Deepens," 11.

[112] "Kuwait election: Opposition hails boycott as turnout falls," *BBC News*, December 2 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20571958.

[113] Ibid.

parliament was dominated by independent MPs, with the historically pro-government Shiite National Islamic Alliance as the largest bloc represented, with five MPs.[114]

In June 2013, weeks before the coup in Egypt, the Constitutional Court dissolved parliament for the second time in one year, dismissing opposition claims that it had been elected under an invalid electoral law. Many opposition groups, including the ICM as well as several tribal leaders, Salafi figures, and liberal groups, boycotted the polls, again in protest of the change in electoral law. As a result, the current parliament is dominated by a blend of liberal and tribal blocs, with independents, including some "service" or pro-government MPs, holding 30 of the 50 seats. Only two rogue Salafi-oriented MPs are in parliament now.[115] When asked about the logic behind the ICM's two boycotts, Nasir al-Sani' explained that they were meant to expose the government as the source of political gridlock.[116] He stated, "The more we stay away, the more we show it's the government that cannot perform."[117] As Shafeeq Ghabra put it, "this parliament realizes the problem is the decision-making structure; the problem isn't the street."[118]

Kuwait's Sunni Islamist Movements in the Post-Coup Era

National malaise continues, with leftist opposition leader Musallam al-Barrak urging a return to protests until a new election is called and cabinet positions become elected.[119] The ICM and ISA support al-Barrak's ultimate goal of a constitutional monarchy, appearing to privilege such restructuring over social reforms. In early 2013, the ICM signed a 23-page document drafted by al-Barrak, Brotherhood figure Jama'an al-'arbash, and Tariq al-Mutairi of the liberal Civil Democratic Movement.[120] Political trends ranging from secular leftists to Salafis, as well as the largely Brotherhood-dominated Student Union, have signed the document, which "proposes a full parliamentary system, with a stronger legislature, independent judiciary and revised criminal code."[121] Such goals do not traditionally form the capstone of Brotherhood or Salafi platforms.

Significantly, as part of the opposition coalition, the ICM and politically active Salafis dropped their once primary demand of amending article two of the constitution to specify shari'a as *the* primary source of legislation.[122] Both groups seem increasingly willing to work alongside other opposition movements to ensure at least limited political reform, privileging pragmatism over ideology, perhaps having learned lessons from the Brotherhood's failure in Egypt. Due to their cooperation in opposition, the more recent trend of detaining Kuwaiti activists for their statements about other Gulf states has targeted Islamists and leftists alike. Kuwaiti Brotherhood member and former MP Mubarak al-Duwaila was arrested in January 2015 following negative statements he made about the Emirati leadership on Kuwaiti parliament's official television channel, while Salafi leader of the Umma Party Hakim al-Mutairi was detained in March for

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[114] Sabrie and Hakala, "Policy Briefing: Kuwait's Political Crisis Deepens," 6.

[115] Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis," 20.

[116] Nasir al-Saniʿ, interview, November 21, 2013.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Shafeeq Ghabra, interview, November 21, 2013.

[119] "Freed Kuwait Opposition Leader Vows Protests Will Continue," *Gulf News*, July 8, 2014,
http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/freed-kuwait-opposition-leader-vows-protests-will-continue-1.1357223.

[120] E.A.D., "Kuwait's Opposition: A Reawakening," *The Economist,* April 17, 2014,
http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/04/kuwaits-opposition.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

insulting Saudi Arabia, and Tariq al-Mutairi of the liberal Civil Democratic Movement was also detained due to Saudi complaints about some of his statements on Twitter.[123] Neither the Brotherhood nor the Salafi trend, then, is being considered "a security threat," as both continue to operate openly.[124] While the Brotherhood is maligned elsewhere in the region, in Kuwait it is "regarded more as a political nuisance than a security threat."[125] Having experienced government repression, Islamists and secular opposition movements appear to be banding together. As predicted by Shadi Hamid, "[t]he shared experience of repression […] encourages opposition groups to focus on what they have in common. After all, they have a shared enemy – the regime. So they agree to prioritize the fight for basic freedoms and democracy. Ideological divisions are put to the side."[126] Former ICM MP Mubarak al-Duwailah even explicitly called for the overcoming of traditional differences in a January statement shortly after his arrest, signaling a very public effort to overcome ideological divides.[127]

Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements remain primary political actors inside Kuwait – in part due to the fact that there is little competition to Islamist ideas in the state. As explained by liberal Kuwaiti activist Ahmad Al-Baghdadi, "Kuwait has liberals, but there is no liberalism. There is a big difference between the two. You will find liberal individuals, but liberalism as a concept in society remains weak."[128] In such an environment, Islamists are poised to remain ideologically and politically appealing to the Kuwaiti population. Certainly, in the Kuwaiti context, "religious affiliation is stronger than the liberal one because it is ideology-based and uses religion, the heritage of the people."[129] The allure of such movements, significantly, exists despite the fact that they have never earned a plurality of seats in parliament and even in the face of the political defeat of Islamist parties elsewhere in the region, namely Egypt.[130]

In the post-coup environment, Kuwait's Islamists are working more closely with other opposition movements, a move which provides them political cover and allows them to avoid mistakes of Egypt's Islamists who were accused of failing to work with other parties. During this period, Salafis have also increasingly acted like Brotherhood movements, with the two privileging political reform over traditional goals of Islamizing society. As Nathan Brown observes "the more salafis involve themselves in semi authoritarian politics, the more they respond like Brotherhood-type movements."[131] Kuwait's Salafi blocs have historically been more persistent

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[123] "Kuwait Arrests Opposition Figure after Saudi Embassy Complaint," *Middle East Eye*, March 18, 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kuwait-arrests-opposition-figure-after-saudi-embassy-complaint-1329348434.
[124] Brown and Williamson.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 54-55.
[127] "Al-Duwaila: 'Ala al-Quwa al-Siyasia an Tafham Hasasiat al-Marhala Tatalab 'an al-Khalafat al-Taqlidia (Al-Duwaila: The Political Forces Must Understand that the Sensitivity of the Stage Requires the Transendance of Traditional Differences)", *ICM*, January 11, 2015, <http://www.icmkw.org/site/pages/topics/alduilx_-yl649-alqu649-alsiasi629-623n-tfx_m-623n-xhsasi629-almrxhl629-ttt_lb-altyali-yn-alxlafat-altqlidi629.php?p=60#.VTOHgxfndKo>.
[128] Ahmed al-Baghdadi, Qtd. in Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 230.
[129] ʿAbdallah al-Nibari, interview, February 2, 2014.
[130] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, p. 220.
[131] Nathan J. Brown, *When Victory is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012): 239.

than the Brotherhood in pushing legislation to reform the social sector, with MPs proposing in 2012 a Decency Law "to ban flirtatious behavior and 'indecent attire' in public, which would include swimsuits on beaches."[132] Islamists have had to adopt a degree of flexibility in their social positions in order to maintain political relevance in the most politically liberal state of the Gulf, however. For example, as early as 2005, when women were granted the right to vote and run for parliament, which the ISA opposed, ISA MP Ali al-Omair stated that although "my religion does not permit women to serve in the assembly, if a lady is elected into parliament, we have to deal with her. We can't isolate ourselves in parliament."[133]

The Kuwaiti Brotherhood also, significantly, is considered to be more influenced by activist Salafism than branches elsewhere.[134] Kuwait's Ikhwan has maintained its commitment to Islamic social values, at least in rhetoric, as have activist Salafis. Where they differ, is primarily in their willingness to cooperate with outside groups: the Kuwaiti Brotherhood is willing to work with Shiite coalitions in parliament and has traditionally held a moderate view of the United States and West more generally after their country's liberation from Iraqi occupation at the hands of an American-led coalition. Salafis, on the other hand, are more suspicious of links to Shiites and the West.

As Kuwait's Salafis become more focused on political reform rather than a strictly Islamist social agenda, some of their outward energies have become increasingly extreme. Salafis have positioned themselves as defenders of the *umma* (Islamic nation) and thus filling the void left by the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood as an international movement following the fall of the Morsi government.[135] With the rise of radical organizations like ISIS, Kuwait's Islamists appear to have tempered their traditional demands, as secular and Islamist groups are increasingly working together to advance democratic aims, as seen in the pre-Arab Spring Middle East more broadly.

While in the past, the domestic influence of Kuwait's Islamists was felt primarily through legislation concerning social reform,[136] today the country's Islamists seem more willing to advance broader political goals, changing the face of political Islam in that state. If Islamists continue setting aside their pursuance of Islamic social reform, in what ways do they maintain their ideological identity? Has Islamists' exclusion from the political system as a result of more stringent government policies led to the moderation of Islamist agendas in the Kuwaiti case? In the aftermath of the coup in Egypt and considering the rise of Islamist-motivated violence in Iraq and Syria, Islamist actors in the Middle East are changing the way they behave, undermining previously accepted theoretical assumptions about their behavior. Islamists do not necessarily moderate when included in a political system, nor do they always privilege ideological policies over systemic political change more broadly.

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[132] Westall.
[133] Ali al-Omair, Qtd. in Monroe, p. 413.
[134] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism,"11-12.
[135] Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism," 21-22.
[136] Michael Herb, "Emirs and Parliaments in the Gulf," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (October 2002): 47.