Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting

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Summary

- Kuwait's democratic maturation and its aspirations for a 'knowledge economy' require the recognition, agency and action of its citizens; however, such development is hindered by the reality that these features are largely absent from the country's education system.

- Public schools are segregated on multiple levels (nationality, religion, and gender most obviously, and cultural and economic backgrounds more subtly); such segregation mirrors current societal divisions, and prevents groups from exploring and addressing the differential experiences of 'being Kuwaiti'.

- The national curriculum conflates citizenship and nationalism, and constructs an exclusive, singular and fixed 'cultural identity', with 'other' affiliations and cultural change presented as threats to national unity.

- Islamic focus in national curricula promotes obedience at the expense of critical thinking; the particular patriarchal interpretations that are presented are assumed to be complete, precluding input and expansions from individuals and groups – including women and Shias.

- Nationalism and religion work together to control students, breed passivity and maintain the current balance of power, at the expense of Kuwait's democratic, knowledge-based development.

- Empirical findings point to human rights education as a potential 'interruption' to the nationalistic and Islamic hegemony in Kuwait's school structures and curricula. Study of human rights provides opportunities for more inclusive citizenship, active learning, criticality, and both sanctioned and unsanctioned youth action.

Introduction

Kuwait, often hailed as the most politically democratic of the Gulf states, continues to use its education system to promote uncritical nationalism and Islamic obedience, both of which are in tension with its democratic maturation and its aspirations for a knowledge-based society. Traditional teaching methods based on memorizing and testing breed passivity; the educational goals of national unity and loyalty can be said to translate into control; and Islam permeates the curriculum, securing obedience and obstructing critical thinking. Consequently, education does little more than perpetuate the status quo, including existing power structures, and this process is supported by a traditionally authoritarian educational ethos.

Across Kuwait, all public schools begin the day with students lining up in the courtyard to sing the national anthem, while a small group marches to the flagpole in military formation to raise the flag and hail the amir, Kuwait and the Arab nation. Then, a selected student reads an excerpt from the Qur'an. The nationalistic and Islamic overtones of this morning *ṭabūr* (line-up) set the tone for the rest of the day and facilitate control of the student body. Teaching and learning in Kuwaiti schools are carried out in a 'fixed classroom' (*al-ṣaf al-thābit*); students stay in this one room for most of the day, with their teachers coming to them to conduct lessons. Generally, students sit in straight rows facing the teacher; and they are often expected to respond to questions in unison, using words taken direct from textbooks issued by the ministry of education. These textbooks are distributed to teachers at the start of each academic year, with a timetable that specifies the exact page numbers that teachers should be covering on any given day in order to ensure their students have memorized the information in time for the four sets of annual examinations. The first- and third-quarter exams – or 'small exams', accounting for 25 per cent of the students' grades for the quarter – are written and controlled by the school districts themselves. The second- and fourth-quarter exams – 'big' exams, making up 75 per cent of the students' quarter grades – are issued and controlled by the education ministry. Moreover, students are not permitted to see their second- and fourth-quarter exam papers once they have been graded. The high stakes involved in this type of testing can be critiqued as keeping both teachers and students locked into the traditional model of teaching and learning by rote, thereby ensuring a centralized dissemination of information.

Young people have very little say in and about their lives at school. While school councils are present, they are often tokenistic at best or assigned by the administration for good behaviour at worst, and the councils have no power at the district and ministry levels. Even in those arenas where students do have a say, their participation is often interfered with by adults. For example, Islamist members of the Majlis al-Umma (national assembly) are heavily involved in the Kuwait national students' union, inculcating youth with patriarchal ideologies.[1] Furthermore, the youth groups that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 'Arab Spring' were backed by opposition members of parliament, with the latter often speaking for them at rallies and protests.[2] This means that while young people are becoming more involved in the national arena, their participation is rarely autonomous and this, again, often perpetuates the status quo.

While Kuwait aspires to become a knowledge-based economy, it defines this within its education system in reverse: rather than knowledge fuelling the economy, the economy drives education. This often leads

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[1] Lubna Al-Kazi, 'Women and Non-Governmental Organizations in Kuwait: A Platform for Human Resource Development and Social Change', Il 14(2) (2011), pp. 167–81.

[2] See, for example, James Calderwood, 'Youth Group Fifth Fence Calls for Kuwait Government to Go', *The National*, February 8, 2011; http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/youth-group-fifth-fence-calls-for-kuwait-government-to-go.

to a reductive approach to education – one that strives predominantly to shift Kuwaitis out of the public sector, at the expense of other goals. Notably, the government-commissioned *Vision Kuwait 2030* report states that a 'reinvigorated education system' will serve to integrate locals into a competitive market. Economic discourse is used throughout the report: 'investments', 'examinations', 'management', 'results', 'career advancement', 'incentives', 'diversified', 'strictly monitored' and 'training', to give some examples.[3] This neo-liberal trend of greater standardized testing and market-driven training has not served Kuwait well, with students still lacking the knowledge, skills and values to participate actively in society and the economy. Kuwaiti students fare poorly by international standards, coming close to bottom in both the *Trends in Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) and the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) assessments.[4] Systemic problems that have been identified include comparably lower budgetary spending on books and resources, as well as a shorter academic year by international standards.[5] The guarantee of a public-sector job also contributes to a demotivated student body.[6] Other reforms in the education sector have focused on technology, although this has been largely superficial, as demonstrated by the distribution to students of iPads with an app housing all their textbooks. A new national curriculum framework is also in development, with a major (and arguably typical) focus on assessable teacher and student outcomes. In the absence of a 'greater investment in the human infrastructure of a free, democratic citizenry', however, such educational reforms are insufficient,[7] and they are unlikely to contribute to Kuwait's economic advancement.

This paper examines how nationalism and religion operate within Kuwait's traditional, authoritarian approach to teaching and learning. The first section explores the origins and implications of Kuwait's long-standing strategy of 'divide and rule', and how this plays out in the segregated educational system. The second section highlights the educational goal of national unity, which promotes an uncritical nationalism that perpetuates societal divisions in order to preserve current power structures. The role of Islam in school structures and curricula in fostering compliance and obedience to secure this balance of power is also examined. Kuwaiti human rights curricula and their enactment in a case study school are then analysed for their potential as an 'interruption' – in the sense of a facilitator of change – to the traditional approach to education. Three main themes are discussed: recognition; criticality and creativity; and agency and (unsanctioned) participation. Finally, building on the empirical findings and based on demands of Kuwaiti youth themselves, suggestions for change are offered.

Divide and rule: differential citizenship

Kuwait's theoretical and practical conceptualizations of citizenship and identity are the result of an intricate interplay between state-building, power preservation, rentierism and culture, among others. While analysing this interplay is beyond the scope of this paper, some contextualization is necessary in order to frame the implications for the education sector under discussion.

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[3] Tony Blair Associates, *Vision Kuwait 2030*, pp. 221–23.
[4] See Michael O. Martin et al, *TIMSS 2007 International Science Report: Findings from IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grades* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2008). See also Ina V. S. Mullis et al, *TIMSS 2007 International Mathematics Report: Findings from IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grades* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2008). See also Ina V, Mullis et al, *PIRLS 2006 International Report: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in Primary Schools in 40 Countries* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2007).
[5] Nadeem A. Burney and Othman E. Mohammed, 'The Efficiency of the Public Education System in Kuwait', *The Social Science Journal* 39 (2002), pp. 277–86.
[6] Tony Blair Associates, *Vision Kuwait 2030*.
[7] Muhammad Faour and Marwan Muasher, *Education for Citizenship in the Arab World: Key to the Future* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), p. 4.

Kuwait's population is usually split into a series of binaries: Kuwaitis/non-Kuwaitis; original/ naturalized citizens; Muslims/non-Muslims; Sunnis/Shias; ḥaḍar (townspeople)/bedouins; men/ women; and adults/children. With these varying categories come varying degrees of legal rights and social belonging. In each binary, it is the first that is most recognized, so 'original' Kuwaiti Sunni Muslim, ḥaḍar, male adults – a decidedly small group considering that expatriates outnumber locals by almost two to one, and women, bedouins and youth make up the majority of the local population. This divisive approach often puts members of the various binaries into dichotomous relationships, with each falling in and out of favour with the regime at various points in history.

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Kuwaiti women – historically perceived as loyal, and whose political participation was therefore supported by the ruling family[8] – got the right to vote, stand for election and take high public office in 2005. However, their civil and social rights have lagged behind their political enfranchisement; for example, a woman who marries a foreign or bidūn (stateless) man cannot pass her citizenship to her spouse or their children, and loses most social benefits (such as housing). Distribution of social services through male citizens suggests that women do not have an independent status: a woman is a daughter and then a wife, supported by her father and then her husband. This inequality hinders women's ability to compete with men in the political and economic arenas, with Islam often used to defend such barriers.[9] Moreover, although economic reasons are often cited in defence of policies that prevent women benefiting from welfare rights for their families, this conceals the real threat that full citizenship for women poses to suppressive cultural and religious practices.[10]

Among the intersections of the less-recognized binaries are bedouin women. Al-Mughni (1993) argues that class struggles have kept women from forging solidarities to fight inequalities. By her analysis, in order to maintain class privileges, women of the elite classes must maintain their kinship organization; for them, privileges of class supersede gender issues (intentionally or not). Women's organizations in Kuwait have historically supported this elite group, to the detriment of women from low-income groups; it is the latter who are most affected by the state's discriminatory welfare policies as well as patriarchy in both the public and private spheres.[11]

The male bedouin population, historically used to counter the demands of the merchant ḥaḍar for more participatory politics, continues to suffer resentment. Moreover, when very large numbers of tribesmen were naturalized in the 1960s and 1970s to garner support for the rulers, it triggered a gradual shift in the demographic of Kuwait from a ḥaḍar majority to a bedouin one. The deep cleavage between the merchant ḥaḍar and the bedouin populations in Kuwait has been attributed to these factors, as well as to perceptions of loyalty, economic privileges and cultural differences, among others.[12] In recent years the bedouin population has become the government's greatest opposition. The government

[8] Mary Ann Tétreault, Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000).
[9] Mary Ann Tétreault and Haya Al-Mughni, 'Gender, Citizenship and Nationalism in Kuwait', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 22 (1995), pp. 64–80.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Haya Al-Mughni, Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 143.
[12] See Farah Al-Nakib, 'Revisiting ḥaḍar and Bedū in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 46 (2014): pp. 5–30; Anh Nga Longva, 'Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait', International Journal of Middle East Studies 38 (2006), pp. 171–87.

also encouraged sectarianism in order to counter opposition movements, manipulating elections and electoral constituencies to control parliament.[13] Furthermore, although Shia citizens have the same legal status and rights as Sunni citizens, historically they were marginalized in religious, economic, social and political terms.[14] They are consequently perceived as being lower on the scale of what Tétreault terms 'Kuwaitiness'.[15]

The use of citizenship and belonging to control the population is most apparent in Kuwait's citizenship and naturalization laws. Naturalized citizens have restricted political rights, and, unlike 'original' citizens – whose citizenship can only be revoked because of issues of national security – naturalized citizens can have theirs revoked for less extreme reasons – including, for example, 'honour-related' and 'honesty-related' crimes.[16] The constitution allows this in Article 27: 'Kuwaiti nationality is defined by law. No deprivation or withdrawal of nationality may be effected except within the limits prescribed by law.'[17] The past several years have seen a marked increase in the use of this law to suppress dissent. The increasingly stringent citizenship laws have also made it impossible for the *bidūn* to acquire citizenship.

Also excluded from the attainment of Kuwaiti nationality is the immigrant population. While Kuwaitis are kept dependent on the rulers through generous welfare policies, immigrants are controlled through a system that keeps them in a subordinate position to the Kuwaitis, who are legally their sponsors. This sponsorship system, or *kafāla*, ensures the transience of the expatriate labour force.

Education: differential segregation

These layers of categorization belie Kuwait's historically cosmopolitan character as a trading hub, and nowhere is the abandonment of these cosmopolitan roots more apparent than in its homogenized public schools. According to Article 11 of the Kuwaiti constitution, 'Education is a fundamental requisite for the progress of society, assured and promoted by the State.' Article 40 (1) further states: 'Education is a right for *Kuwaitis* [author's italics], guaranteed by the State in accordance with law and within the limits of public policy and morals. Education in its preliminary stages is compulsory and free in accordance with the law.' Despite what appears to be a democratic approach to educational access, in reality Kuwait's school system is a very undemocratic one. Free access to public schools is dependent on the legal status of citizenship, which means that two-thirds of the country's population have to pay for education. This applies largely to the expatriate population, but the children of the *bidūn* and of Kuwaiti women married to expatriates or *bidūn* men are also excluded.

Castles (2004) outlines various approaches to dealing with the challenges of diversity and migration in national education systems. One approach, termed differential exclusion, seeks to control difference by temporarily integrating immigrants only into those systems of society needed for them to fulfil their economic role. Immigrants are not eligible for citizenship, and are excluded from political and cultural participation. The educational response for these migrants' children is either denial or stop-gap measures to keep them marginalized.[18] This describes the situation in Kuwait quite accurately.

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[13] Anh Nga Longva, 'Citizenship in the Gulf States,' in *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East*, eds. Nils A. Butenschon, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 179–97.

[14] Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[15] Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 33.

[16] Articles 13–14, 1959 Kuwaiti Nationality Law, as amended; English translation by UNHCR (http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b4ef1c.html).

[17] State of Kuwait, *The Constitution of the State of Kuwait* (1962).

[18] Stephen Castles, 'Migration, Citizenship, and Education', in *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*, ed. James A. Banks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 17–48.

As previously noted, the *kafāla* system of sponsorship confines expatriates in a transient existence, in which citizenship is unattainable. With only a handful of exceptions, their children are denied access to public education. This attempt to control difference extends to the national population through what might be termed differential segregation. Kuwaiti students are segregated by gender most obviously, and according to cultural and sectarian backgrounds more subtly. Such segregation masks and therefore perpetuates the cross-cutting demographic binaries and numerous inequalities in contemporary Kuwait.

With schools segregated from primary to university levels, Kuwaiti men are able more easily to ignore the realities of women's experiences, and it becomes increasingly difficult for women to access the people and structures necessary to attain full recognition. The various additional layers of separation across schools make change even more elusive, as they continue to hinder the formation of a female solidarity movement.

While districting can be defended as a practical way to distribute schools, district lines in Kuwait divide across cultural, sectarian and economic backgrounds. Schools therefore mirror and reinforce societal divisions between Kuwaitis and expatriates, men and women, bedouins and *ḥaḍar*, Sunnis and Shias, and upper and middle/lower classes. Such segregation preserves the current structure by sacrificing what Freire calls the 'totality' in favour of the 'focalized view',[19] whereby people are kept largely blind to issues and injustices outside their immediate context. The danger of this segregated approach lies in its potential to perpetuate supremacist attitudes in schools that represent the dominant populations (male, Sunni, *ḥaḍar*) and reactive angry attitudes in schools that represent the marginalized populations (female, Shia, bedouin). This threat is made all the more real by the way that citizenship and identity are constructed in national curricula.

Uncritical nationalism: national identity vs cultural diversity and change

Kuwait's attempts at education for democratic citizenship are undermined by contradictions that privilege the notion of a singular national identity and a static national culture over a more inclusive and cosmopolitan outlook. The main focus in official policy statements, education reports and the national curriculum has been *muwāṭana* (national citizenship), although this has often been conflated with *waṭaniyya* (which can be translated as both nationalism and patriotism) – as demonstrated by its frequent association with loyalty to, and love and defence of, the nation. *Waṭaniyya* emphasizes emotional aspects at the expense of conscious political understanding that can promote social and political participation,[20] which, in turn, can foster change.

A report issued by the ministry of education in 2010 presented the national strategy for reinforcing the concepts of citizenship, loyalty and belonging for Kuwaiti youth through the national curriculum. This outlined eight challenges and threats facing the country.[21] The second challenge translates as follows: 'the obstacles standing in the way of social integration due to multiple citizenships and ideological, tribal or class affiliations that create cracks in the structure of the state and in the ties of national unity.' This can be understood as meaning that citizens need to subordinate tribal, sectarian and any

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[19] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, [1970] 1993), p. 122.
[20] Saud H. Alharbi, Citizenship and Educational Curricula (al-muwāṭana wa al-menāhij al-dirāsiyya). Paper presented at the Conference for Citizenship, Kuwait, February 2010.
[21] Kuwait Ministry of Education, *Strategy for Reinforcing the Concepts of Citizenship, Loyalty and Belonging Among Young People Through Educational Curricula in Kuwait* ('istrātijiat tekrīs mefāhīm al-muwāṭana wa al-walā' wa al-'intimā' ledā al-nesh' fī al-menāhij al-dirāsiyya bidawlet al-Kuwait) (Kuwait: Ministry of Education, 2010) [English translations by the author of this paper].

other non-national identities to the greater cause of national unity. At the same time, however, these same 'other' identities are strategically utilized to exclude and divide (as explained above).

> If social integration really is the goal, then schools need to be transformed from homogenized institutions to become diverse and inclusive spaces where young people are able to engage with difference and be part of actively building national unity.

The fifth challenge identified in the report similarly lays blame on the citizenry, in stating that citizens are demanding economic, social, cultural, health and educational rights without fulfilling minimal responsibilities, and are unwilling to accept the government's attempts to change this dependency on the state.[22] By conflating rights with welfare entitlements in this context, the implication is that rights are already universal and equal – and this is not the case. In response to student demonstrations in 2011 – the year after the national strategy was published – the value of stipends paid to students was increased in response to student demonstrations. Thus, the education ministry again apparently contradicted itself, responding to such protests by providing more entitlements (and therefore perpetuating more dependency) and yet ignoring the more urgent need for equal human rights and legal recourse – which, it can may be argued, are the real reasons underlying the 'cracks in the … ties of national unity'.

If social integration really is the goal, then schools need to be transformed from homogenized institutions to become diverse and inclusive spaces where young people are able to engage with difference and be part of actively building national unity – one that recognizes diversity as a natural part of a democratic multicultural society and that understands the dynamic nature of culture.

The education ministry's report makes just one reference to a globalized context, and frames this, too, as a challenge: 'the cultural, economic, political and intellectual effects of globalization on cultural identity, the nation state, borders and sovereignty'.[23] This focuses on preserving the national in the face of the global, and conceptualizes cultural identity as desirably fixed. Six areas of focus for the formulation of the strategy for citizenship education are also set out in the report. The majority of these reinforce through their wording – 'protecting Kuwaiti essence'; 'deviant behaviours that are foreign to Kuwaiti cultural identity and that threaten our intrinsic constants'; 'overcoming particular affiliations'[24] – the message that culture is defined and static.

One of the suggested areas of focus is identified as: 'emphasis on the value of dialogue, human rights and respect for the opinions of others, as well as the utilization of democratic means to resolve conflicts of opinion and interest; this makes it possible for young people *in the future* [author's italics] to treat the deficiencies in political practice in society.'[25] While this emphasizes the role of human rights, dialogue and democracy as facilitators of political reform, it identifies students as future participants rather than as agents who can invoke change now – and this is a common theme within the report. This is not surprising, given that Kuwait does not issue the *jinsiyyah* (the legal citizenship document) until the age of 18. While arguably innocuous, this none the less leaves young people without official status in Kuwait's citizenship system. Theoretically, children are considered to be the property of adults not in

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 24.
[24] Ibid., p. 25.
[25] Ibid.

need of their own status. In practice, this justifies the perception of children as 'future' citizens, and thus their exclusion from potentially transformative decision-making processes.

Kuwait's *Education Strategy 2005–2025* lists as its first goal: 'contributing to the achievement of interaction with the current age requirement of freedom of thought and response to the dynamics of change without conflict with the cultural identity of the society.'[26] Here, cultural identity is perceived as national, singular and static, with the notions of thought and change conceptualized as potential threats to this status. The second goal, however, is more inclusive: 'contributing to enhancing the values of faith in the importance of dialogue and respect for human rights among the educated and providing the basis for a sound democratic life.'[27] By emphasizing human rights and democracy, this goal expands where the former constricts. The strategy also includes the educational objectives of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); one of these highlights the significance of globalization and information technologies and their benefits for society, while also cautioning about the need for 'protection from the negative consequences on the identity and the values of the Kuwaiti society.'[28] Once again, the importance of preserving 'the cultural identity' is prioritized. Built into this imagined singular cultural identity is an Islamic one.

Uncritical citizenship: Islamic hegemony in Kuwaiti curricula

Regional alliances between governments and religious groups against educational reforms are common, the aim being to control what and how students learn.[29] By suffusing national curricula with Islamic content, students are discouraged from seeking out alternative perspectives and thinking critically, which further secures their passivity.

The *Education Strategy 2005–2025* includes another of the educational objectives of the GCC: 'building the correct Islamic faith in the educated so that its principles become a method of thought and style, which develops the preparation of educated [sic] with Arab-Islamic heritage and loyalty to the Arab-Islamic identity.'[30] Not only is Islamic identity assumed to be part of the Kuwaiti and Gulf identities, the term 'correct' implies that there is only one such Islamic identity. The 2010 strategy report on citizenship education[31] also lists feelings of belonging to the Arab and Muslim worlds as values to be fostered, suggesting that an Islamic identity is necessarily part of Kuwaiti citizenship. In doing so, the report ignores the tiny Kuwaiti Christian population, as well as those Kuwaitis who perhaps prefer not to reveal their religious beliefs; it also overlooks the much larger expatriate Christian and Hindu populations.

It is not just Islam that is built into the imagined Kuwaiti identity, but particularly a Sunni perspective of Islam. In 2010 a dispute about the content of the Islamic studies curriculum almost forced the resignation of the then minister of education. Concerns were raised by some Shia members of parliament over examination questions that they considered to be heretical, and which they argued could contribute to sectarian tensions. The minister's decision to remove these questions provoked

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[26] Cited in Kuwait, Ministry of Education, *The National Report: Development of Education in the State of Kuwait 2004–2008* (Kuwait: Ministry of Education and Kuwait National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2008).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Muhammad Faour and Marwan Muasher, Education for Citizenship in the Arab World: Key to the Future (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).
[30] Cited in Kuwait, Ministry of Education, *The National Report: Development of Education in the State of Kuwait 2004–2008* (Kuwait: Ministry of Education and Kuwait National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2008).
[31] Kuwait Ministry of Education, *Strategy for Reinforcing the Concepts of Citizenship, Loyalty and Belonging Among Young People Through Educational Curricula in Kuwait*.

angry responses from Sunni Islamist members. One stated, 'We will not allow the minister to amend the curricula, and nobody will dare mess with the faith of Kuwaiti people. This issue is not only a red line, it is multiple red lines together; messing with these issues could shake the whole country if the minister does not stop.'[32] The implication here is that 'the faith of the Kuwaiti people' is a singular one. Another Sunni Islamist member shared this view: 'Ask your father and your grandfather about the belief of Kuwaitis, and they will tell you';[33] this suggests that those members who requested the change in the curriculum were, in his view, not 'Kuwaiti'. A few months later the minister banned schools outright from discussing sectarian issues.[34]

The didactic nature of Islamic studies and pedagogical methods in Kuwait's national curriculum assume a particular patriarchal interpretation of Islam as 'finished', expecting obedience without discussion and debate. This leaves no room for anyone to interpret the religion in more egalitarian ways – including Muslim women who are attempting to change the perceived identity of women in Islam.[35] The segregated school system makes it even more difficult to question and challenge gendered roles and obligations, and it justifies separation and inequality through religion. The national grade 10 textbook for Islamic studies (for students aged about 15 years) states that death is the Islamic punishment for apostates. This prohibits Kuwaitis from asserting an alternative (or no) religious identity, in clear violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which guarantees the right to change one's religion.[36] In 2006, in response to a reported decision by the education ministry to remove Article 18 from the secondary curriculum, the reformist academic Ahmad Al-Baghdadi commented:

> Why does the education ministry [bother to prepare] a curriculum with international contents, if it plans to distort it and present it in an inappropriate manner? Moreover, why should a teacher refer to religion when teaching a curriculum on human rights? … Is the education ministry required to introduce religion into all topics of study? If it is, then why not hand over the schools to the religious education [authorities] and be done with it?[37]

The eight challenges set out in the strategy report on citizenship education make no reference to what Al-Baghdadi questioned as being the introduction of religion into every teaching subject,[38] or to extremism. The outcome – convenient for both the government and for Islamists in parliament – is an approach to education that is rendered uncritical by the expectation of obedience that comes with religion.

Kuwait's homogenized schools, its educational focus on uncritical nationalism, and the Islamic hegemony in its national curricula are all in tension with the goal of democratic, knowledge-based development. These factors stand in the way of recognition, criticality and creativity, and agency and participation – all of which are precursors to such development.

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[32] Ahmad Saeid, 'MPs Threaten to Sack Education Minister', *Kuwait Times*, July 1, 2010.
[33] Ibid.
[34] 'Mudhi Instructs Schools Not To Discuss Sectarian Issues', *Arab Times*, September 24, 2010; http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smid/414/ArticleID/159916/reftab/96/t/Mudhi-instructs-schools-not-todiscuss-sectarian-issues/Default.aspx.
[35] See Ghada Karmi, 'Women, Islam, and Patriarchalism', in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1996), pp. 69–85.
[36] See http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr; Article 18 states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'
[37] As cited in 'Kuwaiti Columnist: Interference of Religious Groups in Curricula Damages Education', The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2 March 2007; http://www.memri.org/report/en/print2071.htm.
[38] Ibid.

Human rights education: a potential interruption

In the late 1990s Kuwait's ministry of education set up a committee to address the issue of education on human rights and the constitution. The philosophy agreed on for this new addition to the curriculum was based on two guiding principles – the importance of the constitution and the universality of human rights. Three sources were eventually identified for the curricular content: *Shari'a*; international declarations and covenants; and the Kuwaiti constitution. The constitution and human rights module (*al-dustūr wa ḥuqūq al-insān*) was set in secondary schools as a three-year programme, for grades 10, 11 and 12 (i.e. for students aged approximately 15–17), from the beginning of the 2006/07 academic year.

What is markedly absent from the programme's name as well as its philosophical foundations, goals and, for the most part, textbooks is the word '*muwāṭana*', which, as already noted, is often conflated with *waṭaniyya*. Rather than being referred to as *muwāṭinīn* (nationals or citizens), people are referred to as individuals, as members of society or of the community, and as human beings. This is significant, and can be interpreted as a shift from a nationalistic concept of citizenship and identity to a more democratic one.

> In the move from conception to implementation, however, the promising foundations of the *dustūr* programme gave way to thin applications marred by contradictions.

Focusing on belonging rather than national identity in the *dustūr* curriculum perhaps marked an acknowledgment of Kuwait's contentious issues with citizenship and the associated societal divisions. The programme also dedicated an entire academic year to the topic of human rights – a radical step towards developing within the secondary curriculum a more inclusive notion of citizenship and identity, and a pioneering development within the region.

In the move from conception to implementation, however, the promising foundations of the *dustūr* programme gave way to thin applications marred by contradictions. From the outset, its incorporation into the existing authoritarian and homogenized school system lessened its potential impact. The single, 45-minute subject was added to the secondary schedule once a week, and teachers were given the same type of timetabled curriculum as they were for other classes, nominally requiring them to proceed through the textbooks towards the examinations.

All the information in the *dustūr* textbooks is presented as factual, including that which is based on religion. Specifically, each chapter in the grade 11 textbook presents human rights from three perspectives: Islam, international documents and the Kuwaiti constitution, in that order. Each of these sections presents a 'factual' perspective on the rights being discussed, but the textbook does not provide any formal opportunities for engagement with the tensions and contradictions between the three perspectives. Moreover, with the Islamic perspective being presented first throughout the textbook, the implication is that this takes precedence. Indeed, an official pamphlet giving information on the *dustūr* module states, 'There are rights that cannot be accepted as they are in conflict with *shari'a*'; the examples it provides are premarital sex, same-sex marriage and equality between males and females in inheritance laws.[39] This justifies allowing constitutional and universal rights to take second and third place to a particular interpretation of Islamic rights. However, it does not take into account that as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its

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[39] Kuwait Ministry of Education, The State of Kuwait: Experience in the Field of Human Rights Education (Kuwait: Ministry of Education, 2010), p. 7.

related covenants, Kuwait has made a legal commitment to uphold the indivisible rights contained within them. This has been a contentious issue between Kuwait and international organizations.[40]

Furthermore, while the *dustūr* module aspired to include legal frameworks, this did not materialize to any significant extent in the grade 11 textbook, which did not discuss any legal rights or their potential tension with the other rights presented (Islamic, universal and constitutional). This is particularly significant in the case of Kuwait, because the constitution leaves considerable scope for the legal system to restrict citizens' rights.[41] To give an example of the obfuscation arising from the decontextualized presentation of rights in the textbook, it is argued, in the short passage (amounting to half a page of text) that deals with women's rights in Kuwait, that women's rights are protected because the constitution uses the word 'individual' and therefore does not distinguish between men and women. However, this fails to address the fact that women do not have equal legal rights, as discussed earlier. It also fails to contextualize the struggles and successes in promoting women's rights in Kuwait.

The only other module in the secondary curriculum that makes explicit reference to human rights is Islamic studies, and this is equally vague and contradictory when it comes to women's rights. In the grade 10 textbook, on the topic of the right to equality, three lines state that God created everyone from mud with equal rights and responsibilities. An excerpt is given from the *ḥadīth* against racism, and another from the Qur'an stating that men and women were created in the same way.[42] However, the latter does not explicitly declare equality between men and women. This is particularly problematic given that several interpretations of Islamic laws do not treat men and women equally (e.g. marriage and inheritance laws, among others). Selecting a passage that states merely they were created in the same way leaves room to justify unequal treatment. Indeed, the chapter on punishments in the same textbook includes an excerpt that justifies men hitting 'disobedient' women.

Rather than immediately dismiss the *dustūr* module as a failed attempt at citizenship education, however, it is important to consider its application in context.[43]

The *dustūr* programme in application

A case study undertaken by the author over three years in a girls' public school helps to put the *dustūr* model in context, demonstrating its potential impact on students' understanding of citizenship and rights.[44] As previously outlined, the *dustūr* programme was introduced as a series of three short textbooks to be taught in grades 10, 11 and 12. Notably, there were no ministry-set examinations. Most of the social studies teachers expected to deliver this course had no teaching experience with its content. The outcome of these factors was serendipitous.

For the *dustūr* curriculum, unlike for all other social studies modules in Kuwaiti schools, schools and districts, rather than the education ministry, were responsible for setting their own tests. While this

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[40] See Human Rights Watch, *World Report* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2010). See also United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Universal Periodic Review: Kuwait (2010); http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=4c6142072.
[41] See Gianluca P. Parolin, 'Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives', in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (Dubai, Gulf Research Center, 2006), 51–87. See also UN Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme, 2009).
[42] In Islam, the *ḥadīth* are those acts, sayings, etc. attributed to the prophet Muhammad rather than the Qur'ān.
[43] Gandin and Apple (2002) point out that 'rearticulations' of policies must be studied in local contexts in order to 'map out the creation of alternatives'; see Luís A. Gandin and Michael W. Apple, 'Thin Versus Thick Democracy in Education: Porto Alegre and the Creation of Alternatives to Neo-Liberalism', *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 12(2) (2002), p. 100.
[44] Author's own case study, conducted in a Kuwaiti all-girls secondary school, 2008/09–2010/11.

perhaps reveals something about the module's perceived status with officials, knowing the content of the examinations ahead of time meant that teachers could divert from the official timetable and textbook without undue concern that their students' grades would suffer. In addition, because the textbooks were short, teachers were able to incorporate ancillary resources, such as newspapers, videos, copies of the Kuwaiti constitution and visits by guest speakers (including a female member of parliament and a human rights lawyer). Because there was no pressure to memorize for a ministry-set examination, textbooks were often abandoned altogether for more active, participatory learning, including debates, mock elections and mock demonstrations. Furthermore, since the teachers were often learning the new topics alongside their students, knowledge was 'co-constructed', taking learning in unpredictable directions. For example, in one observed human rights class for grade 11 students, the teacher did not shy away from addressing the tensions that the *dustūr* textbooks inadvertently brought to the surface. Early in the 2008/09 academic year, this teacher and her students dealt with the tensions between the secular and religious frameworks of rights by deciding to work from the secular one. Their decision to do this arose from a discussion during which they concluded that the legal framework protects against the misuse of particular interpretations of the religion; they also decided that the legal system, unlike a religious one, is man-made and can therefore be changed and developed as needed.

As the students in the case study learned about their rights, their teachers began to recognize these rights, and their agency and confidence grew. The students were critical, articulate, demanding and active. They turned the sanctioned classroom activities into unsanctioned action beyond the classroom, including demonstrations and sit-ins in their school courtyard in support of particular demands.

In 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring, Kuwaiti students took to the streets to protest about various issues, including educational reforms and corruption. Although a direct link is very difficult to prove, it can be assumed that some of the students involved would have taken the constitution and human rights modules at school.

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In 2010 a decision was made to shorten the three-year *dustūr* programme to a one-year subject to be taken in grade 12 only. With the restricted time frame resulting from the three textbooks being bound into one, rote learning again became the norm. Student workshops undertaken during the case study to explore participants' perceptions of their learning on human rights, democracy and citizenship in school[45] allow for comparison of two grade 11 cohorts: one enrolled in the three-year programme and studying human rights in that year; and, a year later, a group of grade 11 students who had yet to take the *dustūr* module (restructured meanwhile as a one-year programme for grade 12).

Students enrolled in the three-year programme identified links between citizenship, human rights, freedom and democracy. They also displayed awareness of the reciprocity between human rights and democracy; they mentioned dialogue and respect for others, and they spoke out against racism and discrimination. They also identified instances when they felt that their own rights as students and as citizens were not recognized. The students seemed quite confident in their own agency, and were

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[45] Workshops conducted by the author in a Kuwaiti all-girls secondary school, 2008/09–2010/11.

articulate in their demands for change. They were also optimistic about the possibility of change, and were motivated to take action when they felt their rights were being violated. The students linked this learning to the *dustūr* module and teacher.

By contrast, the responses of grade 11 students who had yet to take the module made no references to democracy. While several students were able to identify instances where they felt their rights were being violated, their tone was markedly more compliant and less confident; and the criticality and active learning that had apparently been enabled within the three-year *dustūr* programme was less evident. There were frequent references to Islamic studies, suggesting that the extent of their learning on human rights hitherto was confined to religion.

As previously noted, the 2010 strategy report on citizenship education[46] presented a restrictive view of identity and belonging. However, the three main overarching goals that are listed in the report are surprisingly inclusive, with references to human rights, democracy, cultural diversity, equality, participation, dialogue and critical thinking. Its more detailed goals also emphasize belonging and social pluralism. National identity is not mentioned. The shift in tone from the challenges to the goals may be explained by the fact that this part of the 2010 report was written by a different member of the ministry committee that devised the strategy; the same member was also one of the authors of the textbooks for the *dustūr* module.

The 2010 report made no mention of adding anything to the curriculum to realize its goals. In terms of application, the *dustūr* module would therefore seem like a logical foundation on which to build. However, the year the report was released was the same year the three-year programme was condensed into one. According to the official pamphlet about the module, presented to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for Kuwait's Universal Periodic Review in 2010, 'The ministry has decided that it is much better to teach this subject in the final stage of secondary school (12th grade). The learner in this grade is ready intellectually and psychologically to [sic] such specialized [information] about democracy, [the] constitution and human rights.'[47] Notably, while the 'specialized' content regarding human rights was deemed too much for students in grades 10 and 11 in the case of the *dustūr* module, the equally 'specialized' rights content in the grade 10 Islamic studies module continued to be taught. As the three year *dustūr* module was being phased out in secondary schools, *terbia waṭaniyya* (national education) was being added to the primary school curriculum, marking a return to nationalistic citizenship education.

Conclusions: constructing identity among Kuwaiti youth

In March 2013 Kuwait's National Youth Project, under the auspices of the Amiri *diwan*, held its first conference, titled 'Kuwait Listens' (*al-Kuwait tisma‘*). The project is a pioneering step for young people in Kuwait, who have had limited opportunities for institutionalized participation in the state. Among the project's strategic goals are strengthening the national identity, eliminating sectarian and tribal divisions among youth, promoting social cohesion, supporting Kuwait's democratic and constitutional culture, promoting tolerance, combating extremism, and respecting freedom of speech and the diverse viewpoints of young people.[48] At the conference, the group shared the comprehensive findings of its

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[46] Kuwait Ministry of Education, *Strategy for Reinforcing the Concepts of Citizenship, Loyalty and Belonging Among Young People Through Educational Curricula in Kuwait.*
[47] Kuwait Ministry of Education, The State of Kuwait: Experience in the Field of Human Rights Education, p. 12.
[48] Kuwait News Agency, HH Amir Inaugurates National Youth Conference, March 13, 2013, http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails. aspx?id=2298178&Language=en.

research on matters of citizenship, focusing on issues judged to be in need of immediate attention. Among these were issues of identity: in the view of project members, if national identity and unity are to be prioritized, then all citizens' sub-national identities – including religious and tribal affiliations – must also be embraced, with existing, discriminatory levels of citizenship addressed. The group also highlighted the role of education in redefining citizenship, emphasizing that the national curriculum should focus on teaching the constitution, critical thinking, and the values of tolerance and respect for all religions.

Kuwait's ministry of state for youth affairs was established earlier in 2013 out of the National Youth Project. The values of the ministry, as set out on its website, are national unity, followed by citizenship – including rights and responsibilities – and then democracy – to include youth involvement in decision-making processes. These match the goals laid out by the youth project above. Also listed are values that ministry employees share and that drive their work, foremost of which are solidification of Islamic values, loyalty to the nation and the amir, and patriotism. These seem more in keeping with the traditional model of youth education. The ministry's creation, as well as the recognition of youth rights and participation, however, appears to be a positive development, although young people at the conference urged the minister, who attended the sessions, not to tuck their suggestions away into a drawer, as has been the trend historically.

Building on the suggestions of the participants at the youth conference, in order for schools to prefigure the democratic, knowledge-based society that Kuwait aspires to be, the authoritarian ethos should be replaced with a more humanistic environment, in which students' rights are protected, their identities recognized and their agency secured. School populations should reflect the diversity of contemporary Kuwait, and provide opportunities for young people to confront and potentially bridge societal divisions and inequalities – as well as gain deeper understandings of the multi-layered nature of individual identities. Students' agency should be embraced, allowing time and space for active, participatory learning that fosters critical thinking and creativity. This would in turn encourage participation not only in knowledge construction, but also in unsanctioned transformative action. When schools are spaces that are free from national, religious and corporate hegemony, the voices of young people may be heard – and how they are constructing their own identity may be recognized – and transformative education becomes possible.

About the author

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Acknowledgments

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This paper forms part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project on 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate some future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states. The research has four main strands:

- **Citizenship and political development:** Looks at citizens' shifting attitudes and political aspirations particularly those of the under-30s who make up the majority of the GCC's population, exploring the dynamics of reform.

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