

THE *DIWANIYYA*: GUESTROOM SOCIABILITY AND
BUREAUCRATIC BROKERAGE IN KUWAIT

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about men's guestrooms (sing. *diwaniyya*; pl. *diwaniyyat* or *dawawin*) in Kuwait and their place in the nation's unique welfare compact with its citizens. The central question guiding this research is unambiguous: Why do Kuwaiti men visit the *dawawin*? The answer, it is argued, lies in the nature of the distributive rentier arrangement in contemporary Kuwait that has allowed for the unprecedented expansion and utilization of these guestrooms. It is the position of this study that the creation of an inflated, underperforming bureaucracy tied to an intricate system of patronage and brokerage extending downward throughout the state from the ruling Al Sabah dynasty has created the conditions wherein actors must provide their own inroads if they are to tap into the government's vast resources. However, given the opaqueness of the Kuwait state system, the personalization of offices and institutions, and the imbalanced distribution of oil rents throughout the community, knowledge of precisely who to contact for what ends has become a regular nightly activity. Coupled with the benefits of luxury employment and subsidies that have bolstered discretionary incomes, hosting and visiting to foster and reinforce ties to governmental largess has become institutionalized in ways that have transformed these customary male guestrooms into indispensable marketplaces for facilitatory support.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is about men's guestrooms (sing. *diwaniyya*; pl. *diwaniyyat* or *dawawin*) in Kuwait and their place in the nation's unique welfare compact with its citizens. The central question guiding this research is unambiguous: Why do Kuwaiti men visit the *dawawin*? My motivations for this study were driven by two principal matters. First, I wanted to delve deeper into the themes of male guesthouses, guestrooms and reception rooms; all institutions that sporadically appear in Middle East ethnographies¹ but rarely have they ever been the focal point of ethnographic research about the region.² So, I wanted to depart from the practice of adding such an establishment as a side note to a wider project and instead explore how the rites of guestroom socialization could stand at the forefront of a study about social, political and economic life in the Middle East. Second, there was my decision to concentrate my efforts on Kuwait and the visitation routines of Kuwaiti men. Part of the reasoning for this was purely serendipitous; I traveled to Kuwait in 2003 with the National Council on U.S. – Arab Relations (NCUSAR) and was afforded the chance to visit a *diwaniyya*. When I returned home and started looking for more information about Kuwait's *dawawin* I realized that not only were these parlors virtually absent from the anthropological literature but that Kuwait itself was grossly underrepresented; dual deficiencies that I

¹ A few examples include Antoun (1972, 1979, 1997), Bujra (1971), Fernea (1970), and Slyomovics (1998).

² Richard Antoun's enlightening account of conflict resolution in a Jordanian guestroom (2000) is a noteworthy exception.

wanted to address that would still allow for a guestroom, in this case the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya*, to be the centerpiece of my research agenda.

I spent 18 months collecting data in Kuwait between 2006 and 2010. With the exception of a six week pilot study in June and July of 2006 to gauge the feasibility of this project, my research calendar revolved around the fall, winter and spring months. This schedule was necessary because, as I noticed in the summer when I was trying to ascertain the best way to pursue a guestroom-focused venture, many Kuwaitis avoid the oppressive hot months by vacationing abroad. Expectedly, such a period when large numbers of Kuwaitis are traveling in and out of the country means that guestroom habits are going to suffer; attendance by hosts and guests is irregular, some *diwaniyyat* are open but devoid of any visitors, and other parlors only seem to act as temporary stopovers for callers busily searching for their usual cohorts. Also, the National Assembly is normally in recess for part of the summer and its absence tends to invite a lull to creep into some of the politically-oriented *dawawin*.³ Therefore, to ensure the availability of participants and maximize the accessibility of fully-operational guestrooms, my research was conducted at intervals from October to May.

While in Kuwait, I sought lodging accommodations with non-Kuwaitis; that is, with expatriate workers. Financially, this was the most sensible solution to Kuwait's high-priced housing market for a lone male⁴ with a limited budget and without any real need for more than a single room. Additionally, this circumvented any of the contracts, deposits, or associated set-up fees that are standard rental requirements. There was, though, a more significant factor in my choice to live with foreigners and that is the fact

³ Of course, this tendency is reversed if special elections are being held in the summer.

⁴ Many apartment managers will not lease to an unmarried adult without a family.

that the people who are actually soliciting roommates online or in local circulars are not Kuwaitis. The likely explanation for this is that Kuwaitis do not have the same fiscal pressures that compel expatriates to subsidize their housing by boarding strangers.⁵ Regardless of the grounds for this disparity, I was relieved to share apartments during my different stays in Kuwait with an assortment of Indian families, Indian and Pakistani bachelors, and an Irishman. Although this was a convenient answer to my housing woes, it also brought me face-to-face with how expatriates deal with their lives in the country – something that would otherwise have been sorely missed in the Kuwaiti-centric social world I was building for myself.⁶ However, living with expatriates in districts dominated by apartment blocks intended for foreigners had an extra advantage that I did not appreciate until a short stay of a few nights in a Kuwaiti household located in a Kuwaiti suburb:⁷ the abundance of taxis. Because personal vehicles are the preferred mode of transportation in Kuwaiti neighborhoods, it makes it difficult to find a cab without resorting to an expensive pick-up service. Needless to say, this logistical hang-up alone made it worth my while to reside in a taxi-infested expatriate quarter of Kuwait City.

Initially, my fieldwork began when I arranged to meet with five contacts in Kuwait; one was a host during my first brief visit to the country in 2003 with NCUSAR, another was Yagoub Al-Kandari at Kuwait University who I reached out to after reading his book, *Al diwaniyya al kuwaitiyah*, and three others were recommended to me by an acquaintance who also happened to be their professor. After preliminary discussions

⁵ Nevertheless, in 2008 the Committee to Remove Irregularities on Public Property circulated flyers showing Kuwaiti homes with illegal shacks, used to house foreign workers, which encroached onto state lands, but this hardly qualifies as a roommate arrangement.

⁶ It is odd that as a foreigner I neglected the “expatriate experience” in Kuwait.

⁷ While Crystal notes that the government segregated citizen – noncitizen residential areas beginning in the 1950s (1995b:79), Longva argues that today’s divisions are increasingly due to socio-economic factors (1997:37-38).

with each of these individuals about my interests in discovering as much as possible about Kuwait's guestrooms, a purposefully broad objective given the scarcity of published research on these institutions, I asked for any referrals that they thought might be able to help me put together a candid portrait of the nation's *diwaniyyat*.⁸ Fortunately, these early relationships yielded far more links than I could have anticipated and I was quickly inundated with enough primary, secondary, and extended networks (Boissevain 1974:47-48) to allow me to begin gathering information. All of my data were collected by way of interviews and, within the short time of a few days following my arrival in Kuwait, direct participant-observation in the men's guestrooms. I used a combination of Arabic and English for all parts of this project. With interviewees, I left the choice of language to the discretion of participants, but most of those who took part had advanced English skills and oftentimes our talks merged elements of both Arabic and English. However, business in the guestrooms was carried out in Arabic, which I translated as much as I could hear into English in my notebooks, even though many of my own personal conversations in the *dawawin* were in English.

The formal, scheduled interviews⁹ for this project were conducted in a semi-structured, open-ended fashion with 58 participants (49 of these sessions were with Kuwaiti men, six Kuwaiti women, and three expatriate males). I chose this approach because my research goal was exploratory and, ultimately, inductive; I wanted interviewees to have the opportunity to express and freely expand upon their experiences and opinions about the *diwaniyyat* with minimal direction or bias on my part. This was

⁸ As this indicates, all participants for this study were selected by word-of-mouth, or snowball, sampling.

⁹ I preferred to have participants choose meeting places where they would be comfortable. These locations varied but included homes, offices, Western coffee shops like Starbucks or the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, restaurants, *diwaniyyat*, or *gahwa* (literally "coffee" but used to refer to a men's *shisha* café).

critical at the outset because my own thoughts on the subject were too speculative and based almost entirely on decades-old studies executed in poor, rural environs that could not be more different than 21st century Kuwait City. Sample questions from this stage of interviews were mixtures and / or variations along the lines of:

- “Can you talk to me about the *diwaniyyat*?”
- “Do you visit a *diwaniyya*?”
- “Will you tell me about your *diwaniyya*?”
- “Why would a man host / visit a *diwaniyya*?”

Then, from these general queries a rolling dialogue usually developed that gave me a chance to explore respondents’ specific answers by prompting them to tell me more about what was just said. However, some of the Kuwaitis with whom I met did not need any encouragement from me and it was obvious that they had already formulated what they intended to share ahead of time. Occasionally, though, my attempts to persuade someone to stray from his predetermined script or my incessant probing about a topic brought up in the course of an interview, like internal family squabbles, were instantly rebuffed with the caution that, “We should not be talking about this.”¹⁰ I always respected these warnings by switching to more amiable concerns.¹¹

Later, once I had a better basis for understanding the guestrooms I refined my interview protocols to incorporate a pattern that kept emerging from the transcripts: social connections (*wasta*) and the necessity of generating contacts through hosting and

¹⁰ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 6, 2006.

¹¹ Over time this became less of an issue due to a couple of reasons. The most evident is that the long-term relationships that were created between me and many of my confidants led to a degree of familiarity as well as trust about my promises of strict confidentiality. Also, when I was frequently cross-examined by anyone who knew by his own references who I had been talking to, my refusal to divulge anything was an important credential for follow-up interviews.

visiting. Still, I did not deviate far from the aforementioned baseline questions about the *diwaniyyat* with new interviewees even after I narrowed my focus; instead, I made sure to ask for more details about *wasta* whenever it arose along with any personal, secondhand, or hypothetical scenarios that might serve to illustrate the points at which guestrooms and advantageous networks intersect. For the veteran participants who agreed to meet with me again,¹² I typically framed our subsequent conversations around revisiting some of their previous remarks that I had not pursued too deeply before, particularly any prior references made about *diwaniyya* networking. The questions below, although by no means complete, do provide a sense of how I began giving *wasta* increased attention when it came up:

- “What do you mean when you speak about *wasta*?”
- “Why would someone need *wasta*?”
- “Do you know people who visit the *diwaniyyat* for *wasta*?”
- “Is there *wasta* in the *diwaniyyat*?”

Yet, unlike my earlier, imprecise inquiries about guestrooms and the rituals of male hospitality in Kuwait, when my unawareness as an outsider seemed to have been anticipated by locals, the inclusion of *wasta* into the equation created quite a different reaction during interviews. Gradually, it became apparent to me that there was such an assumed obviousness attached to *wasta* and its utility in Kuwait that my desires to have

¹² There were 16 participants who agreed to meet for repeat formal interviews. Not included in this number are 10 one-time interviewees that I saw and visited with regularly once I was sitting in guestrooms, and even though I recorded our later talks, it was more relaxed. From the 26 participants with whom I had recurring interactions, 14 became my closest confidants and they helped me with translations, rumors, gossip, and locating sources and materials. With the other 32 interviewees, some were uninterested in working with me further and others simply ignored my phone calls. I can only assume that in these cases I failed to establish a strong enough rapport and that meeting with me fulfilled the obligation to whoever it was that put us in touch originally. However, I must admit that I was also responsible for discontinuing a few associations that were at odds with my personality.

people itemize their own encounters with it in the *diwaniyyat* were met with skepticism: How could I not comprehend something so basic and why should anyone even care about it in the first place?¹³ Yet, it was this very ordinary, habitual nature of Kuwait's guestroom – *wasta* interactions that I found so extraordinary; that they were so integrated into the daily consciousness of life in the city-state that they had become routine.

Nonetheless, while the interview sessions proved to be an effective primer on many aspects of *diwaniyya* culture, I knew that my project, along with any semblances of ethnographic authenticity, rested on my ability to successfully get into a guestroom.¹⁴ I had prepared myself, not knowing what to expect or how people would react to my research, for the possibility that I might have to cold call guestrooms by actively searching for Kuwaiti men gathering in the vicinity of any house with a placard marked “*diwaniyya*” or “*diwan*.”¹⁵ Luckily, I never had to resort to this measure because on my third day in Kuwait, a female interviewee offered to have her brother take me along on one of his evening rounds of visiting. That first night out, I followed my guide's lead – everyone in the parlor rose from their seats for a handshake when we entered and, starting on our right and moving counterclockwise, we exchanged greetings with each person present¹⁶ – and mimicked his mannerisms.¹⁷ On this same outing, I received more

¹³ I answered more versions of this question than any other about my fieldwork. My truthful answer, that I found *wasta* and *diwaniyyat* to be fascinating, often elicited disbelief or the kind of sympathetic looks reserved for someone who should know better.

¹⁴ This does not mean that the formal interviews ended with my participant-observation in guestrooms; rather, my days were devoted to interviews or tracking leads while my nights were reserved for *diwaniyya* activities.

¹⁵ Theoretically, this is feasible according to the tenets of hospitality but socially it is disfavored. As one Kuwaiti man summed up this idea, “The *diwaniyya* has an open door but in fact it is closed. Nobody can get in unless he is a member. A stranger can enter but he will feel uncomfortable.” Ahmad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on April 8, 2007.

¹⁶ As I learned, this is the fairly standard way that visitors, regular or special, are greeted when entering a *diwaniyya*. In informal guestrooms, or when a guest is late or he is a longtime participant, a collective *as-salam alaikum* (peace be unto you) may be given upon entry to the entire room, thereby bypassing the

invitations to guestrooms, and when combined with similar opportunities that stemmed from further interviews, the participant-observation phase of my study was rapidly taking shape.

It did not take long, however, before I was faced with the problem of defining exactly what constituted a *diwaniyya*. Because nearly every Kuwaiti house has a parlor (Al-Naser 2001:11)¹⁸ and Kuwaiti men are often getting together inside of them to socialize, does every game of cards or late night chat within a *diwaniyya* room necessarily represent that a *diwaniyya* is meeting? This quandary initially arose as a practical matter after one too many nighttime visitations to guestrooms that doubled as occasional lairs for card players, *hashish* smokers, and video gamers. Even though my contacts promised me *diwaniyyat*, and they may have sincerely believed that such cases were sound exemplars of institutional variations, these trips proved taxing because they did not pass what became my own personal benchmark for a guestroom: Do those present recognize their assembly to be a *diwaniyya*? If not, then I could not classify such a group of men as partaking in *diwaniyya* socializing since they were not making that

individual salutations; although once seated, a nod, wave or spoken *masa'a al khair* (good evening) might be given to friends or relatives.

¹⁷ Some of these customary behaviors can be shaking the shared coffee cup three times when finished, or touching noses with someone close (this is viewed locally as a tribal tradition), or saying *fi m'allah* (in God's protection) to those in the room when departing. The real novelty for me was interacting with the ever-present Indian domestic servants who tend to all of the guests' needs.

¹⁸ Even though it is impossible to accurately calculate the number of *dawawin* in Kuwait City, there are two resources that hint at the sum. The directory, *Diwaniyya: The dawawin and diwaniyyat in the State of Kuwait (diwaniyya; al dawawin wa al diwaniyyat fi dawlat al kuwayt)*, has been issued annually during Ramadan since 2003 by Delta Group Publishing. It lists *diwaniyyat* by districts in each of Kuwait's six governorates. In the 2005 edition, there were 3,522 *dawawin* cataloged. For each entry, the formal name of the guestroom is provided, its moniker, an address, the day and time it meets, and a telephone number. Another source that can be turned to for guestroom figures is the office of Saud Al-Khatrash, the general coordinator charged with removing *dawawin* built illegally on public land. Between 2008 and 2010, in the document, "Total Number of Removals of Unlicensed Structures," Al-Khatrash's office estimates that 13,000 *diwaniyyat* were torn down (This record was faxed to the author by the office of Saud Al-Khatrash on November 28, 2010).

designation for themselves.¹⁹ Moreover, these impromptu mixers lacked my second set of criteria, which was founded on what all interviewees who were asked insisted was fundamental for a guestroom to be a *diwaniyya*: it must have a host who convenes it in a regular place on the same day and at the same time each week.²⁰ Jointly, these guidelines served as the filters through which I prioritized my evenings' agendas and they are the nominal qualifications that I used to select whether or not a congregation of Kuwaiti males signified a *diwaniyya*.

By the time that I had called on a dozen or so guestrooms, and I had begun to make repeat visits to a few that were especially receptive to my presence, I altered my approach and changed from being a one-off guest to a regular visitor. There were several reasons for this adjustment. Primarily, I wanted to take part in, and observe, the weekly life cycles of the *diwaniyyat* across the seasons; over holidays like Ramadan or 'ashura, during major and minor elections, or when members were confronted with their own series of in-house bliss and turmoil. Furthermore, although I recorded some wonderful biographical features about the guestrooms that I visited just once,²¹ I was also always alert to the reality that much of what was put before me was incredibly stage-managed, for the sake of decorum, and almost exclusively centered on me since I was the unfamiliar curiosity in the room. To try to move past this, while not totally abandoning new *diwaniyyat* options, I reserved certain nights of the week for recurring visits to three guestrooms, each with its own public mission statement: family, political, and public

¹⁹ As stated, this was my decision for categorizing Kuwaiti guestrooms and there is certainly an argument to be made about the extent to which a group's dynamics can be understood by those internal or external to it.

²⁰ I was given some other generalities about guestrooms, such as rules prohibiting immoral or illegal activities within their walls, but such notions tended to reflect individual ideals since there was little agreement about these proscriptions. Besides, I witnessed quite a few conversations in guestrooms that challenged many moral and legal boundaries.

²¹ There were a total of 19 *diwaniyyat* that I visited only one time.

activism,²² and each playing host every week to between 15 and 30 men.²³ While I could never erase my status as a stranger within these meetings, by slowly becoming a fixture to these groups my attendance was normalized to an extent that I could interact with everyone without any of the fanfare that characterized my original visitations. For me, this meant that I could watch and listen-in to all that was occurring around me, or I could sit with someone for a spontaneous interview²⁴ or request clarification about what was happening, or I could huddle with a cluster of men and engage in whatever subject concerned them at that moment.

The product of these interviews, observations and “participant living” (Longva 1997:15) in the nightlife culture of Kuwait’s men’s guestrooms is a narrative that expands the range of rentier thought by examining it through the prism of everyday practices. In the earliest days of this project, I simply wanted to know why Kuwaiti men choose to spend their evening hours engaged in such spirited socializing in the *dawawin*. Frankly, I diverged very little from this straightforward research schematic, even after I had become quite familiar with Kuwait and its men’s parlors, because the data that I was getting was fairly consistent across participants: men can visit guestrooms for a variety of reasons, but the need to foster social connections is almost always a factor. Nevertheless, acknowledging the existence of men’s *diwaniyya* networks did not tell me about the utility of these interactions until I specifically asked about the uses of *wasta*, and only then did the state’s role come into full view. From this point on, I concentrated

²² By public mission statements, I am referring to the reasons that these guestrooms’ proprietors gave for hosting their *diwaniyyat*.

²³ This gave me an opportunity to work with 45 to 90 men each week. When I had an evening without anything scheduled I usually dropped by a card-playing *diwaniyya* for entertainment and light chatter.

²⁴ To my surprise, many guests approached to talk to me about the guestrooms, or a specific *diwaniyya*, after watching me visit for many weeks. Some of these led to outside confidential interviews about a *diwaniyya* where we were guests.

on how the *dawawin* can be used by supplicants to facilitate bureaucratic partiality and preferential treatments. I stress that this is solely my own application of the data that so many Kuwaitis provided for my benefit but I cannot say if any of them would endorse my interpretation of their experiences. Also, there is the distinct probability that I have used someone's words or actions in a context that was either unforeseen or that might be found unfavorable. Consequently, I have elected to use pseudonyms for both participants²⁵ and guestrooms, and I have tried to omit any identifiers that could expose a source. I do, however, hope that I have not mishandled any of the knowledge that was so graciously shared with me in Kuwait.

It is incredibly humbling to think about all of the people who have made this research possible and to realize how indebted I am to their contributions. Without the insight, support, and encouragement that countless individuals provided at each and every juncture of this project, it is doubtful as to whether this undertaking could ever have reached its final form. At the same time, there is a great sense of reward in knowing that so many people saw some merit in this study, at least enough to warrant the help on which I relied so heavily, and it is my sincere hope that this research will not fall too short of their expectations.

To my family, I have to first extend my deepest gratitude for always being the enduring and everlasting champions of all of my efforts. Not only did they tolerate my repeated absences overseas, their good humor was a welcome respite to some of the frustrations that I faced as I tried to bring my protracted inquiry on Kuwait's guestrooms to its conclusion. Undeniably, I am perhaps most grateful for my family's openness to

²⁵ I did not record the names of participants who requested anonymity nor did I provide them with an alias; they appear in the text simply as "anonymous."

learning about another culture and for their willingness simply to listen to me; in this regard it is hardly an exaggeration to say that they know more about how I experienced Kuwait than I will ever be able to express through my research.

I also owe my committee an incredible amount of personal appreciation for all of their guidance throughout this process. Here, I want to fully thank Laurence Loeb for serving as chair of my committee, commend Polly Wiessner for tirelessly laboring to help me elevate the standards of my work, and recognize all of the members for the invaluable insights that they imparted to me: Peter Sluglett, Stephen Beckerman, Steve Ott, and Leslie Ann Knapp. It is not easy to articulate exactly how much their generous supplies of wisdom, enthusiasm, and patience have meant to me but I cannot envision a more fruitful intellectual atmosphere. It was honestly a privilege for me to have enjoyed the breadth of their knowledge.

Of course, no ethnographic study is even conceivable without the charitable involvement of its participants. In my case, I can confidently state that at some moments I felt as if the whole country of Kuwait had opened its arms to me with what was nothing short of legendary hospitality. At every turn I found that my constant questions were tolerated, my ignorance was never ridiculed, and all of my misunderstandings were remedied with the utmost grace. Today, I am fortunate that I can count many of those I met during my fieldwork as friends and family. Thus, it is with a good deal of regret that I have chosen not to reveal these close confidants in any way so that I might preserve our confidentiality.

Still, it would be careless of me not to mention at least some of those in Kuwait who selflessly gave their time and assistance to me through the years. At Kuwait

University, Fahad Al Naser, Muhammad Al Hussien, and Yacoup Al Kandari of the Department of Sociology and Social Work always kept their doors ajar and their phones turned on whenever I called, giving me a local academic and institutional base to rely upon when I was abroad. Also, there is Youssef Abdul-Moati, who was kind enough to allow me to access the remarkable library at the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait. Each trip to Kuwait required accommodations and I feel obliged to give credit to a few of the expatriates I lived with who showed me the non-Kuwaiti side of life in the country: Cyril, Stephen, Tyron, and Declan.

Financial support for this project was provided by a number of sources. While at the University of Utah, I received two Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowships for fieldwork through the Middle East Center; the Barbara & Norman Tanner Center Graduate Fellowship for the Prevention of Violence; the College of Social and Behavioral Science Giles W. and Elise G. Mead Foundation Endowed Scholarship in Honor of Professor Charles Hughes; and the Middle East Center Khosrow Mostofi Fellowship. My last research excursion to Kuwait was funded by the Kuwait Program at the Chaire Moyen Orient Mediterranee at the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) in Paris. However, this does not imply the endorsement of these entities for the analyses, arguments, and findings presented within this text and any errors are solely my own.

There were two opportunities afforded to me by separate institutions that deserve particular recognition because both were responsible for introducing me to the wider community of scholars specializing in Persian Gulf studies. The Gulf Research Unit at the University of Oslo hosted me for a symposium and pre-Middle East Studies Association (MESA) brainstorming session for our shared conference panel. I distinctly

recall that it was during these several intensive days spent in Norway with Bjørn Olav Utvik, Jon Nordenson, and fellow guest Michael Herb that the disparate pieces of my research initially began to crystallize into a coherent narrative. On the other side of the world, I have to thank the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore for bringing me in to present a condensed version of my study at their international meeting on the Gulf. To have this many area specialists in one place at one time was truly a resource when it happened to be precisely at the very moment I was trying to collect feedback on my polished report.

Lastly, I must acknowledge the incalculable aid that Linda Morgan, Sandra McCarthy, and Ursula Hanly each made available to me just about anytime that I asked for it. Together, these three women have almost magical talents when it comes to making sure that the necessary forms get signed by the right people and delivered to the appropriate desks. Their collective expertise in all matters concerning university protocols and regulations is such that I never once lost sleep or agonized over any task with which they had been entrusted; I always knew that my questions would be answered, my problems resolved, and my mind put at ease.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rare are the nights in the small Persian Gulf nation of Kuwait when the roads are not packed with carloads of men on their way to a *diwaniyya* (pl. *diwaniyyat* or *dawawin*). Located at the junctures between domesticity and outside sociability (Tetreault 2001:206), local historian Khalid Al Mukames defined the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya* as “a place separate from the main household specifically for men... [it] is a club comprised of groups of people who constitute a small community which deliberates on various affairs of life from the household or commerce or politics or literary and intellectual” (1986:19).²⁶ The Kuwaiti academic Yagoub Al-Kandari also portrayed the *diwaniyya* in similar terms, identifying it as a “forum of cultural exchange within which is debated various matters and affairs associated with daily social life” (2002:51).²⁷ Western researchers, too, have given their reflections on Kuwait's *diwaniyyat*, describing them as “informal socio-political groups... [that] serve to coalesce, filter, and transmit Kuwaiti opinion on public issues” (Russell 1989:30); or, “regular private gatherings of relatives, friends, and colleagues that serve as forums for socializing, conducting business, and discussing politics” (Hawthorne 2004:8); to even labeling them as a

²⁶ Translation provided by the author.

²⁷ Translation provided by the author.

“gregarious place where many Kuwaitis... uniformly receive their knowledge and discuss, among other things, public matters” (Louër 2005:771).²⁸

Yet, missing from the preceding discussions on the *diwaniyyat* as a context for male sociability in Kuwait are any conceptions of how these institutions interact with the country's all-encompassing bureaucratic networks. This is not an inconsiderable prospect. In a state that employs roughly 90 percent of all its citizens (Ghabra 1997:361), there is always a good probability that any assembly that includes adult male citizens will be synonymous with an unofficial gathering of civil servants. Nevertheless, when the *diwaniyyat* are presented in the literature as political entities it is almost always according to their roles in formal, state-sanctioned activities (Antoun 2000:442), like parliamentary contests and political campaigning (Al-Naser 2001:13-14), as well as the less savory components of electoral participation: vote buying²⁹ and prearrangements of the pool of candidates via pre-election primaries (Gavrielides 1987:166-170). What is frequently left unsaid is that these institutions also facilitate the “low politics” (Singerman 1995:15) of informality that allows actors to access the state, its offices, and its benefits without the procedural indignities or obstructions that typify official channels (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:18).

The goal of this research is to address this shortage by focusing explicitly on Kuwaiti reception rooms and demonstrating the utility of these institutions for providing points of contact between individuals and the overarching welfare state. Although popular local accounts tend to explain the *diwaniyyat* as being inherited legacies of the

²⁸ Translation provided by the author.

²⁹ Miq. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 7, 2006.

past (Gel'man 2004:1022),³⁰ this inquiry seeks to orient the guestrooms of Kuwait as vital endowments of the present that simultaneously penetrate the state while remaining mostly detached from its official apparatuses. It is well documented that in Kuwait, along with its oil-rich Gulf neighbors, the development of an inflated, underperforming bureaucracy (Herb 2009:382) coupled with an intricate system of patronage and brokerage extending downward throughout the state (Hertog 2005:141-143) from the ruling Al Sabah dynasty has encouraged actors to provide their own inroads to governmental resources. What is less clear is exactly how an establishment like the customary guestroom fits into this alignment as a marketplace for facilitatory support in such a high income urban environment. The argument here is that the presence of this pervasive brokerage has become institutionalized to the point of normalcy through the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya* by virtue of its regular visitation networks that foster and reinforce ties to bureaucratic favors.

Untangling Civil Society from the Social Bureaucracy of a Welfare State

To fully appreciate how the *diwaniyyat* act as a conduit for circulating public assets through social avenues demands an explanation of how the state-society framework is realized within Kuwait's distinctive brand of rentierism. At first glance, the *diwaniyyat* found throughout Kuwait City might fit well into what John and Jean Comaroff called "the present infatuation with civil society" (2000:293). Although this

³⁰ The most repeated version of this narrative authoritatively situates the *diwaniyyat* in an imagined, distant past: "The *diwaniyah* is a historical phenomenon believed to have started thousands of years ago, long before the advent of Islam... [The] *majlis*, or board... very popular in the Khalifa era, later came to be known as the *diwaniyah*" (Al-Naser 2001:6). Origins dating specifically to the Abbasid Caliphate of the 13th to 16th centuries have also been mentioned in interviews. What is always left out of these retrospectives are the intervening centuries between these historical roots and the appearance of the *diwaniyyat* on the Kuwaiti institutional landscape.

statement was written by the Comaroffs over a decade ago, its meaning continues to resonate to this day for legions of researchers, scholars, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and policy makers seeking to understand and evaluate, or even influence and shape, both grassroots and state-level sociopolitical realities (Hann 2003:55-57).³¹ In fact, it was the omission of any substantive discussion about the *diwaniyyat* that was explicitly cited by Richard Antoun in his appraisal of Richard Augustus Norton's two volume collection, *Civil Society in the Middle East*. Antoun criticized the contributors for their lack of any serious consideration of informal institutions, pronouncing that, "many authors [in these volumes] allude to patron-client relations, religious networks, sects, tribes, ethnic groups, groupings based on social type (village, town, neighborhood) and the *diwāniyyah*, without giving them any attention" (2000:442).³²

So, what exactly does it mean to take notice of Antoun's comments and give the Kuwaiti *dawawin* greater appreciation within the broader dialogues on civil society? As already indicated, there is little argument that these guestrooms occupy what can appropriately be described as an intermediate space between the social world of household intimacy and the wider, unrestricted community (Tetreault 2001:206). Specifically, the country's *diwaniyyat* are presumed to reside somewhere beyond the privacy of the home though still remaining sheltered from intrusions by the state (Delmas

³¹ In academia, at least some of the focus on civil society can be said to revolve around the topics of local nonstate groups taking over a state's distributive functions (Hemment 2004:217, 222) or as a counterbalance to a government's authoritative presence (Kulmala 2011:51-53); hence, too much or too little government seems to pose questions as to where, and how, civil society fits into any particular state's social, political, and economic equations. For NGOs and official agencies, Partha Chatterjee's conclusion that, "Civil society as an *ideal* continues to energize an interventionist political project" (2004:39) reflects Amy Hawthorne's position that, "programs to 'strengthen' civil society have become a standard part of the U.S. and European democracy-promotion tool kit around the world" (2004:5).

³² Even earlier, in 1993, Norton insisted that, "Arguably, the essential element in Kuwaiti civil society is the *diwaniyya*" (210). Again, as with Antoun's critique in 2000, Norton provided nothing to support this statement or reinforce its claim. More recently, Paul Salem listed the *diwaniyya* under the heading of civil society without expanding much on his designation (2007:10-11).

2007:3).³³ This latter guarantee is rooted in customary local convictions that point to the inviolability of the family domicile,³⁴ which is considered to include any *diwaniyya* regardless of whether or not it is actually positioned within the property boundaries of a household,³⁵ along with legal provisions that are in place to ensure that the values of domesticity are not violated (Tetreault 2000:61-62). Under the Kuwaiti Constitution, this physical protection of the home from unwarranted disturbances by the state, and its consequent extension to the *diwaniyya*, is upheld by the language in Article 38. The safeguards to assemble within the walls a residence, again applicable in practice to the *diwaniyya*, are designated in Article 44.³⁶ Importantly, these constitutional provisos mean that the *diwaniyyat* and their congregations are excluded from the restrictive Public Gathering Law (Law Number 65 of 1979) that sets out the criteria that must be met by other types of civic organizations (Kelly and Breslin 2010:238). It is for these reasons that, in the eyes of many Kuwaitis, the *dawawin* are repeatedly heralded as consummate “mini parliaments” where the “country’s affairs may be addressed and discussed”³⁷ devoid of state interference or arbitrary policing actions. Thus, it is this disposition of the *diwaniyyat* as guarded institutions that allow the country’s citizens to harbor the expectation that they will continue to have these forums as outlets for their unhindered political expression.³⁸

The traits listed here are the ideal kinds of qualities that likely make the

³³ This evaluation is also shared by other authors including Louër (2005:771), Hawthorne (2004:5), Alnajjar (2000:257), Tetreault (2000:62), and Stephenson (2011:187).

³⁴ Anonymous. Interview conducted in A. M. *Diwaniyya* in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 7, 2007.

³⁵ Haitham. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 15, 2010.

³⁶ Recovered from the reprint of the constitution published by UNDP-POGAR (United Nations Development Programme – Programme on Governance in the Arab Region) at <http://www.pogar.org>, accessed on May, 05, 2012.

³⁷ Abd Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 26, 2007.

³⁸ Ahmad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 7, 2007.

diwaniyyat of Kuwait such an appealing model to which some of the concepts that surround notions of civil society might be applied; particularly, the reception rooms' occupation of that valuable social terrain located between the familial house and the government (Delmas 2007:3). With these characteristics as a guideline, it is not too difficult to imagine the *diwaniyyat* being included in the laundry list of civil society associations that Robert Hefner provides in his brief summary of the term:

Though writers differ on its details, most agree in describing civil society as an arena of friendships, clubs, churches, business associations, unions, and other voluntary associations that mediate the vast expanse of social life between the household and the state. This associational sphere is seen as the place where citizens learn habits of free assembly, dialogue, and social initiative. [1998:17]

Phrased another way, albeit with less specificity about the variety of groups that can be encompassed by the classification, is Rosemary Coombe's explanation that civil society can be thought of as, "An amorphous space that lies somewhere between the state and society and mediates between the two by way of representatives circulating in the public sphere" (1997:3). Coombe continues with a more refined version of civil society that bars the most evident nonhousehold, nonstate entities from her definition: businesses and marketplaces. This further spatial clarity sets up a sectoral triptych where the state, the economy, and civil society can each be distinguished (Coombe 1997:3) along the same analytical lines that have been used by specialists in former Eastern Bloc and post-Soviet Russian studies since the fall of the European socialist regimes (Hann 2003:56). In this rendering, as in Coombe's evaluation, civil society is recognized idiomatically as a distinct "third sector" to emphasize its separation from the domains of governance and enterprise: "The third sector is a realm of informal groups – associations, clubs, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations). It derives its name from its role in a triad, where the

first is the state, the second is the private sector of businesses and enterprises, and the third is the realm of citizens' initiatives" (Hemment 2004:217). This three sector typology has also been amended to accommodate the addition of a fourth segment in appreciation of the possibility that contestants for political offices might not strictly adhere to the triad's framework. Therefore, civil society by this formula is proposed to be differentiated not only from the state and the economy, but from "political society" as well (Foley and Edwards 1998:11).

Yet, this process of trying to cordon off civil society from any other forms of social interaction, whether economic, political, or state based, has had its relevance questioned as a universally valid theoretical paradigm (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:17, 24). Principally, it is the obscurity engendered by delimiting where one zone ends and another begins, or assuming that certain sectors of associational life can enjoy absolute autonomy from all other facets of social intercourse without any intrusions, which makes isolating civil society an extremely subjective premise that ultimately undermines any semblance of clarity (Seligman 1998:28). Blair Rutherford makes note of this very shortcoming with his work on the impact that local power disparities and the national government's dispossessions can have on Zimbabwean commercial farm workers' involvements with an assortment of manifestations that typically fall beneath the rubric of civil society:

An important part of this analytic is its emphasis on what a hegemonic definition of the concept misses or marginalizes... Attention focuses on the role of boundaries... The crucial boundary-making processes are those between society and the state, public and private, and civil and un-civil forms of association and rationality. Under the gaze of critical analysis, these boundaries have been shown to be illusory, discriminatory, and constitutive. [2004:128]

Joseph Buttigieg, in a tone not too far removed from that of Rutherford, directs his efforts towards restoring what he believes to have been Antonio Gramsci's views on civil society as put forth in his infamous *Prison Notebooks*. Like much of the current general usage of the phrase, Gramsci's outline of civil society came to minimally represent "the notion that the state and civil society are two separate and opposed entities" (Buttigieg 1995:4). However, Buttigieg contends that such a misappropriation strips the concept of all of Gramsci's original intentions; namely, that civil society is a hegemonic extension of the political elites' command of the state (1995:27). On Gramscian side of this coin, cast sharply at odds against a civil society that is "somehow more authentic, and untainted by the vulgarities of the state and party politics" (Hearn 1997:34), power and sociability are tightly intertwined:

Civil society is not some kind of benign or neutral zone where different elements of society operate and compete freely and on equal terms, regardless of who holds a predominance of power in government. That would be the liberal view, which misleadingly portrays the formal restraints imposed upon the use of force held in reserve by the governmental apparatus of the state as a boundary line that demarcates the separation between the state and civil society. [Buttigieg 1995:27]

For each of these criticisms that challenge the assumptions of a civil society that can exist as a "neat division between state and society" (Worby and Rutherford 1997:67) it is hard not to recall Eric Wolf's stance in *Europe and the People without History* on the pitfalls of disciplinary disarticulation in the social sciences. Although Wolf was not writing about civil society, his assessment of the study of social relations without any attention to the political economy within which such interactions transpire echoes many of the same sentiments expressed here: "What is the flaw in these postulates? They predispose one to think of social relations not merely as autonomous but as causal in their own right, apart from their economic, political, or ideological context" (1997:9).

Yet, if the conceptual case for a civil society comprised of “all the associational forms in society other than the state and the market” (Benthall 2000:1) is inherently deficient in its perspective, either through its ambiguity or its “cheerful illusion” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:24) of the existence of discrete limits for interpersonal exchanges, the *diwaniyyat* of Kuwait can only add to the growing bodies of literature that are uncomfortable with many of the underlying presumptions that accompany the idea. For instance, despite the fact that the Kuwaiti guestrooms do inhabit a midway point that is neither strictly household nor formally state controlled (Delmas 2007:3), it would be disingenuous to mark them as segregated, independent institutions that are able to persist apart from the government,³⁹ the marketplace, or even the family. Otherwise, a strict pursuit of civil society would have to dismiss the *diwaniyyat* of politicians and contenders,⁴⁰ not to mention those of the country’s various political forums and associations,⁴¹ as straying too close to the state as well as “political society” itself (Foley and Edwards 1998:11). A similar problem can be posed for professional *diwaniyyat* in which the participants all share a common occupation or are invested in an overlapping field, like architects and engineers or lawyers and underwriters. Can a line be drawn with any degree of precision for these types of reception rooms that designates where they may sit in terms of a sectoral division of fraternity that excludes markets (Hemment

³⁹ Authorities have always been inconsistent with those *dawawin* that have run afoul of the law. Illegal election primaries (Alnajjar 2000:245-246) and the illicit construction of *diwaniyyat* on state property are probably the most frequent violations (Redman 2012:28-33). However, more well-known are the government’s raids on the *diwaniyyat* of the political opposition, the *diwaniyyat al ithnein* (Monday *Diwaniyyat*), in 1990 following the 1986 suspension of the National Assembly (Tetreault 2000:69-71).

⁴⁰ These offices are not limited to the National Assembly but include positions on the boards of sports clubs, the municipalities, and supermarket cooperatives.

⁴¹ One active “friend” of the Kuwait Democratic Forum (KDF) recalled that five *diwaniyyat*, each gathering on a different night of the week in different neighborhoods, could be linked to the KDF. Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 21, 2007.

2004:217)?⁴² These groupings are plainly off-the-clock and after-hours but their openness is curbed and trade knowledge is an expected topic.⁴³ Then, there are the countless family *dawawin* that play host to some combination of kinsmen depending on the circumstances of the relationships at any given time.⁴⁴ These, in conjunction with the guestrooms that are affiliated with individual tribes and tribal sections, complicate affixing the Kuwaiti *diwaniyyat* to any picture of civil society as “one in which a civic selfhood is (allegedly) distinguished from communal or collective roles and attributes” (Coombe 1997:3). Still, it cannot be ignored that this catalog of the *diwaniyyat* is rudimentary at best; in actuality, nearly every *diwaniyya* and most attendees mix these rough categories on a consistent basis: tribes and politics, families and businesses, politics and families, and so on.

It is also no easy task to try to manipulate the *dawawin* of Kuwait into the more optimistic proposals that seem to be tied in with the existence of, or need for, a strong and mature civil society. Foremost, a *diwaniyya* is not a space for a participatory public despite many local protestations that would prefer to convey these reception rooms as available and accessible to all callers.⁴⁵ As already stated, these are Kuwaiti men’s

⁴² Take, for example, one long-established law firm in Kuwait City that took steps to create a “social role” for its solicitors requiring them to visit certain *diwaniyyat*. Throughout the week, the firm’s lawyers are assigned specific *diwaniyyat* from which to recruit clients. Senior lawyers call on high-profile *diwaniyyat* because sending a junior attorney would insult an important host and reflect poorly on the law firm. Simple legal problems and issues are to be resolved free of charge by the visiting lawyer, but more complicated legal concerns will require a visit by the potential client to the firm for a no-cost consultation, with a fee charged only if the case goes to court or involves mediation. Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 1, 2008.

⁴³ Mishal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 12, 2006.

⁴⁴ It is not unheard of for family disputes to cause a *diwaniyya* of relatives to split into completely separate *dawawin* or for antagonistic kinsmen to withdraw from their familial guestroom until their differences are settled to avoid an awkward setting. Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

⁴⁵ Ahmad A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 21, 2007.

parlors (Al Mukames 1986:19)⁴⁶ and this reality alone rules out any direct contributions from the vast majority of the population.⁴⁷ This, too, calls into question the breadth of the civil society model (Seligman 1992:14) and if it is desirable to have its connotations attached to an institution that is so patently identifiable by its exclusionary nature.⁴⁸ Another issue is that civil society is oftentimes envisioned as a remedy for the distributive deficiencies of welfare states (Hefner 1998:17) that will persuade “non-governmental groups to take on the functions of the state” (Hemment 2004:217). By providing services, it is hoped, civil society can reduce the reliance of citizens upon the government (Hefner 1998:17), thereby leading to the promotion of private markets founded on capitalist principles (Hemment 2004:221). This theme relies on there being a dialectical tension defining civil society (Coombe 1997:3) and the state, whereby the growth of one results in a reduction of the other; two realms that continually oppose each other (Hearn 1997:33). Once more, though, such expectations are especially inadequate insofar as the *diwaniyyat* of Kuwait are concerned. These are men’s rooms, parlors, and meeting places and it can be said quite confidently that the individual proprietors hold no grand delusions

⁴⁶ Translation provided by the author.

⁴⁷ The most current report in 2010 by the Central Statistical Office of the Ministry of Planning estimated the country’s total population to be 3,566,437 with Kuwaitis numbering only 1,133,214 (Recovered from <http://www.cso.gov.kw>, accessed on April 13, 2012). Of this number, there are 195,000 male Kuwaitis of voting age (Olimat 2011:81); in other words, this is the 18.2 percent of the total population that for the most part constitutes the demographic of the *diwaniyyat*. For the female portion of the citizenry there is one *diwaniyya*, that of Rasha Al Sabah, that stands as an often cited exception to male exclusiveness in these institutions (Tetreault 2003:38). Since women were first granted the right to vote in the parliamentary elections of 2006 and now have legal political power, there are questions amongst women as to whether or not their sittings (*yam’ah*) constitute a *diwaniyya*, whether or not women should try to appropriate an institution with such overt male connotations, and the extent to which men’s *diwaniyyat* will accept them if they wish to attend. Social distance and unfamiliarity are also limitations to mixed gender *diwaniyyat* that cannot be overlooked and both of these themes are apparent in one woman’s experience: “I was going to meet my father to hear a lecturer. But only upon arriving at the address did I realize that the lecture was going to be held in a *diwaniyya*. I called my father and did not enter the *diwaniyya* until he arrived to give me some [sense of] security. Even then, I strongly felt out of place and uncomfortable in the presence of so many strange men.” E. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 3, 2006.

⁴⁸ This segregation extends to male citizens as well. As one longtime *diwaniyya* guest explained the institutions’ open-door creed: “The *diwaniyyat* are open for all, but not all are welcomed.” Abd Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 26, 2007.

of one day replacing the state's massive welfare entitlements. Moreover, the amazing proliferation of these establishments over the last decades (Al-Kandari 2002:68-69) has done little to promote economic privatization; if anything, the public sector portion of the national economy is as lopsided as it has ever been (Herb 2009:381-384). Simply put, these additional examples show that civil society, as a concept, just presents too many limitations to properly serve as a starting point for understanding where the *diwaniyyat* fit into the social fabric of modern day Kuwait. This conclusion is largely in part because, in concurrence with Robert Hefner, "Rarely has so heavy an analytic cargo been strapped on the back of so slender a conceptual beast" (1998:17).

Rather, what is proffered by this research is an abandonment of civil society as an ideational construct for situating the *diwaniyyat*, and instead it is proposed that it is much more profitable to examine the ways that these institutions are integrated into the state, albeit informally and without the obvious martial burdens that come with governance (Abrams 1988:77). Moving "beyond the old state-society dichotomy" (Pieke 2004:518), a contentious split that can easily become reified in the rhetoric of civil society's proponents (Rutherford 2004:128), the purpose here is to concentrate on how the *diwaniyyat* populate the interactional zones where state and society encroach upon one another to such an extent that it can make these areas practically indistinguishable. Whereas Hisham Sharabi derided such habits as symptomatic of Arab neopatriarchal customs, where the office is inseparable from the household salon (1988:131) and perhaps even the other way around as presently argued absent the essentializing overtones for the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya*, Timothy Mitchell suggests a more nuanced variation that is less of a cultural indictment: "How are the porous edges where official

practice mixes with the semiofficial and the semiofficial with the unofficial to be turned into lines of separation, so that the state can stand apart as a discrete, self-directing object” (1991:82). Likewise, as with Mitchell’s summation, there is Philip Abrams’ critique of the objectification of the state as a unit of study that can be thought of as distinctive from “the social agencies... of the society in which it operates” (1988:59); on this subject, Abrams was adamant that positioning the state as a detached, self-contained entity was a gross miscalculation that concealed the political truths about legitimacy and nonstate forms of power (1988:76-77, 82). This may be why the state tends to be more legible in those places where it is most unexpected: the everyday acts and deeds of the populous are precisely where the state’s opacity (Das 2007:163-164, 169) gives way to “the reality of the mundane, interested, and often uncoordinated contests of power that make up the individual and institutional ‘state system’” (Candea 2011:312). Hence, it takes some creative effort to disregard or undervalue the complex interfaces that mediate the interchanges between the offices of the state, its bureaucracies, the informal arenas, and the citizenry (Pieke 2004:533).

Certainly, in a fashion kindred to that witnessed with the privileging of the social component of the civil society concept, without caution there is also the acute dilemma of overstating the role of the state in any discussion of social life. If civil society is a nebulous body (Coombe 1997:3), it can be presumed that the state does not fare any better. Impressions range from it being no more than an idea or a mask that screens political practices (Abrams 1988:82); a “fragmented and contested conglomeration of individuals and institutions” (Hoag 2010:7); to a “machinery of intentions – usually termed ‘rule making,’ ‘decision making,’ or ‘policy making’ – the state becomes

essentially a subjective realm of plans, programs, or ideas” (Mitchell 1991:82).⁴⁹

Without a doubt, attempting to pry the state away from society is difficult to say the least (Rutherford 2004:128) and it is plausible only with a highly idiosyncratic set of standards in place (Mitchell 1991:81-83). Of course, this should not be interpreted to mean that the state and the localized daily trials that shape it (Bailey 1972:35-36) are always inseparable from the routines of day-to-day socializing, nor does it imply that the politics of the state are inescapable (Candea 2011:311-313). To think so, Marshall Sahlins insists in his whimsical refrain on Foucault that admonishes much of the current disciplinary fascination with power, is to universalize culture into a generic silhouette: “Power, power everywhere, and how the signs do shrink. Power, power everywhere, and nothing else to think” (2002:20). However, it is this definitional imprecision for locating the contours of the state’s intersections with society, the unidentifiable boundaries that obscure where norms end and regulatory mores commence (Lomnitz 1988:43-44), that can lead to the informal institutional arrangements found within formal political and bureaucratic systems to be overlooked (Helmke and Levitsky 2004:725-727).

The rentier logic⁵⁰ of the Kuwaiti government’s cradle-to-grave welfare arrangements with its citizenry makes this chore of delineating the lines of public and private propriety even more muddled (Horn 1988:403). This is because, under general

⁴⁹ Notwithstanding the contemporary insights that these definitions have provoked, it is worth recalling the classic Weberian image of the state as an instrument for the rightful dispensation of violence within territorial limits (1991:78).

⁵⁰ Chatelus and Schemel give a fairly agreed upon synopsis of rent as, “any income not originating from the productive activity of the concerned unit, the flows and dimensions of which are not directly linked to the beneficiary’s activity” (1984:255). For the rentier economy, as it is understood for the oil producing countries, it should be added that the rent monies come from sources external to the government and are accrued directly by the state (Robinson 1996:35). However, this is a matter of degrees dependent on the extent to which the rents make up government revenues and are circulated throughout the population. In fractional terms, oil rents are 93.2 percent of the Kuwaiti government’s operating revenue (Al Khouri 2008) while in per capita rates this equals slightly less than U.S. \$30,000 for each citizen, ranking Kuwait the third highest amongst the oil exporters. Compared to other petrol nations, these numbers qualify Kuwait to be considered an extreme, or rich, rentier (Herb 2009:376-377).

conditions where state-managed rents dominate the local socio-economic and socio-political landscape, it is scarcely an exaggeration that,

In such a context, the role of the state is paramount: it is the unavoidable instrument of resource allocation whether in ‘liberal’ or ‘socialist’ regimes. Paradoxically, the state plays and even more determinant role in the economic activities of ‘liberal’ countries through budgetary expenditures... state-controlled or state-supported enterprises, food subsidies, administered prices, etc. [Chatelus and Schemeil 1984:255-256]⁵¹

It is commonplace knowledge that the regime and the bureaucracy in Kuwait are the unrivaled mechanisms for allocating the state’s resources. Basically, the government’s welfare mandates have replaced the risks of the markets with the securities of entitlements (Pacek and Radcliff 2008:268-270) and it has inserted itself into many of the support roles that were once filled by “traditional societal institutions” (Quadagno 1987:112). Beginning with state employment, recognized today as a “right” by the citizenry (El-Katiri et al. 2011:27),⁵² close to 90 percent of all Kuwaitis are occupied in the public sector⁵³ (Ghabra 1997:361),⁵⁴ although many of these jobs are created merely to tackle unemployment and not to satisfy any pressing service shortages. Yet, the government of Kuwait is not restricted to paying only for its own employees as private enterprises are subsidized for hiring Kuwaitis so that they might meet the same levels of compensation that public service workers receive; or, reworded with a purposeful hint of

⁵¹ Montinola and Jackman contend that this is the “OPEC effect”: a petrostate’s total domination of markets in conjunction with an absence of political checks (2002:169-170).

⁵² The language of the Kuwait Constitution supports these assertions in both clauses of Article 41: “Every Kuwaiti has the right to work and to choose the type of his work... The State shall endeavor to make it [employment] available to citizens and to make its terms equitable.” Recovered from the reprint of the constitution published by UNDP-POGAR at <http://www.pogar.org>, accessed on May, 05, 2012.

⁵³ For the sake of comparison, Messaoud Hammouya, with the Bureau of Statistics at the International Labour Office in Geneva, calculated public sector employment to account for about 30 percent of the world’s total workforce. Reducing this further, Hammouya found that, “Today the share of public employment in developed market-economy countries is close to 22 percent of total employment; the figure is around 40 percent in countries in transition and varies from 8 percent to 30 percent in developing countries” (1999:1).

⁵⁴ By contrast, expatriates make up 98 percent of the private sector’s labor force (El-Katiri et al. 2011:19).

irony, the state pays for Kuwaitis to work in the private sector to lessen their reliance on the government for jobs (El-Katiri et al. 2011:20, 27). This economic presence by the state is, in Paul Salem's opinion, not insignificant:

The monolithic and statist aspect of the Kuwaiti economy is the main factor that gives the state a large measure of ultimate control and influence over society. While Kuwaitis agitate, oppose, and complain, their economic interests tie them firmly to the state and dissuade them from more openly shaking or challenging the system. Students and youth agitate for change, but when they graduate they invariably turn to the public sector for jobs. Even the so-called liberal reformers, who complain about the limited role the private sector plays in the economic development of Kuwait, suggest... increased government subsidies for private companies as a way to bring about such change. [2007:9-10]

On top of these impressive employment figures for the public and the private sectors are all of the ordinary subsidies that are an accepted part of Kuwaiti citizenship: retirement pensions, free education, free medical care⁵⁵ in domestic facilities or abroad if necessary, marriage gifts, electricity, water, food staples, housing assistance, and fuel. Occasionally, loans and consumer debts are also forgiven along with the periodic Amiri grants that are distributed to all nationals from the state treasury (El-Katiri et al. 2011:8, 11-13, 17, 18).⁵⁶

It is undeniable that this sort of rentier contract put into place by the Kuwaiti government is much more consequential than just random allocations that are somehow

⁵⁵ As with employment, the Kuwait Constitution upholds retirement support (Article 11), education (Article 40), and health care (Article 15) as responsibilities that are to be fulfilled by the government. This is not to suggest that the constitution's articles are infallible but to point out that there is a documented legal context, formulated by the state in 1962, which endorses the citizenry's expectations for their entitlements. Articles recovered from the reprint of the constitution published by UNDP-POGAR at <http://www.pogar.org>, accessed on May, 05, 2012.

⁵⁶ One example of such sovereign discretion occurred in January 2011, around the same time that the uprisings of the "Arab Spring" swept through the region, when the Amir gave each Kuwaiti a KD 1,000 (U.S. \$3,500) present and a 14 month grant of free food rations. Ostensibly, these were awarded to the populace to concurrently commemorate several events: the nation's 50th year of independence, the 20th anniversary of liberation from Iraq, and Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah's own fifth year in office. Recovered from Arab Times Online; January 17, 2011; "KD 1,000 'To Every Kuwaiti'" at <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/164462/reftab/36/Default.aspx>, accessed on May, 05, 2012.

allowed to flow unsupervised to the populace. Instead, the rights that come with citizenship are buried deep within a byzantine bureaucracy (Hasenfeld et al. 1987:400) that is bereft of anything close to administrative transparency (Hertog 2010b:282-283). Surely, Kuwait's indecipherable bureaucracy is not unique, a point that Colin Hoag does not miss in his review of the occurrences of bureaucratic morass when observed across societies:

Bureaucracies are profoundly ironic when viewed in terms of their policies and everyday practices. Despite their self-representations as rational and efficient... bureaucracies often represent precisely the opposite. For many people, *bureaucracy* signifies slowness and delays, unnecessary paperwork, complicated protocols, and other measures or conditions that generally constrain the individual. These organizations' rules and hierarchies are often clearly spelled out, and yet bureaucracies are always at some level opaque, inscrutable, and illogical to both "insider" and "outsider" alike. [2011:81-82]

Still, what makes the Kuwaiti bureaucracy different from public employment in almost every other country (Hammouya 1999:1) is that the entire citizenry is essentially a part of it (Ghabra 1997:361). Kuwait is, quite frankly, a "nation of bureaucrats" (Herb 2009:375) where the state, for all intents and purposes, is operated by most members of the nation's citizenry. Every social right, entitlement, rent dispensation, and favorable allocation is secluded behind a wall of protocols (Silver 2010:284) that is overseen by a population of citizen bureaucrats (Verdery 1991:424-425) who possess a great amount of discretion for expediting or delaying requests (Lipsky 2010:14). Knowing someone or having a proper introduction can transform what is normally an "inscrutable, unpredictable" (Hoag 2010:6) bureaucratic encounter and turn it into an ingratiating, personalized exchange (Boissevain 1966:29). It is this malleability of roles (Boissevain 1974:4-5) in such a widespread system of government laborers – the relative-administrator, the friend-functionary, the acquaintance-clerk – that easily confuses efforts

“to distinguish between what is in the state and what is in society” (Kerkvliet 2001:268).⁵⁷ What can be problematic is tracking down that perfectly positioned gatekeeper who can negotiate access on feasible terms.

The presence of dysfunctional formal institutions like Kuwaiti’s overstuffed and inconsistent bureaucracy (Hertog 2010b:282-283) is frequently cited as a precursor for their substitution by adaptive informal institutions (Tsai 2006:140). These latter bodies provide, according to Helmke and Levitsky, a “‘second best’ strategy for actors who prefer, but cannot achieve, a formal institutional solution” (2004:730). As an offshoot of the official sector, or as a response to its defects, some alternative social practices can even compliment formal spheres without much apparent contradiction (Lomnitz 1988:47-48). In the milieu of Kuwaiti male sociability, the ubiquitous *diwaniyyat* fill the gaps where the state’s bureaucratic incoherence overlaps with opportunities for the personal utilization of governmental resources and privileges (Kerkvliet 2001:263). For it is within any guestroom that a menagerie of brokers, patrons, gatekeepers, friends, relatives, and clients can all be brought together under one roof.⁵⁸ However, just because the *diwaniyyat* are pervasive and well suited to rectify the failings of the state’s formal apparatuses it does not mean that they constitute any formative challenge to the ruling establishment (Scott 1985:33). To the contrary, the *diwaniyyat* host a competitive “informal adjustment” to the bureaucratic status quo that allows participants to bend the regulations without fracturing the structure of their governmental rewards so that they might “systematically deviate from the rules of the system in order to stay in it” (Lees

⁵⁷ One is reminded here of Michel de Certeau’s articulation of institutional subversion via interpersonal exchange: “Thereby the institution one is called to serve finds itself infiltrated by a style of social exchange... that is, by an economy of the ‘gift’ (generosities which are also ways of asking for something in return)” (De Certeau et al. 1980:4).

⁵⁸ Yusef A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on April 2, 2007.

1986:619). It is not so much that the *diwaniyyat* permit the avoidance of bureaucratic controls altogether; more accurately, these men's parlors actually reinforce incorporation into the state's official channels by mending its perceived limitations for aggrieved supplicants. Therefore, the transactions that occur in a *diwaniyya* cannot be thought of in the manner of classic patron-clientelism whereby the patron provides "material resources seen to be strategically more important to the client than anything the client could supply the patron in return" (Wilson 1990:163). This neglects the "externality of benefits" (Corra and Willer 2002:180) being sought where the desired allowances are state resources, not private property, and what are brokered by intermediaries are bureaucratic admittances to these public assets (Hertog 2010b:289).⁵⁹

It is true that the old saying, "It's not just what you know but who you know," (Lin 2001:41) captures the many of the constant reminders of all the frustrations that come with doing business in Kuwait's convoluted state system.⁶⁰ However, this proverb's local derivative, *wasta* (connections), is all but inseparable from the men's visitation networks that are expressed by their nightly calls to their associated *diwaniyyat* and there is a good chance that discussions of one will invoke some mention, intended or not, of the other. Such was the case with a young surgeon who once offhandedly remarked, "I used to attend a *diwaniyya* with my father [because] I was told that I had to

⁵⁹ This is not to deny the existence of Weingrod's political patronage in Kuwait by which "politicians distribute public jobs or special favors in exchange for electoral support" (1968:379). As widely reported there are plenty of "service" parliamentarians (Tetreault 2000:115) who, directly or through surrogate "election keys," use the *diwaniyyat* as a forum to barter state privileges for electoral backing. Nonetheless, far more common are those guestrooms where the participants are relatively equals. Such horizontality lends itself more to relations of reciprocity, helping out, and open-ended mutual assistance (Lomnitz 1988:43-46) than it does to outright hierarchical patronage (Wolf 1966b:47, 86). Parity does not, however, insinuate the absence of "lop-sided" (Pitt-Rivers 1971:140) friendships, pragmatic interactions (Boissevain 1974:6), and obligatory attendance (Antoun 1979:43-44).

⁶⁰ Faisal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 3, 2007.

go in order to develop connections [*wasta*].⁶¹ There is nothing exceptional in this comment and there are many variations of it with more or less colorful details or intriguing circumstances. Still, this single sentence is clear in identifying Kuwait's guestrooms, the *diwaniyyat*, as the places where these *wasta* relationships can be crystallized. Yet, the real significance of this doctor's brief reflection is revealed when it is recalled that the *wasta* he is referencing is tantamount to a form of bureaucratic partiality; without the state this utility of the *diwaniyyat* as a liaison for *wasta* is incomplete since the core cause for these connections is unknown. It is only by emphasizing the state's day-to-day presence (Salem 2007:9) in the lives of Kuwait's citizens that the value of the *diwaniyyat* is immediately recognizable for harnessing the social capital (Portes and Landolt 2000:532) needed to make the welfare bureaucracy simultaneously navigable and flexible (Lomnitz 1982:53-54). In this sense, the *dawawin* are emblematic of personalized hybrid institutions that act as surrogates for accommodating the government's rigid bureaucratic command over the state.

Outline of the Research Project

To understand where the *diwaniyyat* fit into interstices of state and society in Kuwait requires an examination of how the ruling contract that binds individuals, groups, and governing bodies together has been configured, amended, and rethought to adapt to changing circumstances. This is summarized in Chapter 2, beginning with a look at how Kuwait's pre-oil oligarchy used their control of trade to dominate local governance and control the town's populace (Crystal 1995:21). The mode of rule during this time distanced the sovereign from the public because the merchant elite were actually the ones

⁶¹ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 3, 2007.

holding all of the power (Tetreault 2000:36). The emergence of Kuwait as a major oil exporter in the mid-20th century ruptured this arrangement and established the dynastic Al Sabah family as the unrivaled political, economic, and social players in the country (Shah 1995:1018). The consequences of this new paradigm, a rentier state that legitimates itself domestically through its policies of redistribution, are reviewed in Chapter 3. This chapter is of particular importance because it highlights the nature of state-society interactions in Kuwait since it has been awash with petroleum profits: the creation of governmental leisure employment (Herb 2009:382), the abundance of obscure and redundant administrative procedures (Hertog 2010b:292), and the personalization of offices and state privileges. Chapter 4 introduces ways in which individuals can access or circumvent the state framework by relying on their own visitation contacts or by calling on the networks of others via the institution of the *diwaniyya*. It is stressed here that it is within these informal guestrooms that the intersection of state and society is most visible. Furthermore, an explanation is given for the proliferation of these establishments and what this expansion has meant for state brokerage. Chapter 5 elaborates on the value of *diwaniyya* networking with an in-depth review of seven case studies that serve to illustrate how supplicants can use these reception rooms to jockey for their positions along the continuum of state and society. While there are the obvious instances of political candidacy and government permits that clearly show the state's presence in the *diwaniyya*, there are also the acts of family unity, friendly favors, and community activism that can sometimes make the state's proximity appear less apparent. Nevertheless, this appearance should not be too deceiving when, provided the government's command over its own incalculable clientele, there is still the local truism

which holds that, “anyone who needs anything visits a *diwaniyya*.”⁶² Lastly, Chapter 6 will review the arguments made in this study about state and society being actively transacted in Kuwait’s guestrooms, and it will also look at some of the possibilities available for future research.

⁶² Reyadh. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 5, 2006.

CHAPTER 2

SETTING: KUWAIT YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Endowed with an astonishing array of cinemas, restaurants, shopping malls, and coffee shops, as well as its own brand of chic nightspots, Kuwait City today is the epitome of the globally homogenized (Hannerz 1992:234-237), transnational marketplace. Undoubtedly, the contemporary portrait of Kuwait City is not one merely indicative of fiscal modernization; but, rather a picture of *hyper*-modernization buttressed by globalization (Tetreault 2000:24, 50-51) and reinforced by the rampant consumption of imported, particularly Western, commodities. This reality is most colorfully expressed by the observations of Anh Nga Longva:

The shelves of Kuwaiti supermarkets were filled with French yogurt, German sausages, Belgian salad dressing, Dutch lettuce, Swiss cheese, and American peanut butter. Flowers in the flower shops were flown in from the Netherlands, Cyprus, and Columbia, clothes were imported from Paris as well as Beirut and Taiwan, while cars and all electric and electronic equipment came from Japan and Korea. [1997:35]

However, the pursuit of foreign-produced goods that characterizes personal spending habits in the country reverberates throughout the physical landscape of the city as well. In only a half-century, this coastal township (Ansari and Qutub 1983:52) emerged as a visual manifestation that adhered more to the blueprints and sensibilities of British, French, Italian, and Finnish architectural firms (Mahgoub 2008:164) than it did to local

traditions. The resultant built environment introduced an alien aesthetic that is notable for its departure from anything indigenous and its unquestionable determination to “loudly reject any association with the past” (Al Bahar 1985:65). Yet, Kuwait’s appetite for the novelty of imported products is equally matched by its desire to fill the ranks of its manual, unskilled and low-status job sectors with migrant laborers (Shah 1995:1017) whose numbers, at nearly three-quarters of the total population, dwarf those of the citizenry (Tetreault 2000:50).

Of course, it is unlikely that even a single one of these traits that outwardly exemplify Kuwait in the 21st century – the rampant consumerism that borders on fetishism (Taussig 1980:25), the sprawling superficiality of trendy residential villas (Al Bahar 1985:63) and modish public buildings, and what has recently been described as the “Asianization” (Longva 1997:34) of the state’s labor force – would have even been possible were it not for the country’s fortuitous location atop one of the world’s largest oil reserves (Ismael 1982:78). Consequently, the nation prospered following the Second World War under what is deemed “one of the most dramatic rises in national income ever known” (Hill 1975:537); a status quo that is a direct outcome of the government’s redistribution of its petroleum income to all nationals. Promises of guaranteed employment in an ever-expanding bureaucracy (Kaboudan 1988:50) and mandatory preferential hiring policies in private companies, free medical and educational services (Hill 1975:547), and generous early retirement pensions (Russell and Al Ramadhan 1994:581-582) are just some of the programs enacted that have given rise to Kuwait’s present-day leisure class (Shah 1986:824-826). Ultimately, though, the regime’s largess has fostered a welfare society that is almost completely reliant upon the reallocation of

capital surpluses generated solely by oil revenues (Ismael 1993:100, 154-155) and subject to external fluctuations (Kaboudan 1988:48).

Still, it is easy for this current depiction of Kuwait to be deceptively convincing in its portrayal of a statewide bourgeoisie culture prospering in perpetuity. Indeed, this illusion is greatly bolstered by the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s the Kuwait Development Board organized the demolition of the town's old mudbrick structures and defensive walls (Mahgoub 2008:154-156) to pave the way for its ultramodern concrete cityscape (Dickson 1971:191); a declaration that structurally and symbolically denoted the severance of Kuwait's ties to its heritage in favor of a new order. Similarly, oil profits eradicated all traces of traditional production, along with any associated fiscal motivations (Crystal 1995:11), and replaced it with widespread civil servitude (Ghabra 1997:361). However, this semblance of development is notable precisely for its recent occurrence in that it was "an unprecedented fast transformation of [the] Beduin tribal mode of life" (Ansari and Qutub 1983:52). Hence, the image of affluent Gulf living is undercut by a not too distant history of hardship, scarcity and want; more simply, it is "the story of a humble, organic desert Arab village" (Shiber 1964:2).

Pre-Oil: Migration, Settlement and Growth

The textual existence of Kuwait before the 18th century remains shrouded in uncertainty (Slot 2003:8). Primarily, all earlier references are limited to vague cartographic identifications of the area as *Kadhema* and *Kazima* on a mid-17th century French map, or the even more general Ottoman legal designation of the territory as falling outside of the Porte's protection and thereby constituting part of the "Land of the

Tribes” (Slot 1991:10, 38). Yet, it is known that until the 1750s the entire environs of eastern Arabia were part of the *dira*, or customary lands and pasturage (Sweet 1967:1136), of the Bani Khalid (Abu Hakima 1983:1-5) and it is within this ambiguous setting that the Bani ‘Utub, the forebears of the country’s dynastic Al Sabah ruling family (Abdulmoati 2003:13), first warrant mention.

Local sources contend that during the second half of the 17th century a continuous drought in Najd (Abu Hakima 1983:4), compounded by sporadic livestock raids by opposing tribes (Fattah 1997:26) and intertribal conflict, drove the inhabitants of Haddar from their lands in al-Aflaj to search for better prospects on the eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula (Al Juhany 2002:85). These migrant Najdis were a collection of related families (Abu Hakima 1983:4) who later combined under the ‘Utub clan moniker; and, although this is a designation of uncertain origin (Crystal 1995:18), the ‘Utub were definitively adjoined to the ‘Anizah Confederation through the Dahamshah Section of the ‘Amarat Tribe (Dickson 1956:26, 28). After wandering for several decades (Al Shamlan 2000:26) and unsuccessfully attempting to settle in a number of possible locations along both sides of the Persian Gulf, the ‘Utub finally found sanctuary with the Bani Khalid in one of their outposts, a fishing village and shaykhly summer residence (Abu Hakima 1983:3) known as Qorain⁶³ (Longva 1997:19). Still, despite the contemptuous relations that accompanied the ‘Utub before their eventual piecemeal arrival in Qorain,⁶⁴ the years

⁶³ This settlement has been alternatively identified as Grain, Green, Grijn, Graine, Grane, and Gran by 18th century European Cartographers. However, Slot contends that this name does indeed correspond with the Persian designation of the village as Gran (Slot 1991:69, 107).

⁶⁴ One tradition presumes that the ‘Utub were chased from Qatar to Qorain following a dispute with the resident Al-Musallam. Another version suggests that difficulties with Arabs along the Persian coast drove the ‘Utub to continue on to Qorain. Alternatively, there is the report which states that the ‘Utub were either forced from the Ottoman territory of Basra due to their propensity for raiding caravans bound for the city (Abu Hakima 1983:4) or the threat that they posed for shipping along the Shatt al Arab after arriving there subsequent to a clash with the Huwala in Bahrain (Slot 1991:70-72).

of migration were filled with the lessons of an oceangoing lifestyle that would prove beneficial to the nomads as they made the transition from desert husbandry to mobile seafarers (Fattah 1997:26) encumbered with the task to create a maritime community that could rightly be called “Najd by the sea” (Dickson 1956:25). Of course, while the establishment of the itinerant ‘Utub in Qorain marks what is popularly viewed as the founding origins of the territory that ultimately developed into Kuwait (Tetreault 2000:33-35), this perspective obviously discounts the constant cycles of immigrations and departures that defined the nation’s past as Bedouin, Persians, Iraqis, Jews, and Gulf tribesmen found a place for themselves in the port settlement (Broeze 1997:163, 178-179).

While the protracted movement of the ‘Utub from Najd to its ultimate, though unforeseen, destination on the northwest shores of the Persian Gulf was a monumental undertaking, the confluence of serendipitous circumstances that benefited the nascent encampment and helped usher it into a burgeoning coastal town cannot be overlooked. Ecologically, the location of Qorain offered very little. It was devoid of surface water and its sandy, gravelly terrain (Dickson 1956:31) was unsuitable for agriculture (Haarmann 2003:38-39). Nonetheless, sweet subsurface groundwater and the nearby oasis at Jahra (Dickson 1956:26, 44) provided some reprieve for the small population. More significantly, the site afforded its inhabitants a superb natural harbor sheltered by reefs (Broeze 1997:149), the potential of which had never been realized by the Bani Khalid in their preoccupation with control of the desert (Crystal 1995:19). Further still, the administrative ambiguity of Qorain engendered a favorable political environment for the newly arrived ‘Utub. The neighboring Ottoman *Vilayet* of Basra was far too ill-

equipped, mismanaged (Anscombe 1997:91) and distracted by Persia (Abu Hakima 1983:11) to extend its influence into the tribal hinterlands of the Arabian subcontinent. Frederick Anscombe, in his summation of the Porte's affairs in the region in the late 19th century, presents a chronic condition that is applicable to the Sultanate's tenure in the Gulf at even an earlier stage:

This record of ineptitude was the result of conditions...that also afflicted Iraq. Too little money, too little manpower, too little equipment hamstrung policy makers. More debilitating were corruption and the related increase in popular dissatisfaction with unfair, arbitrary rule. More important, however, was the problem of communication. Corruption flourished because officials had little supervision or fear of retribution. Policy had to be shaped in Istanbul without the benefit of prompt, accurate information about events in distant areas. [1997:91]

As a result of this incompetence, despite the proximity of Basra, the 'Utub were able to attend to their own concerns without fear of interference from Ottoman agents (Slot 1991:126). Similarly, Persia, the only other local power with considerable resources, was too preoccupied with its own survival to pose any realistic threat to Qorain. Lastly, the position of the Bani Khalid was already fractured enough internally to give the 'Utub relative autonomy in their own undertakings, although they were still strong enough to police any recalcitrant tribes and provide the 'Utub with the cover of protection (Abu Hakima 1983:3-5, 11, 17).

Given the unobtrusive political situation that greeted the Najdi immigrants upon their debarkation at Qorain it is quite obvious that the settlers could pursue their own interests relatively uninhibited. The harbor that had gone largely ignored by the Bani Khalid (Crystal 1995:19) was a vital asset that had not begun to reveal its full potential and the 'Utub, with their maritime skills developed in Qatar (Mansfield 1990:6) and honed throughout the course of their migration (Crystal 1995:18), were well-poised to

exploit this resource. Moreover, the surrounding barren landscape (Dickson 1956:31) dictated that any permanent, growing population would have to turn towards seafaring to support itself (Broeze 1997:153). Thus, this is the framework within which Qorain emerged from a nondescript seasonal abode for the Bani Khalid into a bountiful “safe haven for trade” (Slot 2003:13) that not only thrived in the Gulf (Crystal 1995:19) but linked the markets of the Indian Ocean with those of the Mediterranean (Slot 2003:10-11).

Upon the death of Shaykh Sulayman bin Muhammad in 1752, the last powerful leader of the Bani Khalid had passed and successional infighting complicated by an unease over the rise of Wahhabi strength in the Arabian interior effectively granted Qorain and its resident ‘Utub their independence (Abu Hakima 1983:5, 19). According to a prior agreement between three principal ‘Utubi families, the Sabah, the Khalifa and the Jabar, the Sabah assumed the reins of governance following the demise of the Bani Khalid. Husayn Khazal depicts this negotiation as one wherein,

[In 1716]... the chiefs of the most important three tribes that inhabited Kuwait entered into an alliance. These were Sabah bin Jabar bin Salman bin Ahmad, Khalifah bin Muhammed and Jabar bin Rahmat al’ilbi (the chief of the Jalaahmeh). The conditions... [stated that] Sabah will have leadership in the affairs of government... Khalifah will have leadership of the financial affairs in commerce; and Jabar will control the affairs of work on the sea. All profits were to be equally divided among them. [Quoted in Ismael 1982:23]

The execution of this covenant translated into arrangement that divided the labor amongst the primary ‘Utubi lineages; the Khalifa and Jabar would not have to distract themselves from their commerce to deal with executive tasks like peacekeeping and dispute management, whereas the Sabah did not have to divert their attention away from administrative responsibilities in order to generate a regular income (Tetreault 2000:33-

34). Also, it is around this same period of ascendant ‘Utubi sovereignty that the name *Koueit*, a diminutive of *kut* or “fortress” and indicative of either the existent Bani Khalid barracks (Abu Hakima 1983:1-2) or a walled town, first appears in European records through the travelogues of Danish expeditionary member Carsten Niebuhr (Haarmann 2003:39-40, 43-44). During the next two centuries, the ‘Utub prospered as mercantile “maritime nomads” (Slot 1991:110) with a fleet that already amounted to roughly 800 ships as early as the 1760s (Haarmann 2003:41). This Golden Age of Kuwaiti nautical prosperity ushered-in an era of near unrestricted trade and commercial expansion for the tiny shaykhdom. High customs levies imposed by Ottoman authorities in Basra deflected some traffic to Kuwait’s duty-free port which released traders from any polls aside from a small subsidy for the Shaykh. The absence of customs officers also meant that merchandise was not scrutinized and goods prohibited by the Porte could be transferred without incident through Kuwait (Fattah 1997:9, 26-27). Additionally, the overland caravan routes between the Gulf and Aleppo conveniently bypassed the Basra – Baghdad circuit and saved several weeks traveling time for only the cost of the Shaykh’s fee for safe passage (Abu Hakima 1983:6-7); a guarantee that the Al Sabah could afford to travelers partly due to the bonds of marriage that had enhanced their relationships with the inland tribes (Ismael 1982:27). As this makes clear, Kuwait flourished not solely because of aquatic shipping lanes or terrestrial transport, but rather due to its interposing position as an entrepôt hub that provided a “gateway...between the sea and the desert area of northeastern Arabia” (Broeze 1997:149).

While the caravan commerce in and out of Kuwait was chiefly confined to the Al Sabah either awarding or denying transit to groups according to their payments of

appropriate tolls (Abu Hakima 1983:6-7) and the prevailing rapport between the Shaykh and the Bedouin tribes (Ismael 1982:27), the dynamics of the sea trade, on the other hand, were much more inclusive of the settled residents of Kuwait. With the limited exception of stock wranglers inside the town, the caravan workforce was populated entirely by pastoralists who, in turn, were themselves insignificant to the settlement's labor pool (Broeze 1997:162-163). Therefore, historic Kuwait proper could rightfully be classified as maritime-intensive economic entity; a sentiment that, though true, was somewhat overstated by merchant descendant Saif Marzooq Al Shamlan: "The sea was the basic element in the formation of Kuwait. It is the source of its life. Without the sea the name Kuwait would be lost to the world" (2000:59). This seaward orientation was a year-round endeavor for Kuwait's inhabitants and it rested on a mutually reinforcing occupational structure that Frank Broeze labeled the as the community's five pillars: "fishing, pearl diving, shipping, shipbuilding, and trade" (1997:152).

There are several points here to note in terms of the settlement's seafaring agenda and its relevance for the Kuwaitis. Foremost is the reality that the port's population was absolutely dependent on imported provisions simply for their survival. Everything from the water shipped-in daily from the Shatt al-Arab in Iraq (Dickson 1971:83) to the products of Murtada bin 'Ali bin 'Alwan's detailed 18th century analysis that included, "Fruit, melons, and other victuals are brought to Kuwait from Basra by boat every day, for it is a port city... All the cereals, i.e. wheat and others, arrive by sea because... [the] soil does not allow for agriculture; even date-palms do not grow there nor any other trees" (Haarmann 2003:37-38). Ironically, the boatbuilding industry itself was even fully reliant upon timber and materials that originated in India (Al Mughni 1993:23). As this

illustrates, marine commerce was the only mode of production that could generate adequate sustenance for the townspeople; fishing and inland pursuits such as animal husbandry or farming were too insufficient to support the most basic needs of the populace (Ismael 1993:24).

However, stocking the shelves of the souqs for local consumption in an environment that yielded no surplus in return required that Kuwaiti merchants focus their efforts elsewhere to garner capital: long-distance commerce and pearling (Ismael 1993:24-25). In fact, just to keep necessities in the markets oftentimes entailed keen trading practices and supply networks. One case in point was the importation of Iraqi wool that could be paid for with dates that had already been secured, either from the Al Ahsa oasis in eastern Arabia or from Iraq itself (Fattah 1997:68). In time, the traders spread throughout the Gulf and extended their reach all the way down the East African coast and across the Indian Ocean to the Indian subcontinent (Anscombe 1997:24); a journey subject to the seasonal monsoons that carried vessels out (Agius 2002:26) with the summer southwest winds (Bernstein 2008:12) and returned them home in the winter via the northeast currents (Agius 2002:26). Suhail Shuhaiber furnishes the following description as a sample of some of the cargoes that were transported each way during these voyages:

Their imports consisted of piece goods, rice, sugar, timber, spices and cotton from India; coffee from the Red Sea; tobacco and dried fruits from Persia; grain and dates from Basra; cloth, dates, and fish from Bahrain. Their exports were ghee and horses coming from the inland tribes and going on to India, and local dried and salt fish to Basra. [2003:101]

Naturally, as Alan Villiers discovered, this official ledger omits the black market enterprises of the crews which proceeded undetected and undeclared:

The sailors are inveterate smugglers; almost none of the goods they bring – apart from the main cargo – is declared... [And] since so much of their more highly dutiable goods are private ventures, such manifests as they produce to the authorities are useless. The mariner buys his goods himself, and sells them himself (though he does not mind disposing of them to boats alongside). He sees no point in accepting any official interference... [1948:404]

It is plausibly argued by Jacqueline Ismael that the conditions that drove the sailors to earn what they could on the side were already well entrenched in Kuwaiti power relations by the time Villiers recorded his experiences at sea. In her estimation, the original pact between the leading ‘Utubi families was little more than the transference of their previous desert aristocracy into a sedentary model “that became the basis of differentiation between appropriators and expropriators... [The] Bani Utub became a class in themselves by their asserted right of control over the factors of production” (Ismael 1982:23).

The most substantial of these factors of production (Ismael 1982: 23) for Kuwaiti coffers was pearl harvesting. Access to the rich, fertile oyster beds along the Arabian littoral (Agius 2002:24-25) gave Kuwaiti merchants more than just another commodity to transfer to foreign ports; to the contrary, pearls were the single surplus material available in these barren lands that were capable of delivering vast amounts of wealth. As a matter of course, a symbiotic connection bound each element of Kuwait’s maritime economy (Broeze 1997:153):

Pearling provided the capital for commerce, and commerce in turn provided the basis for the perpetuation of the pearling industry – the material subsistence of the community as well as the material needs of the pearling industry... [The] development of the pearling industry depended upon the commerce that provided the timber and other material resources for development of the fleet... [Ismael 1993:25]

In this manner, the annual summer pearl harvest that took place between shipping seasons (Agius 2002:28) when the waters were calm and warm (Bowen 1951:169-170)

underwrote the generation of currency that could be reinvested in other shipping ventures (Broeze 1997:152-153). Furthermore, the prevalence of coinage in pealing is acutely exhibited in the dominant role that debt represented to the entire system:

The whole economic structure of the industry, even more than in ship-owning, was based on debt. Everybody was in debt—the diver to the *nakhoda* [captain], the *nakhoda* to the merchant who financed him, the merchant to some other merchant bigger than himself, the bigger merchant to the sheikh. Even the broker who came out to buy the pearls was probably heavily in debt to some money lender who financed him. [Villiers 1969:353]

Intertwined with this debt structure was a rigid division of labor without any occupational mobility; an overall symptom that epitomized the entire Kuwaiti seafaring economy and further distinguished the Bani ‘Utub as the community’s resident elite class (Crystal 1995:19). Captains, divers, sailors, and deckhands, constrained by their fiscal limitations, could rarely expect any opportunity for promotion; while, for their part, the merchants would never betray their station by serving on a ship (Villiers 1948:406-407). The bleak nature of this lifelong debt servitude and the resulting reproduction of social boundaries is found in the account of the pearl divers’ plight given by Richard LeBaron Bowen, Jr.:

[Any] diver who accepted cash advances from a *nakhoda* [captain] had doomed himself to diving until death, and unfortunately death might not be an exit, as his debt was simply passed on to his son or brother, who then went on to incur his own debt. Once in debt a diver is prohibited from hiring to another *nakhoda* – he must repay his debt to the man who gave him cash advances. A diver or anyone else who accepts an advance in the pearling industry has sold himself to economic slavery, for the *nakhoda* owns his ability to work... Thus, a diver is bound to return to the purgatory of pearling... [1951:178]

The consequential magnitude of the yearly pear harvest for the Bani ‘Utubi merchant monopolization of local labor and group relationships (Ismael 1993:33-35) is reflected in its pervasiveness as an estimated 20 percent of the total population took part in the trade (Zahlan 1998:29).

It is also notable that the very same bonds that indebted the general populace to the merchant oligarchs correspondingly restricted the office of the shaykh held by the family of the Al Sabah. The alliance that designated this one 'Utubi lineage to act exclusively as political functionaries at the same time ensured they would remain financially dependent upon, and accountable to, the other two clans (Longva 1997:22). Thus, characterizations of pre-oil Kuwaiti politics are correct in their assessments of the polity as "a merchant republic headed by a coalition of Shaikhs" (Slot 2003:11) where "real power in the community resided in the financial-commercial class" (Ismael 1993:35-36). Although this appraisal conflicts with the details given by former British Political Agent H. R. P. Dickson of historic autocratic rule in Kuwait (1956:257), it cannot be disputed that the merchants were in complete command of the leadership by virtue of their total control over the economy. It was principally by the generation of trade by the merchants (Crystal 1995:21) that the reigning Al Sabah could collect their one (Shuhaiber 2003:100) to two percent duties (Abu Hakima 1983:101) on imports that maintained their position within the community.

This state of dependency for the Al Sabah altered only slightly during their first 150 years of sovereignty. For instance, Istanbul awarded Shaykh Jabir I date plantations on the Shatt al-Arab for his services in an assault against Persian forces in 1837; these were extremely productive landholdings that eventually exceeded 30 square miles in size (Finnie 1992:6, 90-91). Later, an Ottoman stipend in 1872 (Anscombe 1997:65, 200) accompanied the bestowal of the honorary title *qa'immaqam* (provincial representative / subgovernor) upon Shaykh Abdallah II for deeds rendered in the Porte's expedition to Al Hasa. Concurrent with these episodic gains, the Al Sabah continued to amass dues from

the caravan trade in exchange for secure transit along the interior desert routes (Abu Hakima 1983:6-7, 87-90, 98).

Nevertheless, even with this degree of economic self-sufficiency the Al Sabah remained beholden to the dominance exercised by the merchant class (Longva 1997:22), because not only did the shaykh need their trade to garner the associated fees (Crystal 1995:21), but the entire settlement was financed and sustained by their activities. Accordingly, the Al Sabah mode of governance was restricted domestically to dispute arbitration (Shuhaiber 2003:102, 103) and “the provision of [an] administrative infrastructure to support the community and its way of life – including enforcement of the labor contracts that allowed the merchants to accumulate significant wealth... [that] depended on the rulers keeping the system together” (Tetreault 2000:36). This *laissez-faire* policy at home was evidently noticed by Colonel Pelly, the British Resident in the Gulf, when he visited Kuwait in 1863. He declared that, “Indeed, there seems little government interference anywhere, and little need of an army” (Abu Hakima 1983:75). Given this lack of executive autonomy it is not surprising that even the order of succession itself had to be approved by the notables; for it was “from his contract with the notables and not merely from his nomination by the ruling family that the ruler derived his authority to rule” (Shuhaiber 2003:102). If the sovereign ever overstepped the limitations of his office it was to his own detriment as the merchants held the decisive verdict: secession and the resultant economic paralysis that would befall the town (Crystal 1995:21) as legions of laborers, more loyal to their employers than they were to their shaykh, would follow suit (Tetreault 2000:39). This last happened when Mubarak ibn Sabah (r. 1896 – 1915) attempted to raise revenue to support his military aspirations

by taxing pearls, imports, the pilgrimage, and housing (Crystal 1995:24). Mubarak's actions led to a mass exodus of up to half the total population to Bahrain (Ismael 1993:58) and humbled the Shaykh to the point that he withdrew his tariffs and convinced the merchants to return (Crystal 1995:24-25).

Contemporaneous with Shaykh Mubarak's rift with the mercantile bourgeoisie was the increasing presence of European interests in the northern Gulf. Until the closing years of the 1800s, Western diplomats had expressed little concern in the shaykhdom's affairs (Busch 1967:187). Yet, before the turn of the century Britain would sign a secretive treaty of protection with Mubarak for the "negative imperative" (Schofield 2003:58) of keeping its rivals at bay. In the words of the Permanent Under-Secretary of the India Office, "... we don't want Koweit, but we don't want anyone else to have it" (Busch 1967:196). However, British awareness of its possibilities with Kuwait may not have been piqued had Shaykh Mubarak not sought its assistance following his fratricidal coup d' etat and accession to power, a message to Britain that he was not an Ottoman subject as they had assumed (Anscombe 1997:93-94, 99-102). Notwithstanding Mubarak's pleas, the Crown was already warming to the prospect of limiting the Ottoman coastline in the Gulf while curtailing the proposed construction of a German railway terminus in the area (Schofield 2003:59, 71) and preventing a rumored Russian coal depot (Busch 1967:192); essentially, maneuvers by Britain to transform the Persian Gulf into a "British lake" (Anscombe 1997:110) affixed to its Indian holdings (Busch 1967:188). The outcome of the 1899 pact was, for Mubarak, security from Ottoman encroachments both locally and in his neighboring Fao date plantations without sacrificing his independence (Finnie 1992:16-17), whereas Britain barred its rivals from

gaining any foothold in the Gulf (Schofield 2003:61). Although brief, this latter stipulation was the only one clearly specified in the agreement:

... Shaikh Mubarak-bin-Shaikh-Subah, of his own free will and desire, does hereby pledge and bind himself, his heirs and successors, not to cede, sell, lease, mortgage, or give for occupation or for any other purpose, any portion of his territory to the Government or subjects of any other power without the previous consent of Her Majesty's Government for these purposes. [Abu Hakima 1983:184]

Therefore, formal protectorate status was avoided by Britain so that it would not provoke an incident with Istanbul, a loophole that allowed Shaykh Mubarak the flexibility to appease each authority as it suited him: "Through astute role-playing – appearing for all the world as the loyal, subordinate Ottoman *qa'im-makam* in his dealings with the sympathetic *wali* of Basra...and reminding Britain of its 'good offices' clause... Mubarak effectively ensured the continuance of his rule in Kuwait" (Schofield 2003:62).

Political safeguards, though, did not yield dividends for economic prosperity and within a decade of the treaty with Shaykh Mubarak, Britain's fleet dominated the commercial trade in the northern Gulf and reduced Kuwaiti shipping back to its subsistence-oriented origins (Ismael 1993:57). After the First World War, the division of spoils by the victors firmly established boundaries where ambiguity once existed (Sluglett 2002:793-794, 800) and in 1922 the shaykhdom lost two-thirds of its customary territory to 'Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud as Britain sought to establish borders (Dickson 1956:274) that would minimize the extent of its writ of protection over Kuwait (Schofield 2003:87). Further contributing to this steady flow of hardships was the 14 year (1923-1937) economic blockade initiated by Ibn Sa'ud (Abu Hakima 1983:135) to prevent the seasonal *musabilah* to Kuwait by tribes seeking market outlets (Dickson 1949:49) in

order to redirect them to his own merchants (Abu Hakima 1983:135-136).⁶⁵ Even seaward, the 1930s offered little respite as the worldwide depression diminished what commerce remained and the introduction of Japanese cultured pearls onto the market ultimately eroded the demand for natural products from the Gulf (Agius 2002:27). In less than 40 years, Kuwait had regressed from being a maritime presence whose influence was truly transcontinental to becoming an insolvent (Zahlan 1998:36), backwater British dependency that was gradually slipping into obscurity.

Post-Oil: Recovery, Realignment and the Welfare State

The discovery of oil in the Burgan fields in 1938 and the subsequent advent of the petroleum export industry following the Second World War (Ismael 1982:78) irreversibly altered the country's prevailing status quo and released the grasp that the merchant class had held on the shaykhdom's transactions for so long (Tetreault 2000:40). Interchangeably, oil has been labeled a "blessing" (Al Shamlan 2000:148), an "economic salvation" (Chisholm 1975:20) and a "windfall" (Zahlan 1998:39) for the simple reason that it is practically impossible to underestimate the impact that the resource has had on every aspect of the fledgling state's affairs. With the influx of petrodollars the country's inseparable political, economic and social structures were realigned (Hurewitz 1972:113) to a point of unimaginable change. In a matter of years, the longstanding but ailing maritime trade (Agius 2002:27) was completely displaced as oil earnings (Ansari and Qutub 1983:55, 59) fuelled new opportunities in formerly unknown sectors (Wolf 2001:231) and gave rise to an all-encompassing central bureaucracy.

⁶⁵ Not only was this an economic strategy but it was also indicative of 'Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud's desire to absorb Kuwait into the Saudi realm (Toth 2005:149).

To understand these transformations it is first necessary to acknowledge the configuration of Kuwait's oil concessions; that is, that these licensing accords were not between the Shaykhdom of Kuwait and foreign entities. Instead, these exploratory, drilling, and exportation contracts were solely between the ruling family and outside investors. Diplomatically, this eased the shaykh's reliance upon Britain for political backing (Tetreault 2000:41) and shifted the country's importance from one of strategic geographical location to that of a resource exporter, thereby alleviating some of its external dependency (Hurewitz 1972:112-113). More radically, these arrangements disrupted the domestic balance that had existed for 200 years between the 'Utubi mercantile elite and the governing Al Sabah dynasty. Initially in the form of royalties, then proceeded by a profit-sharing scheme, the oil revenue (Hay 1955:365) accrued by the shaykh and his lineage firmly established the royals as financial independents. Since then, the rulers have no longer had to tread lightly to avoid offending the merchants or their economic preeminence.

The effect of oil upon the shaykhdom is easily revealed in sheer monetary terms. In 1951, petroleum exports accounted for 16 million dollars in state revenues; in just one year, that amount increased tenfold to 168 million dollars (Shuhaiber 2003:105) and by the 1970s the oil fields were the source of an overwhelming 90 percent of all state monies (Kaboudan 1988:47). This endowment emboldened the Al Sabah to finally breach the union that had held them to their mercantile financiers, an association that the British Political Resident at the time dubbed, "the protection racket" (Crystal 1995:57). Nonetheless, the merchants' earlier opposition to their political exclusion had culminated in the short-lived Consultative Council in 1921 and Legislative Assembly of 1938

(Russell 1989:30) during the economic upheaval wrought by the interwar collapse of the maritime industry (Ismael 1993:73-75); two events that served to caution the royal family against the unbridled autocratic rule that their petrol wealth could have funded (Crystal 1995:56-58). In light of this, the Al Sabah employed a more equitable tactic to preserve their ascendancy and simultaneously co-opt any dissident factions of the elite: the creation of a redistributive welfare administration. With their seemingly limitless returns from oil exports, the executors of the state could easily afford to cede all of the country's business concerns to the merchants with the promise of minimal governmental interference in return for their political acquiescence. Sharon Stanton Russell explains this strategy as one which rehabilitated what had been a deteriorating relationship between the parties:

For some time, the major source of challenge to the power of the ruling family had been the wealthy merchant elites – descendants of Kuwait's early merchant families. They comprised the core of what we would now call the private sector, whose members are engaged in commerce, trade, and banking... During the 1950s, the ruling family had made judicious use of newly available oil revenues to secure the merchants' support for the regime, granting them a lucrative monopoly over local business affairs in exchange for their tacit agreement to remain outside of politics. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, relations between the merchants and the ruling family were considerably improved... [1989:30]

Thus, compliance by the merchants ensured their continued commercial viability and solidified the Al Sabah's leadership role. In other words, the pre-oil paradigm was replicated (Al Mughni 1993:30) although the benefactors and beneficiaries were now reversed. Oil fiscally relieved the Al Sabah from their reliance upon the merchants while it made the traders into their financial clients, an interrelationship that is accentuated through the selective distribution of governmental contracts and controversial programs like the Land Purchase Program that simply transferred state monies as part of a "subsidy

system for landowners” (Al Qudsi 1981:403) to those with insider knowledge of the government’s agenda.⁶⁶ In sum, to pacify the privileged required the allocation of “subsidies going almost entirely to wealthy Kuwaitis... Today, these schemes include agency commissions, monopoly privileges, and the permission to import labor... along with government bailouts of failed corporations, collapsed stock markets, and bad debts” (Tetreault 2000:156).

Even for Kuwaiti wage-earners, the former subsistence laborers who once toiled on the traders’ ships as mariners and pearl-divers (Ansari and Qutub 1983:53-55) as well as the inland tribesmen (Ghabra 1997:364-365), the regime repositioned itself to become the state’s exclusive economic sponsor and relieve the merchants of their clientele. Hence, the Al Sabah collectively became the “benevolent patriarch” (Shah 1995:1018) situated at the apex of wealth disbursement for the whole population and they used their petrodollars to drive a wedge between the mercantilists and the general populace. Whereas in the past pearling alone consumed at least a fifth of the labor force (Zahlan 1998:29), by 1962 the government employed 46 percent of all Kuwaitis (Crystal 1995:78-79) excluding the police force and military branches (IBRD 1965:40); in the 1990s, this rate inflated to 90 percent (Ghabra 1997:361). What these figures reflect is the state’s increasing function in place of the merchants as the country’s primary employer of its nationals (Shuhaiber 2003:108) on a scale irrespective of the economic costs or benefits:

⁶⁶ A contemporary critique by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development assessed this movement of capital from the government to the landed elite in the following manner: “The private sector has probably relied on land purchases for investment capital... At the same time, we are convinced that the purchase of land at high prices in excess of development needs is not a good use of government funds from the standpoint of a desirable distribution of the oil revenues within Kuwait, or as a means of promoting the orderly development of the private sector of the economy” (1965:89). While possibly correct in developmental or econometric terms this overview obviously neglects the sociopolitical investments that more accurately characterized the Land Purchase Program.

It seems clear that there are many unqualified employees in the Kuwait civil service... The 1963 [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development] Mission was told that less than 1 per cent of the Kuwaitis in the classified civil service are college graduates, less than 5 per cent have graduated from secondary school and only 13 per cent from primary school... [And] nearly 30 per cent, were rated as illiterates. These data perhaps are less a gauge of inefficiency than of the redundancy in the government work force.

The subject of training in government service certainly requires attention, as does the problem of finding productive employment for the large number who draw pay without performing even a nominal service. [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1965:40]

The purpose of creating this public sector, contrary to any expectations of bureaucratic expediency or efficiency, was to further allow for the distribution of state funds (Crystal 1995:78-79) in anticipation of political support (Ghabra 1997:364).

In addition to providing the jobs that eventually evolved into what has been categorized as “luxury employment” (Shah 1986:826) the regime also created a charitable welfare system through which it dispenses its surplus. For example, government programs are in place to offset the costs of food (Tetreault 2000:156) and reduce the prices of basic utilities such as water and electricity (Al Qudsi 1981:401). Likewise, stipends were introduced to assist parents with the expenses associated with childrearing (Hill 1975:547) and pensions furnished for retirees (Ismael 1993:109). Plus, included in this package of entitlements (Crystal 1995:79) are all-inclusive social services like comprehensive health care and education through postgraduate levels for those who qualify (Al Qudsi 1981:401). Although far from exhaustive, this list could continue on to include marriage and family allowances, interest-free housing loans, and guaranteed property (Longva 1997:53); and, as public assistance it is important to note that these expenditures are provided unevenly based on need with the poorest families receiving

higher proportions of aid relative to their earnings (Al Qudsi 1981:398).⁶⁷ In all, for the average Kuwaiti household these subsidies accounted for 46 percent its income in the 1970s (Ismael 1993:132) and totaled ten percent of the country's GDP for 1982 – 1983 (Longva 1997:52). Yet, there is a sociopolitical price for these benefits that is not as easy to approximate; that is, in the absence of taxation with the populous making no financial contribution towards the state for its services an unstated “no representation without taxation” (Zahlan 1998:45) policy by the leadership limits popular participation in state affairs. Conclusively, “The political impact of this lavish welfare system, combined with the state's policy of guaranteeing employment for all citizens, has been to blunt the potential appeal of [oppositional] revolutionary ideologies, at least among the native-born” (Salih 1991:49) and encourage the citizenry's continuing loyalty to the perpetuation of its dynastic monarchy (Tetreault and Al Mughni 1995:71).

Underwriting the country's rapid development since the discovery of oil in the 1930s has been the importation of migrant labor (Russell 1989:27) to serve as “immigrant human capital” (Al Qudsi and Shah 1991:144). Cheap, expendable and without basic economic claims like property ownership or even rudimentary political rights (Shah and Al Qudsi 1989:32, 51), the most basic distinction between the state's populations is that of citizen versus expatriate (Hill 1975:537); and, through the course of the past decades, the latter has steadily grown to far outnumber the former by a three-to-one margin (Tetreault 2000:50). There is no single factor that can be attributed to this imbalance but there are several contributing causes. The government's reinvention of itself as the

⁶⁷ This system of differential distribution based on applicants' needs was altered for the National Housing Authority in 1984; in that year, citizenship became the only requirement for state-provided houses or residential plots. In a sense, this change has meant that subsidized housing is now as much about opportunism as it is about alleviating hardships (Alshalfan 2013:8, 26-27).

nation's principal employer of its nationals through guaranteed, secure positions in the public sector (Shah 1995:1018) has increased to such an extent that it claims over 90 percent of all working Kuwaitis (Al Hayyan 2003:327).⁶⁸ Furthermore, the state's emphasis on higher education has discouraged its citizens from participating in occupations requiring manual labor. As a consequence, immigrants occupy the positions stigmatized by Kuwaitis as undesirable (Shah and Al Qudsi 1989:50-51). Whether due to the physical nature of the job or the perceived instability of private enterprise, expatriates in this division constitute an incredible 96 percent of the workforce (Ali and Al Kazemi 2005:64). To this date, Kuwait's planned economy in conjunction with its welfare package has "had perverse effects on the quality of the labour force. Rather than reducing the proportion of foreign workers, these policies led to a 'de-skilling' of the Kuwaiti labour force. The result was to concentrate Kuwaitis in service positions in the state sector while the bulk of productive works continued to be performed by expatriates" (Tetreault and Al Mughni 1995:70). Equally apparent in Kuwait's mounting demographic disparity is the demand for domestic workers which more than tripled between 1979 and 1987. In part, these services were needed to offset the effects of Kuwaiti women entering the workplace, but alternatively maids were also socially commoditized "to be 'consumed' for social status" (Shah et al. 1991:471).

Clearly, this rendering of postpetroleum Kuwait mirrors even the most conservative definitions of a rentier state: a country "that receive[s] on a regular basis substantial amounts of external economic rent" (Yates 1996:11); thereby freeing "the state from the need of raising income domestically" (Luciani 1987:69). The presumed

⁶⁸ Illustrating this preference for state employment, a 2002 study found that 2,394 unemployed Kuwaitis refused private sector opportunities in favor of waiting for government-funded positions (Ali and Al Kazemi 2005:65).

product of this condition is straightforward:

Because of their external income sources, these 'rentier states' need not extract significant revenues from their populations... The availability of exogenous rents enables the state to become the central, and in some cases, highly generous, distributor of goods and services. In turn, the state elite uses patronage, or the provision of welfare, to buy the population's loyalty or political quiescence. [Glasser 2001:7]

Unquestionably, the Kuwaiti regime's redistributive agenda following the exportation of oil, as it reconfigured the maritime private sector (Shehab 1964:463-464) into a government-funded welfare society, presents a prototypical case of rentier statecraft. Rampant public underemployment (Looney 1992:566), incalculable investiture in infrastructure developments and unrestrained social expenditures have all contributed to an ostentatious consumer society (Shehab 1964:471-472) directly dependent upon the government for the perpetuation of its comfortable lifestyle. In return, the legitimacy of the ruling family and its state apparatus should be upheld and considered inviolable to popular pressure (Hammoud 1986:66). Yet, this rentier model is undermined by its own overly-deterministic approach that proposes that predictable sociopolitical behavior (Niblock 2007:19-21) will stem from a fiscally autonomous state. Accordingly, "Money does not spend itself. Those acting in the name of the state make decisions, and the nature of the regime influences them" (Okruhlik 1999:297). In Kuwait, it is the very mechanisms of redistribution that have provoked its citizenry's discord: the inequitable distribution of oil proceeds favoring those already well-situated and prosperous (Shehab 1964:470) and the fabrication of an expansive bureaucracy that, although providing employment, also mediates access to state monies and services. The outcome of this arrangement is increased structural distance between individuals and the regime, with the intervening gaps filled by the personal networks of politicians, petty bureaucrats and the

sundry officials who intercede and dispense state resources while accruing all of the recipients' gratitude and building their own bases of support (Crystal 1995:189-191).

CHAPTER 3

STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF OIL

Since 1946, the year that the Kuwait Oil Company began exporting its first barrels from the Burgan fields (Ismael 1993:78), it has become difficult to overstate the processes of change that have accompanied the influx of astonishing sums of cash generated by such minimal productive output (Herb 2009:382-383). As early as 1955, just nine years after Kuwaiti petroleum entered world markets, visitor R. L. Banks remarked that,

Usually lack of money keeps the rate of change down to a pace which enables the country to make the social changes and produce the technicians and administrators needed before Western technical methods and machines can be properly used. But there is one place – Kuwait – where finance presents no difficulty, where a small and rather isolated community has been able during the past few years to order almost what it liked from Western countries. A visit to Kuwait is, therefore, of special interest in that Kuwait displays in concentrated form the major and minor consequences of Westernisation at maximum speed. [1955:48]

It is this physical dynamic that in the wider spectrum of Gulf cities can be characterized as intensive oil urbanization (Fuccaro 2001:175-187). Specifically for Kuwait, this meant a move away from initial “petrol-can shanties around the fringe of the town” (Banks 1955:50) towards “speedy architectural and urban developments... [that] indiscriminately disintegrated the anatomy and identity of the traditional city” (Al Bahar 1984:71). These changes were most apparent in the occurrences of urban sprawl and

suburbanization as state oil surpluses were earmarked for the development of Western-styled residential districts outside of the old protective city walls (Al Moosa 1984:47-48, 53, 55). By the 1960s, a sufficient number of modern public buildings had been constructed to serve the growing population and some of these structures even elicited international accolades for their innovative architectural merits (El Mallakh 1966:430-431).

It would be misleading to dismiss Kuwait's material development over the course of the last six decades as merely a visual spectacle built upon the proceeds of incalculable amounts of exported oil. Instead, these monuments of unrestrained consumerism are indicative of the state's postpetroleum social contract with its populace. Departing from its mercantile past, a time during which the merchants supplied the funds that underwrote all shaykhly ambitions and territorial operations (Hay 1955:365), Kuwait emerged as an international supplier of natural resources with all of its earnings being directly deposited into the royal treasury (Tetreault 2000:41). This new paradigm found the ruling Al Sabah situated atop the pinnacle of the nation's petrodollars albeit without a solid legitimizing foundation. In response to this shortcoming the regime, like its neighboring petro-states, fashioned itself into the country's paramount benefactor, a benevolent "arch-distributor" (Hertog 2005:137) charged with providing job security within its labyrinthine bureaucracy (Russell 1989:32) in conjunction with social welfare and an overall "modernizing development ideology" (Baaklini 1982:359) that served to solidify the government's role as its citizens' guarantor (Gavrielides 1987:157-159).⁶⁹ Comparable

⁶⁹ It is also relevant to note that the Al Sabah traditionally justified their reign by promoting their ability to safeguard the country from external threats through their diplomatic acumen (Tetreault 1991:566-567). Understandably, the Iraqi invasion in 1990 substantially diminished this reasoning and exposed the regime to criticisms of its foreign policy (Tetreault 2000:77).

to other Gulf dynasties, the Al Sabah have pursued “bread and circuses” (Bill and Springborg 2000:60) at the expense of any real form of political validation. Therefore,

...they have not developed an elaborate ideological justification of their rule...Certainly they have not been successful in selling such a justification to the populace. Instead, they have chosen to discourage ideological approaches to politics. They have done this by encouraging materialism, emphasizing their ability to supply goods. They have tried to move people from the marketplace of ideas to the marketplace. This celebration of consumerism, encouraged by the government, has largely been embraced by the population. [Crystal 1995a:273-274]

In return for accepting their share of the oil wealth via entitlements, employment, services, and countless other allocations, the citizenry is expected to comply with the government’s directives (Krause 2008:8, 20-21) and consent to the ruling family’s implicit ownership of the state (Herb 1999:30). This is contrasted against any ideals of transparent, rational bureaucratic norms of state institutions accountable to the public (Kassab 2010:356) by virtue of the Al Sabah having aligned themselves within the local sociopolitical framework according to the notion of *mu’azib*, or customary hosting in a patron-client relationship, that is now exemplified at the national level through the government’s redistributive apparatuses (Gavrielides 1987:157-161).

Similarly, Kuwait’s external relations have also been tempered by its access to the immense oil reserves lying beneath the sands. Whereas domestically the profits from oil have gone towards reconfiguring the bonds of state and society, externally these monies have been instrumentally placed to preserve the regime’s existence. Essentially, the government’s approach to its foreign policy has mirrored its tactics for internal stability; that is, the creation, through the mechanisms of distribution, of various clienteles (Tetreault 1991:566-567). As early as the 1950s and 1960s, Kuwait supplied as much as 60 percent of Britain’s petroleum and complimented this with annual investments totaling

between 50 and 80 million dollars. Consequently, the British were more than willing to dissuade Iraq from expanding her borders in any manner that would have engulfed the tiny shaykhdom in the tumultuous years immediately following the overthrow of Baghdad's Hashemite monarchy (Joyce 1995:281-283). However, after its independence in 1961 and Britain's gradual withdrawal from the Gulf, Kuwait had to reinvent itself as something more than a small, militarily insignificant state entity endowed with great capital. It achieved this with a mixture of different investment programs aimed at cementing the ruling family's position regionally as a financial patron. Through the exchange of its wealth for security and stability the government created the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, a donor project that assists developing countries, with an emphasis towards Arab and Muslim countries, and as past events have shown, this strategy has paid for itself through foreign support and alliances (Moubarak 1987:538-539, 542-543).⁷⁰ In terms of popular perceptions in the area, the Fund has somewhat eased accusations that the oil-rich shaykhdoms are oblivious to the plights of their less fortunate fellows (El Mallakh 1964:420) and has thereby served to encourage favorable public relations, an observation that is further proven by the underperformance of Kuwaiti investments in Arab states. Even after the Second Gulf War, the government sought to direct its capital towards both its supporters and rivals in an effort to recompense its allies as well as repair any damaged relations (Ahmed 1995:301, 305). Of course, like the distribution of all previous investment and aid, this was a continuation of the state's agenda "to mobilize an international constituency of supporters of Kuwait by creating foreign aid dependencies" (Tetreault 1991:579) that, even if not outright

⁷⁰ Iraq's brief occupation of the Kuwaiti Al Samita outpost in 1973 was rebuffed by deferring Iraq's scheduled Fund loan along with the intervention of multiple Arab states who shared an obvious interest in Kuwait's continued financial health (Moubarak 1987:550).

supportive of the Al Sabah, would be pragmatically inclined not to want to see the source of so much revenue fall into anyone else's hands (Moubarak 1987:538).

The product of this mode of governance, as demonstrably obvious in the domestic and international realms (Tetreault 1991:566-567), is the implicit understanding on the part of the populace that dissent and opposition can be assuaged not through coercion and martial punishment, but by entitlements and privileges (Krause 2010:8, 21). The Al Sabah, either through historical accident or a tribal sense of duty (Tetreault 2000:33-34), today benefit from their place at the apex of the state's income and utilize its control to ensure their continued preservation. By monopolizing all of the principal instruments of the state, particularly its key ministries or *wizarat al-siyada*, the royals have established a bureaucracy that is entirely patrimonial in its orientation (Herb 1999:8) and overtly distributive in its function. It is through their embeddedness in this generous state distribution system that the patriarchal dynasty is able to extend its reach into the depths of Kuwaiti society (Shah 1995:1018) thereby making accessibility to technocrats synonymous to a royal entrée in terms of rights and favors (Hertog 2010b:282). In a nation where the majority of citizens serve in such posts (Ghabra 1997:361), everyone essentially becomes a gatekeeper of some sorts.

Rentier Dynamics: The Structure of Distribution

The rentier state concept has its origins in Hossein Mahdavy's analysis of the Iranian political economy and what he termed the "fortuitous *étatisme*" (1978:432) that accompanied the nationalization of the country's hydrocarbon industry. Although he focused on Iran, Mahdavy proposed that his analytical approach was applicable to any

number of states both within and outside of the Middle East as long as their revenue sources are external, accrued directly by the government, and are substantial enough to dwarf any local productive capacities. Hence, Mahdavy distinguished these qualifications wherein:

Rentier States are defined here as those countries that receive on a regular basis substantial amounts of external rent. External rents are in turn defined as rentals paid by foreign individuals, concerns or governments to individuals, concerns or governments of a given country. Payments for the passage of ships through the Suez Canal...are external rents. The same holds for payments to the so-called transit countries in the Middle East that allow oil pipelines be passed through their territories...But apart from these so-called royalties, the governments of the oil exporting countries in the Middle East benefit from differential and monopolistic rents that arise from the higher productivity of the Middle Eastern oilfields and price fixing practices of the oil companies. What is more important perhaps is to recognize that however one looks at them, the oil revenues received by the governments of the oil exporting countries have very little to do with the production processes of their domestic economies. The inputs from the local economies – other than the raw materials – are insignificant. [Mahdavy 1978:428-429]

Continuing, it was Mahdavy's contention that intensive oil exportation engenders governmental spending and investment within its own sectors without the hindrances of public accountability since the citizenry is effectively excluded from the generation of state wealth:

The oil industry's major contribution is that it enables the governments of the oil producing countries to embark on large public expenditure programmes without resorting to taxation and without running into drastic balance of payments or inflation problems that usually plague other developing nations. And since oil revenues typically increase at a faster rate than the GNP of the local economies, the public sector of the oil producing countries expands rapidly. [Mahdavy 1978:432]

Following Mahdavy's lead, many subsequent scholars were quick to adopt the rentier model and, unfortunately, pervert it through gross generalizations, assumptions and inappropriate applications. These fallacious notions ranged from basic economic

determinism without any sociopolitical context (Okruhlik 1999:296) to broad classifications of universal rentier ethics (Beblawi 1990:98) that brazenly dismissed the realities of local, historically-specific circumstances.

These misappropriations notwithstanding, the rentier model remains an insightful construct for conceptualizing the dialogues that take place in oil exporting nations between citizens and their governments. Most apparent are the enormous influxes of state capital from foreign sources that are entirely detached from national productive output (Mahdavy 1978:429).⁷¹ Furthermore, these external rents provide oil states with a source of revenue that is independent from the domestic population; in other words, it is unnecessary for such governments to extract the funds required to cover their operating costs by taxing their citizenries (Gause 1994:42). Although this translates into varying measures of financial autonomy for the state (Chaudhry 1989:110) depending on the conditions of the world markets (Cooley 2001:165), its significance cannot be missed for governments that received these princely sums of wealth during the formative stages of bureaucratic development. Instead of developing a state infrastructure founded upon appropriating its monies from the populace via tolls, taxation, and tariffs, the states that came into existence accompanied by the windfall cash surpluses afforded by the exportation of oil built bureaucracies dedicated to the allocation and distribution of state capital (Chaudhry 1989:110).

Obviously, not all rentier states were created equal and there are considerable

⁷¹ Moreover, Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett described not just the generation of capital disconnected from the rest of the national economy but also the separation of the entire petroleum industry from all others within the state in their discussion of Iraqi oil as “a source of income deriving from an industry that is both capital intensive and self-contained, with few direct linkages to the rest of the economy, and employing only a very small proportion of the labour force. Thus...the Iraqi state derives its principle income from a commodity for which demand is generated abroad, outside of its own processes of social reproduction” (2003:216).

disparities between them. Aside from the innumerable contextual variations (historical, societal, political, cultural), demographic factors arise as the most noticeable variable.⁷² States like Kuwait with small populations have been set aside as ideal types of rentierism (Shambayati 1994:310) due to the excessive impact of external rents on the national economy coupled with the negligible existence of any secondary wealth generating activities (Mahdavy 1978:431). Politically, this small-state dynamic in the Gulf has served to amplify the effectiveness of governmental distributive efforts (Gause 1994:42). Also, ideological dispositions rooted in a range of sociopolitical and historical experiences prompted rent recipients to invest their revenues differently in accordance with their domestic agendas. Kiren Chaudhry illustrated this tendency in her categorization of rentier regimes as displaying “socialist” or “capitalist” inclinations in regards to their petrodollar disbursements. While her assessment is perhaps too diametrical and without any midpoints, it is still insightful if solely for demonstrating the range of possibilities available when it comes to the configurations of rentier states.

Chaudhry maintained that,

The key difference between countries like Iraq and Libya, on the one hand, and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, on the other, was not the extent of state interference in the economy, but rather the size of the state’s client groups. The ‘socialist’ oil states entered directly into production themselves, taking over industry, agriculture, trade, and services, and they used their control to uphold the living standards of a broad base of consumers. The ‘capitalist’ oil states, in contrast, distributed oil wealth to create clients in society who had strong primordial links to bureaucrats and decision makers. [1994:18-19]

⁷² Michael Herb makes a convincing case that population size is one of the most underappreciated factors of rentierism. Herb demonstrates that whereas most means of analysis focus heavily on the degree to which oil exports account for a nation’s GDP, this approach fails to account for the effect of such revenues by overlooking its impact per capita. This oversight negates the economic realities that separate rentier states by haphazardly labeling them all the same. However, by using Herb’s measurements based on per capita indicators, the discrepancies between the oil producing nations become more apparent. Hence, there are rich rentiers and poor rentiers, with countries like Kuwait and the UAE falling into the first category while Angola and Nigeria occupy the latter (Herb 2009:376-377).

Again, in all likelihood the realities of rentier state-building lie somewhere between these two “socialist” and “capitalist” distributive schisms with administrations showing only predispositions towards one direction or the other. For example, Iraq, one of Chaudhry’s “socialist” oil states, spent heavily in its private sectors during the boom years of the 1970s and into the 1980s with the regime favoring those businesses that had close ties to official channels (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2003:235-239).⁷³ In another case, Fuad Khuri defined the nature of Bahrain’s rentier system as structurally similar “to socialistic states in the sense that it [the state] controls the economic resources of the country” (1980:153) and it disperses these resources in the forms of extensive social services and public employment. Yet, at the same time the government pursued capitalist strategies through its encouragement of private industries that rewarded its clients in a disproportionate fashion (Khuri 1980:6, 10, 137, 153). Kuwait, too, cannot be said to exclusively exhibit “socialist” or “capitalist” rentier traits as the Al Sabah have diversely utilized both modes as conditions warranted. There are broad-based collective measures that have improved the living standards of the citizenry as a whole, like free education, healthcare and infrastructural upgrades (Al Qudsi 1981:401). Concurrent with these communal programs, however, have been the specific government distributions focused on sectarian and class distinctions: funds reserved entirely for the members of specific tribes in return for their traditional loyalty to the ruling family (Gavrielides 1987:160) and an advantageous business climate for the mercantile elite in an attempt to secure

⁷³ Chaudhry’s argument that “capitalist” oil states “distributed oil wealth to create clients in society who had strong primordial links to bureaucrats and decision makers” (1994:18-19) is meant to exclude Iraq as “socialist.” However, the government’s contract awards in the mid-1970s clearly reveal a favorable bias towards firms located in Tikrit, the familial and political stronghold of Saddam Husayn. It goes without saying that many “of those who benefited most had some sort of privileged access to the regime” (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2003:239).

political capital (Gause 1994:54-57). Once more, further indication that a sharp division between “socialist” and “capitalist” rentier schemes is difficult at best if there is no recognition for internal variability.

Nevertheless, Chaudhry’s claims aside, it is widely accepted that for oil states the concentration of so much wealth derived from external sources places substantial powers and resources at their disposal (Gause 1994:42). In comparison to extractive administrations in “productive economies” (Cooley 2001:166) that rely upon their populaces’ economic activities to generate state revenues (Vandewalle 1998:18), a rentier regime fosters a “ruling bargain” (Krause 2009:20) between itself and its citizenry whereby the state, in its role as the primary link connecting the local economy to external rents (Shambayati 1994:309), allocates its income to support the wellbeing of its nationals. Yet, these allotments are far from indicative of a charitable ruling establishment. The most evident deduction is that these distributive domestic policies by oil-receiving regimes discourage political discourse and invite compliance to spread amongst their populaces (Okruhlik 1999:308). Through the mechanisms of allocation, the rentier government aspires to depoliticize the public and alleviate discord (Chaudhry 1994:18-19) while legitimizing itself as the preeminent central actor in state affairs (Cooley 2001:166). By using astute spending tactics like the allowance or withholding of official funds, “the intention is to provide benefits with the aim of gaining political loyalty or being able to deny such benefits...to those who oppose the government” (Gause 1994:43). What this amounts to for all practical intents and purposes is an attempt by the state to purchase popular consent (Krause 2008:21) by virtue of the overwhelming resource imbalance between it and the rest of society (Hertog 2010b:285).

The official instruments of this political co-optation commonly take multiple forms that range from the conspicuous privileges of citizenship (Cooley 2001:166) to more nuanced privileges of access (Hertog 2010b:286-288). In regards to the former, subsidized goods and municipal services (Chaudhry 1994:18) along with socialized benefits like standardized medical care and universal education (Al Qudsi 1981:401) are the hallmarks of the leadership's largesse. Moreover, government employment and periodic gifts in the guise of loans (Chaudhry 1994:18) and debt-forgiveness (Gause 1994:61) epitomize a sense of national entitlement. In fact, these very welfare allocations were once lauded in the rentier literature as forming the underpinnings of popular obedience in the oil exporting states. Yet, in addition to these comprehensive disbursements are the private, sometimes informal and largely uneven payments that go to benefit a narrow constituency at the expense of the overall population (Okruhlik 1999:295-297, 300).⁷⁴ In this manner, the "ruling elites can privilege certain sectors, and certain companies within sectors, through the letting of state contracts, control over access to capital, policies on the import of labor, and on the writing of government regulations" (Gause 1994:54). Since these and all other allotments are viewed quite literally as public resources that are "gifts from God" with resultant revenues devoid of well developed policymaking (Shambayati 1994:308) or sizeable local monetary outlay (Mahdavy 1978:429), their inequitable distribution calls into question the image of the regime's benevolence in the eyes of its citizenry (Okruhlik 1999:300).

In Kuwait, there have been a number of high-profile transactions that exposed the ruling family to accusations of malfeasance with the public treasury. The first case was

⁷⁴ This occurrence is not unlike the aforementioned merger of Chaudhry's "socialist" and "capitalist" distributive rentier models (1994:18-19).

possibly the Land Purchase Program of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a thinly-veiled reallocation of state funds to private accounts under the pretext of urban development (El Mallakh 1966:427). John Daniels neatly described this ploy as one in which,

...the government purchased the land on which construction or development was to take place at a very inflated price, and a minority of nationals exploited the advantage of buying and reselling land at a very handsome profit. Even some officials, with inside knowledge of future developments, were reputed to have staked their claims on sites which they knew construction was to take place. [Al Qudsi 1981:403]

A reward to the wealthy meant to provoke their loyalty and gratitude towards the regime (Tetreault 2000:156), the Land Purchase Program reinforced the pre-oil dominance of the mercantile elites and their tribal counterparts in local dealings (Gause 1994:54). To appreciate the sheer magnitude of these initial transfers of capital and the costs associated with privatizing public assets, the following report by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development is instructive:

In 1959 the amount spent on land was roughly double the increment to public foreign investments...During the six and a quarter years ending March 31, 1963, over KD 295 million was spent by the Government to acquire land, or more than a third of total government income. Over the same period, the increase in public foreign investments was about KD 140 million, or 16 per cent of government revenue.

From a financial standpoint, in addition to the fact that over 50 per cent more has been spent on land in the last six years than on capital projects, a striking fact is the relatively small amount which the Government has obtained from the resale of land or from rentals on government-owned property. Despite the fact that the housing program would seem to provide for the turnover of a good deal of this land, only KD 15.4 million or about 5 per cent of the cost of land acquired by the Government has been recovered by sale in the last six years. [1965:88-89]

Clearly, though, the government had no intentions of recovering its investments in any way that would have been measurable by monetary standards. Rather, its aim was to placate the old merchant families and those close enough to the Al Sabah to be privy to

its designs (Crystal 1995b:76-77).⁷⁵

In less than two decades after the commencement of the Land Purchase Program the government was again afforded several opportunities to funnel its state monies into private pockets. In 1977, the prices of shares on the Kuwait Stock Exchange (KSE) collapsed due to pervasive speculation and a preponderance of postdated checks. The government swiftly stepped in and compensated traders for their losses with a bailout of over KD 150 million (U.S. \$525 million) (Elimam, Girgis, and Kotob 1997:90). However, at this time the country's market operated on single transactions of large quantities of stocks; minimally, 1000 shares per exchange that, in practice, barred the involvement of small investors. As a result, once the bottom fell out and the treasury propped it back up, hundreds of merchants were saved from bankruptcy (Crystal 1995b:97) while ordinary Kuwaitis watched. Then again, only a few years later the average citizen would have a chance to venture into the market secure in the knowledge that the government had already shown that it would not allow for a financial catastrophe, self-induced or not, to cripple its populace (Al Yahya 1993:76). Thus, with oil prices soaring, public spending multiplying, and few outlets available for domestic investment (Elimam et al. 1997:90) since the KSE remained limited to the old families (Crystal 1995b:98),⁷⁶ a parallel market arose in the Al-Manakh building that catered to newcomers (Darwiche 1986:95). Absent of any regulatory oversight, Souq Al-Manakh,

⁷⁵ El Mallakh remarked that several years after the original land purchases were made from the wealthy landholders the state did begin to direct its acquisitions in such a way that included low- and middle-income property owners. Nevertheless, the budgetary allocations for these later purchases were comparatively reduced (1966:431) and it can be assumed that the financial impact for individual families was only slight given that the highly lucrative downtown properties were already in the hands of the connected classes (Crystal 1995b:76-77).

⁷⁶ As almost a matter of propriety these established families guarded the market and traded privately amongst themselves. In this closed market, the "system of dealing is working well as a mechanism for moving large sums of money among a small number of investors" (Abdul-Hadi 1988:44).

as it came to be known, avoided the state's safeguards that limited the participation of companies,⁷⁷ brokers,⁷⁸ and investors⁷⁹ in the KSE (Abdul-Hadi 1988:21-26). In this anarchic trading environment, where fictitious Gulf companies that existed only on paper (Elimam, Girgis, and Kotob 1996:666) were bought and sold with postdated checks⁸⁰ without a deferment period or traded for real assets, the euphoria was short-lived. When an investor tried to cash a check for KD 55 million from one of Al-Manakh's largest traders before it was due, the account was found to be insolvent and the market crashed (Darwiche 1986:60-61, 88) under the weight of a U.S. \$94 billion debt that was over four times the amount of the country's GDP (Elimam et al. 1997:92).

In spite of this crisis, the government did not respond with the same sense of urgency as it had during the 1977 meltdown that paralyzed the merchants' banking activities. The leadership, though, was rightfully cautious given the enormity of the sums involved (Darwiche 1986:98, 101), the lack of any standard accounting methods (Elimam et al. 1996:666), and the illegality of the whole 1982 predicament (Al Yahya 1993:33). Besides, the government realized that it was ill-equipped to tackle a problem on this scale by itself so it called upon the services of the one concern that still remained unscathed: the elite-dominated Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) (Moore

⁷⁷ In 1977, the government banned the creation of new public companies to boost the market for existing firms. Also, Gulf companies that were not incorporated in Kuwait were prohibited from being traded on the KSE (Darwiche 1986:13, 54-57).

⁷⁸ Most of the brokers in Souq Al-Manakh "were ignorant about the nature of the work of a stock exchange. Land and property brokers by origin, when share trading was introduced, they automatically changed to the new business. Moreover, they were mostly interested parties, since they took stakes in the companies they traded. Stripped of the impartiality of disinterested advisers, they promoted those companies in which they were personally interested" (Darwiche 1986:60).

⁷⁹ In addition to those citizens excluded from the legal market by the old merchant families (Abdul-Hadi 1988:44), Al-Manakh was also available to non-Kuwaitis who were prevented from directly accessing the official market (Al Yahya 1993:32).

⁸⁰ A postdated check premium of 60 to 300 percent was added to spot prices to compensate sellers for their delayed payment (Elimam et al. 1997:91). Some of these checks bore future dates that ranged from months to years (Darwiche 1986:60).

2001:137-138) whose representatives enjoyed access to the official market (Crystal 1995b:100) and did not have to resort to Al-Manakh. The inclusion of these traditional powerbrokers allowed the KCCI merchants to regain some of their hold over the country's policies that they had lost in the post-oil years after the state replaced them as the nation's employer and welfare provider (Crystal 1989:434). For instance, to manage the fallout from Al-Manakh, the Supreme Planning Council was formed with seven of its ten independent members drawn from the KCCI. Next, in 1986, "direct pleas by KCCI president al-Sagr resulted in the creation of the Economic Reactivation Committee, a high-level advisory board of KCCI board members and state technocrats. The state also reversed its controversial personnel decisions of the 1970s by appointing KCCI loyalists and eventually the director-general of the KCCI to head key economic ministries" (Moore 2001:137). Expectedly, the old guard seized this turn of events as a chance to reassert their control over the private economy while penalizing the upstarts who had facilitated the Al-Manakh debacle; a class of investors who were depicted as:

[N]ew speculators with little to lose, people of modest origins or former civil servants, who seized an unrepeatably opportunity to improve their financial status. The majority of those involved in Al-Manakh belonged to the families of the *nouveaux riches* rather than to the traditionally wealthy families prominent in the economy and in major businesses. [Darwiche 1986:95]

Despite any evident conflict of interests, the principals of the KCCI also oversaw the Kuwait Clearing and Financial Settlements Company and acted as legal agents for 85 percent of the debtors; a process that strengthened its position as an intermediary between the government and its citizens (Moore 2001:138-139).⁸¹ More profitably, though, the

⁸¹ To illustrate the suspect motives of the KCCI in its role as mediator and whether it represented its clients' best interests is a meeting that was held between its Finance Committee and the Cabinet Economic Committee. In this session, the KCCI representatives sought to cease further bankruptcies and lower the debts of existent bankrupts. Not only was this proposal unlawful but "creditors of bankrupts would have

merchants' involvement yielded significant incentives. In 1983, over the course of only two months the state injected a sum KD 250 million into the commercial establishment's preferred official stock market (Al Yahya 1993:38). Additionally, the succession of bankruptcies that followed in the wake of Al-Manakh (Elimam et al. 1996:666; Darwiche 1986:127) transferred extensive newly moneyed properties back to the business aristocracy at liquidation prices, and the declining economy even convinced the government to reintroduce its Land Purchase Program (Crystal 1995b:100). The cordial working relationship with the state throughout the entire Al-Manakh episode also led the merchants to marginalize their counterparts (Moore 2004:134-135) and pursue more restrictive policy measures to protect their own trade interests (Crystal 1995b:100). As just one example of this, the 1983 Decree on the Regulation of the Kuwait Stock Exchange instituted the Market Management Committee and designated that four of its 12 members were to be taken from the ranks of the KCCI (Darwiche 1986:128). Entrusted with overseeing the market and approving brokers' applications, as well as setting the fees for new brokerage companies (Abdul-Hadi 1988:27-28), the Committee gave its KCCI majority recognizable leverage in the postparallel market. This correlates well with Jill Crystal's conclusion that once Al-Manakh was contained, ultimately it was the "older merchants [who] had thus benefited from the crisis" (1995b:100).

The last serious disruption to this implicit "business as usual" domestic rule

suffered an injustice, in that they would have incurred a part of their debtors' insolvency. The injustice would have been flagrant, because dozens of other creditors had received what they were owed in full through the [Security] Fund. A double standard would have been created between those who had recovered their monies in full and those asked to make sacrifices" (Darwiche 1986:120). Nevertheless, the passage of Law 100/1983 was indicative of the KCCI agenda (Moore 2001:139): a ceiling of 25 percent on postdated check premiums. Debtors who settled before this law lost money by paying a higher premium as well as losing the premiums they had expected to collect as creditors (Al Yahya 1983:41, 76). Thus, for the dealers caught in the middle, having paid their debts in full but now legally bound to collect only a quarter of their outstanding dues, bankruptcies "followed one another...in a chain reaction" (Darwiche 1986:127).

commenced in the early hours of August 2, 1990, as Iraqi units poured across the border into Kuwait. Coming after many seasons of internal turmoil, the Al-Manakh collapse, the unresolved suspension of the National Assembly in 1986, and the continued calls by prodemocracy activists for reforms, the regime could not have been in a weaker position as it fled the country. Once in Saudi Arabia, however, the exiled government quickly moved to prepare the groundwork for its return. Politically, it appeased the opposition by pledging to restore the constitution (Tetreault 2000:78.79, 82-85) and reinstate the National Assembly upon liberation (Zahlan 1998:54). On the other hand, more pressing was the issue of how to reestablish the relations that had endorsed the status quo for so long. To this end, symbolically the regime reached out to the old merchants and selected KCCI Chairman 'Abd al'Aziz al-Saqr to speak on behalf of the people at the October 1990 Jeddah Conference, an event staged to show the world that the legitimacy of the ruling Al Sabah was backed by popular solidarity (Alnajjar 2000:253-254). Nevertheless, to regain its grasp on local affairs the government had to do more than publicly reconcile with its critics; it had to reaffirm its own prewar function as the nation's unrivaled distributor (Crystal 1995b:178) despite the fact that the invasion had erased its capital surplus and driven the regime to seek loans (Ismael 1993:175).

Accordingly,

The amir worked hard to adopt the prewar strategy of placating the population economically. Despite severe economic constraints, the government announced it would pay all existing consumer loans, car loans and mortgage loans to Kuwaitis, pay back salaries to government employees for the occupation period, exempt Kuwaitis from utility and other public service charges and rents incurred during the occupation, and increase government entitlements in a variety of categories (marriage grants, child allowances, aid to orphans, widows and the poor). In March 1992 the government granted a 25 per cent salary increase to all Kuwaitis in the public sector. It also bailed out the ailing banking sector. [Crystal 1995b:178]

Supplementing this general welfare package for the populace were several initiatives intended to rescue and mollify the nation's commercial establishment. Included in the postinvasion bank bailout was a provision for the government to purchase the debts of investment houses. All told, this would have cost the treasury an estimated U.S. \$20 billion (Ismael 1993:175) and, as to be expected, the KCCI was very supportive of this plan. Later, the National Assembly amended the original proposal (Gause 1994:56) although it accepted a revised version from the KCCI in 1995 (Moore 2001:139). Also, in the rush to rebuild the country, the government oversaw several modifications to its existing trade policies that appealed directly to the old families' interests. Former housing minister Ibrahim Shanin was entrusted with approving all reconstruction contracts, a task for which he was woefully inept, and many believed that his appointment was orchestrated by the country's merchants to ease their access to lucrative state contracts (Tetreault 2000:85-86). Whether this was actually the case or not, the annulment of the Public Tenders Law No. 37 lowered many of the barriers between contractors and public monies, particularly the prohibition on direct negotiation for tendering that bypassed the Central Tenders Committee's powers of review (Gerald 1991:328) that were in place to control the use of government money (Arab Law Quarterly 1986:460). With a price tag of up to U.S. \$30 billion (Al Bahar 1991:15) there were ample enticements for businessmen to take part in the rebuilding efforts (Tetreault 2000:86) now that they could operate unimpeded by procedural supervision.

Noticeably, the preceding samples are quite illustrative of selective allocation on the part of the Kuwaiti government. Although there are the wide-ranging perks that impact the citizenry, such as guaranteed civil service employment (Tetreault 2000:156),

particular support is directed towards specific groups like the old merchant families (Gause 1994:54-57) and the tribes in the hopes of securing their political cooperation (Gavrielides 1987:160). This foregoing scenario is the basis for conventional rentier analysis: the local distribution of externally-derived rents in exchange for popular obedience towards the state (Okruhlik 1999:295-297). Yet, this also pinpoints exactly why the rentier approach demands further treatment. The unequal disbursement of payments and privileges (Cooley 2001:166), rather than breeding passivity and contentment, actually cultivates resentment and discord. In this way, Gwenn Okruhlik attests that,

... [The] long-stated corollary of the observation that distribution replaces extraction as the primary function of the state is that oil wealth can be distributed and used to placate potential dissent. Thus, the government can effectively buy off opposition. Yet in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain opposition has arisen and with it a discrepancy between the expectations derived from the rentier framework and empirical reality. Not simply the receipt of oil revenue, but the choices made on how to spend it shape development... The rentier framework has proven inadequate in elucidating the rise of dissent because it reifies the state and overemphasizes state resources and autonomy from the social consequences of expenditures. [1999:296-297]

Thus, instead of merely buying the citizenry's affections, the rentier state's position as the overwhelming source of national wealth places it at the forefront of debates when questions arise over its spending habits (Vandewalle 1998:27). Even in Kuwait, where the ruling family has been keen to dispense state monies in accordance with its political agendas, these programs have not passed unnoticed. In 1996, parliamentarian Ahmad al-Sa'doun spoke out against the Kuwait Investment Authority, accusing the state of "simply selling its assets to a select number of Kuwait's elite" (Tetreault 2000:189). Just a few years earlier the Kuwait Investment Office, chaired by Sheikh Fahd Muhammad Al Sabah, could not account for several billion dollars ventured in Spain (Crystal

1995b:177). In the ensuing outcry, National Assembly member Abdallah al-Nobari disparaged, “It seems that some members of the Kuwaiti royal family just helped themselves to a financial grab equivalent to Saddam Hussein’s invasion” (Cohen 1993:C1). Hence, while the rentier framework is suggestive of the state’s immunity from its citizenry’s appeals (Krause 2009:20), it cannot assume or guarantee the public’s quiescence when the official distributive mechanisms are so skewed in the favor of so few (Okruhlik 1999:296-297).

Another limitation readily apparent in rentier assessments is the overemphasis on a “top-down dynamic” (Moore and Salloukh 2007:59) that leads to assumptions about rentierism’s effects on individuals without actually exploring the options available for individual agency. Although the rentier state is not internally extractive it nonetheless must be well entrenched in local affairs and not at all be set apart from society (Okruhlik 1999:308-309); otherwise, it would be unable mete out its surpluses with any degree of efficiency. Yet, in small states like Kuwait with expansive bureaucracies that employ all but a fraction of the nationalized populations (Hertog 2010b:286), nearly everyone enjoys some sort of privileged access to the state and its resources (Hertog 2005:130-131); from ubiquitous civil servants and “paper pushers” (Hertog 2010b:292) to midlevel technocrats and administrative fiefdoms (Hertog 2005:131) there are seemingly endless ranks of intermediaries standing between citizens and services (Gause 1994:60). With so many opportunities for brokerage and influence peddling, a condition intensified by such bureaucratic vastness that proper channels and efficiency are either unforthcoming or altogether absent without personal intervention (Hertog 2010b:291, 306), individual rent-seeking becomes a standardized, day-to-day *modus operandi* for those who require basic

public amenities as well as even more discretionary dispensations (Vandewalle 1998:24). Therefore, the rentier image of social dormancy that is presumed to result from the state's distributive munificence is shortsighted and neglects the fact that these civic properties are oftentimes guarded within closed, personalized networks (Ledeneva 1998:96, 100-101) that easily transpose any distinctions between the private and the public (Volkov 2000:38).

Facilitating Access to the Personalized Bureaucracy

In the rentier states found throughout the Gulf the confluence of colossal national wealth, limited nonstate productive capacities, and the near total reliance by local populations on public services in the forms of jobs and subsidies (Hertog 2010b:285-286) have made each of the governments in the region a focal point for their respective citizenries. Indeed, it is certainly plausible that this civic scrutiny is heightened given that the state is the sole recipient of all oil-generated rents (Khuri 1980:153) and the discretionary dispenser of these revenues (Vandewalle 1998:27) according to its inclinations (Gause 1994:43). Moreover, as the aforementioned Kuwaiti cases illustrate, these inclinations are hardly equitable despite any ideals to the contrary. Not surprisingly, "While the development of oil contributed to a tremendous growth and proliferation of the economy, it has simultaneously generated all kinds of inequalities" (Khuri 1980:152). These disparities become even more amplified by the arbitrary nature of state allocations (Vandewalle 1998:27); a characteristic of rent distribution in the Gulf States that is aided by opaque bureaucratic channels and restricted magisterial access (Hertog 2010b:292). Such traits, Alena Ledeneva argues, lead to "closed distribution

systems” that “are closed particularly in terms of information. Whereas privileges are common knowledge, there is no open information about the criteria for entitlement, services and rations” (1998:100). Combined with the absence of administrative impartiality at any level of government, from the routine daily offices for licenses and permits to the more specialized requests that require higher-ranking intervention (Crow 1966:174-175), it becomes a regular expectation that informal and personalized connections must constantly be sought to mediate transactions between the citizen and the state (Hertog 2010b:284).

This whole process of deploying one’s contacts in order to make some desired result come to fruition requires the discriminative use of *wasta*, a colloquial usage of the formal Arabic *waseet* (Makhoul and Harrison 2004:25),⁸² the root of which means “middle” (Hertog 2010b:289) although in actual practice it functionally denotes “either mediation or intercession... [both] the person who mediates / intercedes as well as the act of mediation / intercession” (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1994:29). In its most innocuous forms, *waseet* can encompass reconciliatory interpositions (*tawassat* and *yatawassat*) meant to compel antagonists to find a middle ground (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993:1) for the sake of restoring the social order (Antoun 2000:449-450).⁸³ Undoubtedly, this is the perspective that Victor Ayoub had in mind when he wrote that in Lebanon, “When a dispute severs a social relationship among clansmen, the process of mediation begins to function. A *wasta* is formed... [that designated] the group of men who at any time acted

⁸² Frederick Charles Huxley also recorded *wasita* (sing.) and *wasayit* (pl.) as a Lebanese variation on the colloquial *wasta* (1978:29).

⁸³ Intuitively, it is understandable that some mediators are not gratified by altruism alone. Ginat makes clear that for the Bedouin of the Negev and Galilee, successful mediation can enhance a man’s status and even establish him as a paid adjudicator (1987:79-81).

as mediators in a dispute” (1966:109).⁸⁴ Still, in the Yemeni highlands even now, *tawassat*, or mediation, is upheld as a revered role by the religious elites (*sayyids* or *sadah*) who stylize themselves as neutral parties that use tactful compromises that skillfully avoid degradation to remedy plaintiffs’ injuries (Weir 2007:137-138).⁸⁵

More frequently, though, *wasta* has taken on a less constructive tone to indicate the promotion of individual, private interests that circumvent formal procedures and potentially deprives others of their rights (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:7, 18-20). *Wasta* in this sense entails the deployment of influential liaisons on one’s behalf to secure some benefits that, without *wasta*, might not have been reasonably attainable (Makhoul and Harrison 2004:25-27). While this may, at first glance, appear to insinuate that petitioners are always trying to stake their claims to entitlements that are rightfully owed to others, although this does happen more often than not (Wickham 2002:55), it is also true that supplicants must regularly seek agents simply to find any satisfaction in their legitimate dealings with government offices (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:32). Saud Joseph underscored these currents in Lebanon with her findings that without the right *wasta*, the country’s judicial and legal structures remain practically inaccessible:

The class relationships relevant to working the Lebanese law were manifested in patronage ties and legitimated in personal-moral terms. The law neither protected individuals automatically nor operated independently by formal rules. To make the law ‘work,’ individuals needed *wasta* (brokerage connections to persons in power). By exchanging services, manipulating identities, and evoking moralities, individuals created short- and long-term, horizontal and vertical alliances to build *wasta* networks. [1990:144]

⁸⁴ This classification of the actors involved in conflict management was further defined by Antoun wherein a *wasta* “go-between” (1979:156) “is always to be preferred to the self as an effective pleader” (2000:460) since this party is thought to be evenhanded and / or well-connected enough to gain acceptable concessions (2000:448).

⁸⁵ This is not far removed from Goffman’s general depiction of successful mediation as being the avoidance of embarrassment for all those concerned without the shame or humiliation of rejection (1959:149).

In nearby Jordan, Sa'eda Kilani and Basem Sakijha echoed Joseph's account but they expanded their inquiry to reflect the typical frustration that comes with handling any aspect of the national bureaucracy:

In daily life, *Wasta* is used to facilitate procedures in state institutions. People resort to *Wasta* mainly to avoid the waste of time and money on administrative procedures, or still, to subdue the disrespect that comes with bureaucracy...an aspect that should be further studied since it gives legitimacy to *Wasta*. One does not have to know influential personalities to use *Wasta*. Suffice to know an employee at the concerned department or a friend of his/hers to carry out the needed paper work or to alleviate the demanded costs. [2002:18]

Kuwait, too, exhibits its own analogous tendencies whenever there are the inevitable meetings that bring the nation's inhabitants into contact with the state's hierarchical agencies. As the narratives below reveal, the need for *wasta* and the admittances it can provide permeates every level of Kuwaiti society regardless of citizenship. In the first instance, a national, Khalid A. R., recounts his mother's ordeal with the healthcare system:

Sometimes you go to the hospital to take a [doctor] prescribed treatment, like a [therapeutic] sauna, and you are asked officially right there if you have *wasta*. *Wasta* speeds things up. This did not happen to me but it happened to my mother during the course of her recovery.⁸⁶

Staying with healthcare, the experience of Faisal, a very well-connected retiree, highlights some of these arrangements as they are used to expedite the government's public coverage of its populous.

Faisal once held a low-level governmental post and when he was active in his position he developed an impressive number of contacts within the different ministries. Today, people visit Faisal precisely for his access to this broad range of decision-makers. Regularly, Faisal finds himself out during the day calling on people all at the request of others.

One of Faisal's acquaintances, Abu Bakr, is a good example of his networking capabilities. Faisal and Abu Baker first met one afternoon when they both happened to be visiting the Ministry of Health. In the hallway outside of the

⁸⁶ Khalid A. R. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 22, 2009.

personnel offices, Abu Bakr lamented to Faisal that for the past three months he had been trying to get his paperwork signed but, regrettably, he did not know any of the managers or directors. Faisal, from his previous work, was on personal terms with the director that Abu Bakr needed. He took Abu Bakr's papers and returned them to him, signed, within an hour.⁸⁷

Given these complications that the citizenry faces in its maneuverings with the bureaucracy, it is not unexpected that for expatriates too, there are considerable barriers that hinder those trying to find their way through the state's immense networks of regulatory offices and redundant paperwork. Like the urban laborers and working classes that Saud Joseph depicts in Lebanon, Kuwait's foreign work force must also confront an obstructive bureaucracy as they are burdened by the weight of their substantial "handicaps: lack of time, money and resources, the likelihood of illegal statuses, and negative past encounters with public officials" (Joseph 1990:145). These obstacles, and the means by which to resolve them, are all present in the commentary of Tamer M., a young Pakistani man from Lahore employed in Kuwait's private sector as an office assistant, who expressed his aggravations with trying to get a driver's permit:

If I get my [driver's] license I will buy a car to get around; it will make going to work and coming home easier because right now I have to ride with friends. I have stayed on [at] my new job for nine months and I have my [civil identification] card but even with the card it is hard to get a driving license. I have tried many times [to get one] but they want more papers... signed from many ministries and offices.⁸⁸ My friend at work is Kuwaiti and he knows someone he can give my papers to. I think this will take care of it.⁸⁹

Comments like these by Tamer M., Faisal, and Khalid A. R. make it unmistakable that *wasta*, whether manifest as trustworthy connections (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:20) or

⁸⁷ Faisal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 3, 2007.

⁸⁸ Minimally, non-Westerners applying for a driver's license must collect the necessary forms and circulate them amongst their embassy, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, the Ministry of Public Health, the Traffic Department in Qurtoba, the Licensing Section at the Central Traffic Department in Shuwaikh, and the Traffic Department in their residential district.

⁸⁹ Tamer M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 17, 2007.

outright favoritism (Haladjian-Henriksen 2006:315), defines the junctures where the interests of the state, the polity, and the body politic all intersect. It is, in Frederick Charles Huxley's estimation, the linkage that "operates on and between [the] micro and macro levels" (1978:12) of society. In the testimonies cited above, *wasta* serves in what some authors have called its deceptively egalitarian (Perthes 1997:181) or benevolent (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:25) guises; namely, it can provide a conduit by which anyone (Sharabi 1988:46), citizen and expatriate alike, can penetrate the regulation-laden state bureaucracy and receive satisfaction (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:22, 25). That is, unless one does not have the sufficient *wasta* needed to outflank all others competing for the same spoils.

Outside of its equalizing pretexts, when everyday it is called upon to sway contests with the bureaucracy over to the sides of the citizenry (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:21, 22), *wasta* is disparaged as a stigmatizing (Mohamed and Hamdy 2008:1-3), socially divisive, and culpable in forming dependencies (Perthes 1997:181). In her work addressing the symptoms of poverty in Lebanon, Sylvia Haladjian-Henriksen went so far as to reproach what she sees as the central role that *wasta* plays in creating schisms between Lebanese social classes:

In fact, as *wasta* seems always to be behind social and political power, job opportunities, high incomes, educational success, etc. (and even sometimes access to healthcare), social classes are more or less constituted around this concept. Thus, individuals, and mainly families, who have very strong *wasta* (very strong connections with powerful people) have greater opportunities to be part of the upper classes. At the opposite extreme, those with no *wasta* at all will in all probability find themselves in the lower classes and be identified as 'the poor.' Consequently, social mobility can be considered to be strongly connected to *wasta* gain or loss. In particular, 'losing *wasta*' would simply mean 'impoverishment.' [2006:316]

While this statement is plainly reminiscent of the adage that “the people who do better are better connected” (Burt 1999:48), though neglectful of the counterpoint that *wasta* can operate vertically to connect socially disparate groups (Joseph 1990:144), it is more complete in its conviction that it is the unbalanced circulation of *wasta* (Perthes 1997:181) that will disproportionately shape the probabilities for betterment in a multitude of arenas. This is what happened for Rashid A. M. after he submitted his employment application with one of the state’s agencies. He was excited to be called back for an interview although, as he quickly discovered, the evaluative protocol was little more than a shallow formality.

At the meeting where the applicants meet the heads of the departments that they are applying to, I was told by the man taking me into the room, ‘Do not even worry about anything at all if you have *wasta*. Don’t be nervous if you have a *wasta*. Just answer their questions. Don’t be nervous if you have a *wasta*.’⁹⁰

Rashid A. M. moves on from this discussion to another story that is somewhat parabolic in its content as if it is intended to show that turning to *wasta* is hardly exceptional, even for the most accomplished, in Kuwait:

One of my father’s close friends had four sons graduate from college at the top of their class in the United States. At their graduation, they even shook hands with [former U.S. president] Clinton. When the boys returned to Kuwait they told their father that they wanted to find jobs on their own without his help and without his *wasta*. After a year, they came back to their father and said, ‘O.k., help us find jobs now.’⁹¹

Also, there are two additional principles of *wasta* that must not be overlooked: not all *wasta* is equally potent insofar as its capacity to deliver the desired outcome; and, a *wasta* exchange may only be indirect in that it capitalizes on “friends of friends” (Boissevain

⁹⁰ Rashid A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 22, 2009.

⁹¹ Rashid A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 22, 2009.

1974:24-25) who serve as “chains... to gain access to a certain resource” (Lin 2001:44).⁹²

Reflective of this first tenet, that not all *wasta* is equivalent in its ability to supersede its opposite numbers, is the job search that Ali A. K., a Kuwaiti information technologies (IT) specialist educated in the United States, executed a few years before he found his current employer:

When I applied for a job at Kuwait Oil Company [KOC], my father had me meet with one of his friends who he thought could help me at KOC. It was nice but it did not matter for me and I did not get hired. [Why?] Many of the other applicants had stronger *wasta*. Stronger *wasta* would be someone held higher in the eyes of the company. For example, a minister.⁹³

Continuing, Ali A. K. details another of his quests, this time for “friends of friends” or what he deemed as “small fish *wasta*” to allude to those secondary contacts that can assist with procedural details, like forms and documentation, but ultimately must pass one along to someone else with more capable, stronger connections. In this next excerpt, Ali A. K. shows how this practice unfolds. Despite his use of hypothetical phrasing here, Ali A. K. is intimately familiar with the process he describes:

Any applicant for employment will first want to find [all] the names of a company’s managers. Then, [he can] look for people who might have *wasta* with these managers to help the applicant or an applicant will try to find one of his relatives who is close to a manager. This can move him [the applicant] to someone who... [has] stronger *wasta*.⁹⁴

What becomes increasingly apparent in these accounts of *wasta* is that it is infused with the qualitative attributes of interpersonal aid. Although it distinctly exudes the veneer of what some have called dependency (Perthes 1997:181) and others have criticized as the

⁹² Needless to say, the presence of one of these conditions does not preclude the activation of the other. Ostensibly impotent *wasta* might easily lead a solicitor to more helpful *wasta* (Joseph 1990:150-155) just as plentiful “friends of friends” are sometimes painfully ineffective in their efforts to achieve acceptable results.

⁹³ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

⁹⁴ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

trappings of nepotism (Haladjian-Henriksen 2006:315) or corruption (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:17), such labels ignore the fundamental centrality that relationships occupy in a country like Kuwait. From the self-framed image at the state level where leadership and governance is personified (Zahlan 1998:79) rather than cast in abstract institutions (Al Oudat and Alshboul 2010:71), to the complications of “meritocratic individualism” (Shryock and Howell 2001:266) in a social climate where “mutual favor-doing” (Bill 1973:138) is simultaneously a marker of success (Hamzeh 2001:176)⁹⁵ and a community expectation (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:33),⁹⁶ any boundaries that would delineate individual concerns and the dynamics of kinship from the business of statecraft and industry (Sharabi 1988:131) are either unclear (Shryock and Howell 2001:249)⁹⁷ or completely negotiable (Kingston 2001:56-57).

Eric Wolf surmised as much in his scrutiny of formal power structures and the parallel existence of informal groups that challenge the state for its resources, and compete amongst each other, but are nevertheless still needed by officialdom for its very survival (1966a:1-2). Here, however, the distinction between formal and informal frameworks is far less pronounced as official avenues are enmeshed with, and legitimated by, the rhetoric of interpersonal obligations and responsibilities (Rosen 2002:62-71).

⁹⁵ Kilani and Sakijha contend that the sole act of meting out *wasta* can be convincing enough to signal one’s achievements to the wider public (2002:23, 74).

⁹⁶ In Crow’s review of public institutional efficiency in Lebanon, he found that for civil servants, communal demands and the loyalties of group membership often trumped conceptual administrative goals (1966:175). This was still patently in effect decades later when, in the aftermath of the civil war, Lebanon’s environmental conservation efforts were marred by posts being filled based on factional loyalty at the cost of professional expertise (Kingston 2001:64).

⁹⁷ In this respect it is worthwhile to quote Hisham Sharabi’s thoughts on personalized institutions, or what he concluded to be neopatriarchal institutions, in the Middle East: “For the typical bureaucrat, for instance, the workplace (one’s office) is no more than an extension of the place of sociability and relaxation. There is little qualitative difference between what goes on in the office or what goes on in the salon, living room, or *diwan*... This is not just a pattern of local behavior, but an institutionally embodied and socially prevalent practice. Thus bureaucracy – in government, the military, education, business – projects a modernized exterior, but internally its structure is essentially patriarchal, animated by an elaborate system of personal relations, kinship, and patronage” (1981:131).

Shryock and Howell, in their study of prominent Jordanian families and the contemporary memories of tribal politics during the early days of statehood, chose the phrase “house politics” to explain the conceptual limits of state-society autonomy “by exploring the zones in which the processes and institutional objects familiar to metropolitan political science give way to... other intimate encounters” (2001:250). Further blurring any structural lines that would demarcate where the “webs of informality” (Bill 1973:134) end and the offices of state begin is Nazih Ayub’s outlook that throughout the Gulf, “Just as the *état providence* is also an *état famille*, the *raison d’état* is not easily distinguishable from the *raison de famille*” (2006:229). What must be added to Ayub’s reasoning is that the synthesis of the *raison d’état* and the *raison de famille* becomes possible only once the former has been loaded with the same “moral and emotional content” (Joseph 1990:144) as the latter. Whether or not this is signified through the lexicon of kinship (Joseph 1993:454)⁹⁸ or some alternative device⁹⁹ intended to prompt requital, like gift-giving (Bourdieu 1966:204, 206) or visiting (Rugh 1997:218-219),¹⁰⁰ it is the design and management of relational indexes (Padgett and Ansell

⁹⁸ In an interesting piece on the uses of relatedness in workplace practices, Jenny White reported the metaphorical use of kinship by underpaid female pieceworkers in Istanbul to extend “the requirements and benefits of reciprocity beyond the family and actual kin to a group of unrelated individuals who do what kin do” (2000:142). This corresponds with Larson’s discussion of how, according to context, nonkin might be regarded “as if” they are blood relations to validate their closeness (1983:566). Of course, Lancaster’s classic study of the Rwala Bedouin explored the ideas of genealogical hindsight whereby pragmatic relationships were explained by manipulating the idioms of descent (1997:32-34).

⁹⁹ Marc Bloch, in his expansive volumes on the rise and decline of the medieval European feudal system, specified the weakening of protective kinship as one of the main causes that led to a form of vassal patronage that, in some ways, reproduced familiar commitments (1961:142, 148, 225). Henry Rosenfeld agreed with this last proposition in his work on Palestinian Arab villages where 19th century landlord-tenant relationships were often merged with the liabilities of kinship-oriented reciprocation by the peasants to secure allowances from landowners (1974:140-141). In postindependent Lebanon, Hamzeh isolated confessional clientelism as supplanting the Ottoman-era ascriptive foundations of feudal patrons (2001:169-170, 176).

¹⁰⁰ Bourdieu makes the point about Kabylian gift exchange that equates giving with the issuing of a challenge that demands a riposte (1966:204-206). This is similar to Mauss’ perspective that offerings without repayment can lead to the recipient’s subservience and shame (1954:63, 72). These types of tests compliment Andrea Rugh’s observation that at her field site in Wusta, Syria, there is always an element of

1993:1310) like these that collapse the dichotomies of executive duties and customary commitments (Rosen 1995:201).

Against this backdrop that pervades with what Hisham Shirabi derided as one in which, “Public office is a privilege and public service a favor” (1988:132), personalism and the cultivation of personalistic ties surface as instrumental in configuring individual and group ambitions (Lancaster and Lancaster 2006:349). Before the Islamic Revolution toppled the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979, James A. Bill witnessed the intense pursuit of these kinds of relationships by Iranians in their commonplace interactions at every stage of society; a preoccupation that, in his view, was practiced with methodical tenaciousness:

The system of persistent and direct personalism pervades all corners of an individual’s life. It dominates, for example, in family, occupational, religious, educational and governmental settings. In such an environment, one is required to develop highly refined techniques of perception and persuasion. An individual’s survival and success have often rested upon his ability to make the right personal contact and then to be able to use that contact to achieve a certain end... The most common expression describing the intricacies of the personal flow of power in Iran is *pārtī*. This term means to possess connections, to be able to pull strings, or to have “pull.” There is a saying in contemporary Tehran circles that in order to achieve any important goal in Iran one must be strong in Vitamin P, *i.e.*, *pūl* (money), *pārtī*, and *pur ru’ī* (pushiness). [1973:136-137]¹⁰¹

It is probably not a coincidence that Bill’s Iranian “Vitamin P” and all of its undertones are matched by the pejorative moniker “Vitamin *Waw*”¹⁰² used in Arabic-speaking countries to scorn *wasta* (Mohamed and Hamdy 2008:1) or, as bank employee Yahya

tension inherent to social calls for hosts because their visitors usually harbor an underlying expectation that they wish to see fulfilled (1997:219).

¹⁰¹ Javidan and Dastmalchian also add that the deployment of mediators in Iranian society serves to lessen the potential for interpersonal disagreements: “Because Iranians tend to avoid direct confrontation and conflict, they prefer to use a third party who is usually trusted by both sides... to facilitate the conversation and the resolution of issues” (2003:133).

¹⁰² In this usage “*waw*” refers to the Arabic letter *waw* that is at the beginning of the word *wasta* (Jammal 2003:108).

retorted when asked about it in Kuwait City, to dismiss it euphemistically.¹⁰³ Even so, the words of Ahmad H., a Kuwaiti college student who studied in the United States, are genuinely succinct in their appraisal of the primacy that interpersonal obligations are given in the country: “Our life is all about connections... it is not about who I am or if I have this degree, it is about who I know.”¹⁰⁴ Khalid A. R. qualified this judgment after he took a moment to collect his thoughts on how indispensable connections are for attaining anything in Kuwait. In his opinion,

Our government is strong in the sense that no one can overthrow it... [But] it is weak in [its] power... The government and its laws, the legal system, [are] not respected or feared. [It is] respected by those without *wasta* or relations [because] *wasta* or relations let people get away with things. [Why?] [This is a] small country, everything is built on relationships.¹⁰⁵

Each of the foregoing cases makes it clear that *wasta* and its subtexts constitute a valuable and necessary resource base that almost invariably must be mobilized whenever authorization or sanction is needed (Crow 1966:174). On an abstract level, this characterization of *wasta* bears an undeniable resemblance to the notion of social capital, as it was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, in that it too exemplifies, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Portes 1998:3). Nan Lin further refined Bourdieu’s synopsis of social capital as being indicative of,

...the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions. Thus, the concept has two important components: (1) it represents

¹⁰³ Yahya also shared that *dezah*, or push, was a less common but not unknown synonym for *wasta* in Kuwait City. The example that Yaha provided was, “He had a *dezah* [push] into his management position.” Yahya. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 21, 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Ahmad H. Interview conducted in Salt Lake City, Utah on September 11, 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Khalid A. R. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 22, 2009.

resources embedded in social relations rather than individuals, and (2) access and use of such resources reside with actors. [2001:25]

Correspondingly, Sandra Franke determined that social capital could not be fully comprehended without recognizing that it is located within interpersonal networks and that it is not the discretionary asset of lone individuals. With this formulation, Franke advocated that:

This approach is based on the premise that social capital is neither an individual nor a collective property, but rather a *property arising from the interdependence between individuals and between groups within a community*. Consequently, social capital is viewed as a resource that emerges from social ties and is then used by members (individuals or groups) of networks. [2005:2]

Clifford Geertz, a quarter of a century earlier, would even suggest as much in his analysis of Moroccan merchants in the *suwwaq* of Sefrou where he postulated that the heterogeneous mixtures of goods, social backgrounds, and information could be partly controlled by, “constructing around oneself a personal network of exchange relations in which these matters can be given a reasonably determinate, stabilized form” (1979:230). Working within the same Maghrebian milieu, Lawrence Rosen emulated Geertz’s proposal by explicitly focusing his attentions towards, “the centrality of the individual as the fundamental social unit who engages in a series of dyadic contracts within and beyond his kinsmen to construct a web of indebtedness that links him to others in his world” (1984:91). Also, as Kenneth Brown pointed out in his historical investigation of Salé, securing such linkages was a stipulation for cooperative efforts that occupied both the elites and their dependents:

The basic fabric of this community was held together by cross-cutting ties among individuals, and by networks of social relationships. The elite of the community were those important personalities who dominated social networks. Their authority and influence within the community derived from their contractual and

kinship ties to other members of society who depended on and supported them, and who in turn had their own followers and dependants. [1976:60]

Yet, in a state system where the government and all of its appendages are at the epicenter of nearly every distributional allowance, from support services to economic provisions (Crystal 1995a:260, 272), *wasta* or social capital can scarcely be expected to exist either entirely independently or far beyond administrative inducements. This is especially true when the pathways through the bureaucracy are littered with “secondary and tertiary” (Jamal 2007:15) intermediaries who are strategically situated in a position to negotiate the terms of governmental favors (Farsoun 1970:275-276). By recognizing the centrality of the welfare state’s place in everyday life, these networks, in one way or another, eventually lead back to a state-sponsored patron even though the participating actors might actually regard themselves as being equivalents in status. Then again, this lack of interpersonal differentiation does not mask the unavoidable fact that in the oil-rich Gulf monarchies, “the broader structure[s] in which such relationships are embedded tend to be hierarchical, and by and large societal partners function as clients of the bigger institution involved” (Hertog 2005:130).

Without question, the Middle East in general and modern Gulf society in particular are not alone in their reliance upon interpersonal associations to navigate what are otherwise lethargic bureaucracies (Hertog 2010b:283).¹⁰⁶ In fact, a redistributive

¹⁰⁶ For instance, in China informal connections (*guanxi*) and “the idea of ‘face’ (*mianxi*)” (Smart 1993:402) emerge as so axiomatic in day-to-day affairs that an “individual with a problem, personal or organizational, naturally turns to his or her *guanxiwang*, or ‘relationship network,’ for assistance” (Hutchings and Weir 2006:143). Centered on the exchange of favors, *guanxi* ties were especially instrumental in Mao’s time for factory directors in dire need of supplemental funds from government planners and for party members who undertook their career advancement through displays of personal loyalty to their immediate superiors (Bian 2006:278). Likewise, Campbell observed that among the Sarakatsani of Greece, the shepherds systematically try to align themselves with the village council president to ensure that the latter’s decisions will meet with their approval. To achieve these ends, “the Sarakatsani attempt to draw him [the village council president] into some form of personal relationship that will introduce a moral element of mutual

welfare economy like that found in Kuwait bears a striking likeness to the allocative monopolies that typify command markets (Fitzpatrick 2000:167). Most illustrative of this overlap is the lopsided public employment sector in Kuwait that provides jobs for 90 percent of the country's citizenry (Ghabra 1997:361) in concurrence with the government being in a position to inundate its nationals with services, subsidies (Hertog 2010b:285), and favorable business opportunities (Herb 2009:384-386). Furthermore, attempts towards increased privatization have been staunchly opposed on the grounds that it would seriously undercut the massive dispensational benefits that so many Kuwaitis have grown accustomed to receiving¹⁰⁷ and, it can be supposed, the intercessional capacities of the

consideration" (1979:229). Within the Soviet Union, before its eventual dissolution and the command economy's transformation into privatized operations (Ledeneva 1998:177), *blat* functioned as a veritable "second economy" (Fitzpatrick 2000:166) to augment shortages in the marketplace. Portrayed as a personal exchange relationship, Soviet-era *blat* allocated state properties outside of formal outlets and redirected them into informal networks centered on familiar obligations and gratitude (Ledeneva 2000:184-188). Even today in Russia, "Now that the capital and commodity markets work and access to goods and services is available, it is access to money, making a living, and getting a well-paid job [that have] become the 'new power' of personal networks" (Ledeneva 2009:264). Remaining in the Soviet bloc and turning to Kazakhstan's tenure with the Kremlin, it is notable that for this Central Asian Republic, Russian *blat* was effectively replaced by the idioms of tribal genealogies to handle similar local deficits. Shortfalls in political capital and state resources were mitigated by clan-based linkages that operated in a face-to-face, exclusive framework that relied strictly on reciprocity while at the same time curtailing the circulation of such services to nonmembers (Schatz 2004:11, 17-19, 70). The Cuban expression *sociolismo* also carries an equivalent connotation wherein the term embodies "a generalized 'I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine' system that rewards those who are friendly with government officials" (Perez-Lopez 1995:102). It is Damian J. Fernandez's assertion that in Cuba, the citizenry's "informalization" of the state's rigid apparatuses via *sociolismo* represents a realized grassroots mechanism for accommodating, and subverting, the regime's directives: "The 'informal' realm of the private sphere where friends and family interact constitute an alternative source of norms to the state and state institutions... These networks form the infrastructure of the politics of affection, politics that revolve around who you know, who you love and are based on personalism and personal exceptionalism" (2003:231). Lastly, although numerous other examples abound, are the bonds of person-to-person trust (*confianza*) that flourish between members of Mexico's middle classes and gives them a competitive advantage in seeking executorial support. Basically, these "favors tend to be bureaucratic in nature, consisting usually of preferential treatment in dealing with red-tape procedures and priority access to the services offered by the state. This social institution allows people to maintain certain privileges, and to have access to jobs and services that the state offers but not always is able to provide to all society members" (Lomnitz 1997:119).

¹⁰⁷ Michael Herb indicates that this great imbalance between the public sector and private enterprises is fermenting "a distinctive form of class conflict in the Gulf in which salaried citizen employees of the state have a jaundiced attitude toward the private sector while the private sector views most citizens as parasites on the state and avoids hiring them" (2009:383).

well-placed intermediaries who provide these allowances (Hertog 2010a:287-288).¹⁰⁸

This is the point that is the key to understanding the existence of brokerage between state and society in Kuwait: its top-heavy, unnavigable bureaucracy lends itself to an abundance of go-betweens who possess insider knowledge of how to satisfy most demands (Hertog 2010b:291-292). However, the state's absolute control over the local economy must be included in any formulations of the parameters of Kuwait's *wasta*-type intermediation. What this means is that instead of subjecting one's own assets to petitioners, it is actually the government's resources that are already destined for eventual redistribution that are being sought through the mobilization of these informal relationships; the only personal outlay is accessibility (Ledeneva 2000:185, 188).¹⁰⁹ Plus, these state properties are widely looked upon as belonging to citizenry (Ledeneva 1998:101) despite the difficulties that come with trying to retrieve these resources through formal measures without the right personal backing (Hertog 2010b:303). All of these elements are abundant in Ahmad A. A.'s disclosure of his father's disillusionment with the expectations that were incumbent upon him when he occupied just such an intersection that linked nationals and their advocates with the arbitrary magnanimity of the regime.

My father is a doctor and he trained as a surgeon. He used to work in a position for the government where he was in charge of sending citizens overseas for medical treatment. Men from the National Assembly used to always approach him so that he could put together the paperwork to send their supporters abroad for therapy and care. These Parliamentarians who came to him would say, 'This man votes for me so make sure he gets papers he needs for treatments here.'

¹⁰⁸ One of the most notorious liaisons acting between the state and its nationals is a politician who is diminutively regarded locally as "Al-Hout," or "The Whale," due to, as Taher A. made clear, his ability to funnel such large sums of government *wasta* into his own personal networks. Taher A. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 15, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ This description of how *wasta* operates in Kuwait is closely linked to Alena Ledeneva's remarks on Soviet era *blat*: "By helping out, people gave out not goods of their own, but benefits of which the other was deprived" (2000:190).

Sometimes these patients did not even need medical attention overseas but the Assemblymen wanted them to be sent anyways because of their support and the government pays for it. My father grew tired of this type of *wasta* and quit to start his own private practice. Now he refuses to prepare reports just so that political supporters can have government-paid medical vacations to Europe and other places.¹¹⁰

Unfortunately, Ahmad A. A. did not divulge what his father was able to gain from his tenure in this advantageous position where he could freely authorize the use of public funds for either legitimate or more questionable claims. Nonetheless, Ahmad A. A.'s tale does serve to reinforce the utility that connections, brokerage, and *wasta* afford individuals operating within a state-society framework that is rife with patronage, public sector overemployment (Hertog 2010a:288, 294), and generous government disbursements (Herb 2009:382). Whereas the country's "all-pervading welfarism" (Delacroix 1980:13) provides the citizenry with incentives for rent-seeking (Krause 2009:20), its bureaucratic morass gives them a reason for locating skilled interceders (Hertog 2010b:284). To borrow the conclusion drawn by Anton Blok in his closing remarks on the transformation of regional powerbrokers in the wake of state centralization in western Sicily, "Access to State resources is what counts today. Without it, local resources would be inconsequential" (1975:221).

¹¹⁰ Ahmad A. A. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 04, 2010.

CHAPTER 4

INSTITUTIONALIZING ACCESS IN THE CITY-STATE THROUGH THE RITES OF GUESTROOM SOCIABILITY

Kuwait, like many countries, is home to an incredible assortment of informal institutions that populate the associational field that exists between the individual and the formal apparatuses of the state. At the most fundamental level, the sanctity of the home and the sacredness of the mosque seemingly offer their attendees some freedom of association devoid of governmental regulation (Tetreault 2000:8-9), and these sites are complemented by cafés, sports clubs (Aldousari 2004:57-58), neighborhood supermarket cooperatives, *husayniyat*, and professional societies. Understandably, though, there is no strict dichotomy that “freezes [these] interactions into two distinct spheres, namely formal and informal” (Keshavarzian 2007:61), as these locations are precisely the points at which state and society frequently intersect. In some cases, such spaces rely upon the state to define the legal parameters of their existence (Salam 2002:3-4), whereas in others administrative regulations allow for “techniques to observe, register, record, and monitor associationalism” (Wiktorowicz 2000:48). Then again, there is the ever-present risk of electronic surveillance on the part of the government, a practice that has been widely rumored to afflict private gatherings in Kuwait City (Slyomovics 1998:162). Aside from

the invasive tactics of officialdom there are also the less apparent public-private juxtapositions where the multiplicities of individual roles (Bailey 1969:10-12) can be manifest within multifunctional institutions (Barnes 1969:107-108). In one instance of the former, Richard Antoun wrote of the ambiguity of office that burdened the village mayor in Kafr al-Mar, Jordan, with the simultaneous obligations that were owed to kinsmen, constituents, and the state (1979:81-82) that make the realms of the personal / informal largely inseparable from that of the institutional / formal (Rosen 2006:166). As for institutional multiplexity itself, Diane Singerman's documentation of the establishment and calculated use of private voluntary organizations, private associations, and community centers by Members of Parliament (MPs) in Cairo to collect information about their constituents and redistribute government resources to their supporters (1995:258) is a clear case of the versatility that can be incorporated into associational venues.

Given that the line of demarcation that distinguishes where the formal ends and the informal begins is vague or negotiable at best, it is not unexpected that the pervasive visiting practices that are so often upheld as the hallmarks of sociability throughout the Middle East (Vinogradov 1974:3-4) exemplify this overlap. While visiting easily entails community ideals about status differentials based on who visits whom at what duration and frequency, not to mention the competitiveness and moral imperatives that complicate hosting and visiting, it also visibly reveals to others the nature of interpersonal and intergroup relations (Meneley 1996:4-6, 30, 35-37); which linkages are strong, what ties are weak, and how bonds are being reconfigured (Benedict 1974:33-34). At the same time, the informality of visitation and networking can serve as a barometer by which

public, official decorum can be evaluated for its substance or lack thereof, as Christine Eickelman described for women's gatherings in Oman:

For example, during one visit a woman of the tribal elite was asked whether she often visited the wife of the *wali* (governor). She replied that she did not know the governor's wife and changed the subject. Yet, later in the privacy of the car on the way home, she added, 'You know at the mourning for *x*' – she named a well-known older woman of the tribal elite – 'the governor's wife only came once!' The single visit was a bitter insult, suggesting the governor's family perceived the tribal elite as no more than clients. Although the tribal notables and the governor appeared to have cordial relations at official functions, the women's formal networking suggested underlying tensions. [1993:663]

Plainly, as Eickelman's brief account indicates, the rituals of visitation cannot be categorized into the unceremonious province of casual entertainment (Meneley 1996:4), for these are the very types of acts that bring informality and the more formal fields of activity, like governance, into contact with each other (Rosen 1984:100-104). In many ways, this echoes Pierre Bourdieu's views that capital expended in one area, whether symbolic or social, can always be redeemed for economic or political returns in another, and vice versa (Portes 2000:2). This is illustrated in Andrea Rugh's portrayal of exactly how indeterminate the boundaries of informal visits and formal calls can be when a low-ranking governmental official in the village of Wusta, Syria, fell ill during her fieldwork:

Almost as tangible were events like illness, where the number and lengths of visits substituted for gifts as a measure of friendship. For example, when Abu Abdalla was sick, he knew who wanted to maintain friendly relations with him by the stream of well-wishers who came to visit. Many came not so much out of concern for his health as for the power he wielded in his governmental job. Abu Abdalla kept mental note of who came and went, as did Um Abdalla and Um George when they discussed the list of visitors each morning at our coffee break. Each 'active' acquaintance was expected to come at least once during his convalescence and would store up more 'credit' if he came several times. [1997:217-218]

As can be seen in Rugh's depiction, home and health were not autonomous from the patriarch's identity as an agent of the state; circumstances that loaded any casual stopover

with the accountability of a formal appointment. Here, the extension of Abu Abdalla's governmental rank into his household persona is along the lines of Hisham Sharabi's contention that the office is little more than an appendage to the sociability expected in the home (1988:131). This interconnection becomes heightened in Kuwait's paternalistic, autocratic environment where political support is synonymous with government expenditure (Eifert et al. 2003), state spending towards individuals and groups can be discretionary, and public overemployment (El-Katiri et al. 2011:12, 26-28) can make any social encounter a potential interaction with a member of the bureaucracy; again, bringing into question any definite separation of the private from the public or the informal from the formal.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of visiting practices in the Middle East at locales where the dispensation of hospitality, patronage, assistance, as well as the sharing of basic camaraderie is an expectation if not an outright requirement (Antoun 1979:72), has long served as a point of access bridging the gap between the powerful and their petitioners (Bill 1996:510-511). At lively sites variously labeled as guestrooms, guesthouses, reception halls, and the pastoral men's side of the tent, "the processes of a civil society form a seamless web with state processes rather than a sharp dichotomy with them" (Antoun 2000:442). Although much of the ethnographic literature on these gatherings tend to accentuate, and take for granted, that such activities are the exclusive purview of men, it is shortsighted to overlook women as participants in their own cycles of hosting and visiting that are no less valuable for familial politics (Eickelman 1993:663).¹¹¹ Still, it is the men's house that has embodied the perception of a place

¹¹¹ Christine Eickelman's work in Oman (1993) and Andrea Rugh's research in Syria (1997) have already been mentioned but William Lancaster's monograph on the Rwala Bedouin accurately conveys how men's

where outside relations can coalesce (Bourdieu 2003:159) and decision-makers can always be found.¹¹²

Just before the mid-20th century, British official A. H. Hamilton discovered one such congregation of important men when he called upon a *diwankhana* (guestroom) in Iraqi Kurdistan where he was greeted by “the mudir [director] of customs, the schoolmaster and the neighboring chieftain, Shaikh Allahadin. The local ‘bash chaush,’ or police sergeant, had hastily donned his full uniform” (1947:127). As a visiting outsider with a title, however, Hamilton’s recollections have to be viewed with care since his presence carried the weight of imperial designs. More reflective of local-level notions of statewide brokerage in the company of a guesthouse is Abdalla Bujra’s report from the factionalized settlement of Hureidah in southern Yemen. Interestingly, what might be designated as the elites’ informal guesthouses (*barzah*) could practically double as impromptu courthouses, reception halls, and political headquarters. Thus, it was Bujra’s conclusion that,

To be a host to such important visitors, with the implication of personal friendship between host and guest, has obvious political significance especially under a system in which the manipulation of individuals is an important means of gaining power. The role of host in Hureidah has since become so closely identified with political power that the President of the Local Council is now the ‘official’ host of Hureidah, and he has kept aside one of his houses especially for this purpose. [1971:136-137]

Continuing, Bujra detailed one specific occurrence in which all of the components of local and national authority merged inside a guesthouse setting to validate the host’s

and women’s networks might be jointly coordinated for household information (1997:64-65). Similarly, Fatma Haidari’s thesis (2006) on women’s gatherings (*yam’ah*) in Kuwait sheds light on the country’s institutional counterpart to the male *diwaniyya*. The Egyptian context for the necessity of female sociability for household survival in the face of bureaucratic hindrances has been well studied by Diane Singerman (1995) as have the roles of family status and hierarchy within Yemeni women’s networks (Meneley 1996, 2007).

¹¹² Hanan. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 30, 2006.

command over his own town as well as demonstrating his influence within the state system:

One morning the D.A. came to Abubakar's guest room to find out what the [Local] Council had been doing during his absence. He normally comes to these sittings whenever he is in Hureidah, but this was a business visit to receive a report from the Council.

The fact that the D.A. came to Abubakar's house for the report is itself significant in that in other places the visit would have been reversed. After the D.A. had sat down and courtesies had been exchanged Abubakar called his son, twenty-two years old, to bring the Council files, and then delegated the task of reporting to the D.A. to him. These two withdrew to a corner of the room to carry out their business while Abubakar continued to entertain his visitors. This, of course, was a slight. . . . But this treatment of the D.A. produces the 'right' impression in Hureidah and shows who is the 'boss' in the town. [1971:165-166]

Robert Fernea was also explicit about the capacity of the tribal guesthouse (*mudhif*) in southern Iraq to act as the conduit that linked local leaders with provincial authorities and statesmen in Baghdad. This connection became quite literal, as Fernea witnessed during his research in the late 1950s, when the latest technological advancements of the day were utilized inside the shaykh's *mudhif* to minimize any communicative distances between his court and the capital: "a modern telephone sits behind one of the reed pillars, putting the shaykh into immediate communication with the local heads of government and, occasionally, the ministries of Baghdad" (1970:20). For this tribal leadership, the guesthouse was unchallenged in southern Iraq as the preferred place for "representing the tribe vis-à-vis the local government officials" (Fernea 1970:53). Lastly, departing from the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and turning momentarily to Turkey, there is Brian Beeley's study on the spread of coffeehouses in the rural eastern parts of the country and the sociopolitical impact that these establishments had on the region's guestrooms as they both vied for a clientele. Beeley's description is particularly instructive for its treatment of how these guestrooms in the countryside were

anything but isolated from the national framework; to the contrary, a guestroom could provide an entryway for government appointees to reach the populace.

The most influential family head (not necessarily the most prosperous) tends to attract the leading figures in the community – even where no direct kinship ties are involved. On this basis, if a village is large enough to support more than a single guest room, one such room by general recognition fills the role that would be accorded to the government-inspired, official village guest room. Thus the tax collector, the army recruiter, or any other bureaucrat would gravitate to the principal guest room as a focal point in his dealings with the village as a whole. [1970:480]

What all of these excerpts make clear is that there is no perceptible line dividing informal groupings from formal proceedings in the Middle East, especially in the context of the guestroom or guesthouse forum, and generally within a sociopolitical milieu where “the boundary between personal obligation and official duty is not well defined” (Fernea 1970:60). Consequently, while this situates the reception rooms outlined above into a position to reinforce, substitute, or undermine state institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004:728), it also highlights an institutionalization of the area’s multifaceted “negotiated relationships” (Kingston 2001:70) that bind state and society.

Despite its efficacy, the guestroom institution has faced difficulties maintaining its relevance in the contemporary Middle East. As early as the 1960s, Fredrik Barth noticed a precipitous decline of men’s houses (*hujra*) among the Swat Pathan chiefs due to the concentrated efforts of the government’s administrative centralization in conjunction with its commercialization agendas. Whereas in the past the chiefs transformed their perishable inventories of rice into political capital by constantly feeding their retainers, once the ruler offered the leaders secure land titles and distant markets became accessible via new roadways, strategic hosting lost its appeal as the surplus produce could be transported out of the villages (1966:16). Likewise, Brian Beeley

surmised that the Turkish *misafir odasi* would gradually become extinct in Anatolia with the region's greater integration into the national economy combined with the introduction of commercialized agriculture and an increased, mobile population. This, Beeley believed, would eliminate the vestiges of rank based on age and lineage, the requisites for authority in the guestrooms, and replace it with status founded on education and wealth to lead men to a more equitable meeting place: the village coffeehouse (1970:475-476, 486-487). Other factors, like outright political hostility and the reformulation of state policies, have left undeniable impressions on the presence of guesthouses on the institutional landscape of the Middle East. The ascendancy of Syria's Ba'athist doctrine in the 1960s meant land reforms and the political disenfranchisement of the mercantile cotton shaykhs which, in turn, stripped the elites of their facilitatory services and reduced their reception rooms into nostalgic edifices:

Once, in the *madafa* of the late Shaykh Faysal al-Huwaydi, I heard Shaykh Faysal himself while playing cards with other men describe the shaykhs' condition thus: '*Bi-hal-ayyum falhit-na li'b al-waraq*' (Nowadays, playing cards has become our cultivation, i.e. meaningless occupation). Bitter statements of this kind reveal the shaykhs' realistic perception of their marginal role in society under the neo-Ba'ath. It also reflects the ironical nature of the situation in which they found themselves. On the one hand wider national transformations had rendered them powerless while, on the other hand, their own perception of their shaykhly position continued to force them, as it were, to maintain the *madafa* as a politico-social institution even when it had been effectively emptied of its former role. [Khalaf 2000:116]

Moreover, it must not be ignored that something as simple as lifestyle changes can play a significant role in decreasing guesthouse attendance. Almost a quarter-century after recording the vibrant social activity that surrounded the village guesthouses in Kufr al-Mar, Jordan, Richard Antoun returned to find a different paradigm dictating men's pastimes.

By 1986 nearly every house had a television set (some had two) and men (and sometimes women) commuted every day from work in towns or other villages. The attractions of the *madafa* paled in relation to the television screen (in Arabic and English). Men came home tired from work and commuting and like their counterparts in the Western world wished to relax in comfort with their conjugal families and be entertained without effort rather than take part in the repartee of the guest house, which in the new age had become palaver rather than open education on the world. [1997:169]

Even when tribal affiliations enjoyed a resurgence in Iraq after the Second Gulf War, the groups' reconstituted leaderships chose to adopt city apartments for their affairs instead of reinstating the customary guesthouses due to their urban livelihoods (Jabar 2000:31).

However, the guestroom tradition in Kuwait escaped many of the complications that have befallen comparable institutions in the region. Legally, the country's *diwaniyyat* are protected from the Public Gathering Law (Law Number 65 of 1979) that delineates the conditions under which congregations can meet (Kelly and Breslin 2010:238). As domestic family spaces, theoretically these *dawawin* are private facilities that are to be shielded from incursions by the public state (Tetreault 2000:61-62). They are, as one Kuwaiti insisted, "*harma*, private, forbidden, [and] the government is foreign and cannot enter... without permission."¹¹³ This attitude rings true even with seemingly innocuous affairs like routine neighborhood upkeep by a municipality's electricians:

In a Bedouin area my friend had a *diwaniyya* that was built illegally over the sidewalk. When electrical work for the municipality had to be done, the workers had to access the power lines underneath the sidewalk. The owner of the *diwaniyya* refused to allow the government into his *diwaniyya* so that they could get to the electrical lines under the sidewalk. You have to understand that the sidewalk is public property that they [government workers] could not get to. They had to rewire all of the lines in a route that went around his *diwaniyya*. All because of one person!¹¹⁴

In actuality, though, these reception rooms have come a long way from being exclusively

¹¹³ Anonymous. Interview conducted in A. M. *Diwaniyya* in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 7, 2007.

¹¹⁴ Haitham. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 15, 2010.

associated with kinship and the government has repeatedly shown a willingness to violate the supposed inviolability of the *diwaniyyat* whenever the institutions have tested its control of the public arena.¹¹⁵ So, by avoiding any direct competition with the regime the *diwaniyyat* are relatively free from state interference. Coupled with this permissive legal atmosphere is the postpetroleum economy in which the government distributed its oil proceeds without providing enough local investment opportunities (Elimam et al. 1996:666) given the small size of its private sector (El-Katiri et al. 2011:5). Unlike the Swat Valley where Barth predicted that the availability of markets would drain the surpluses that would otherwise have been destined for the chiefly *hujra* (1966:16), in Kuwait it is conceivable that the opposite happened as liquidity surged with limited investment outlets (Elimam et al. 1996:666) and resources were diverted into the *diwaniyyat* as symbolic outlays (Bourdieu 2003:180). Modernization is another feature that has thrived in Kuwait and although it is uncertain as to what this ultimately means for the guestrooms it has not meant any quantitative reductions. Expectedly, some young people prefer the leisure of technologies like the internet to the rituals of visitation found in some *diwaniyyat* (Wheeler 2000:443) but cyberspace has yet to prove itself to be an adequate replacement for the face-to-face verification of news or events (al-Roomi 2007:144-145) and the cultivation of necessary contacts. Besides, there are young men's

¹¹⁵ The most recognized incident of this sort concerns the *diwaniyyat al ithnein*, or Monday *Diwaniyyat*, that developed after the National Assembly was suspended in 1986 and entire provisions of the constitution were nullified. By 1989, former MPs and politicians from the opposition began meeting on Monday nights at different *diwaniyyat* to keep themselves informed of the evolving political situation. The government's response to this was swift and police squads were deployed to breakup the gatherings (Tetreault 2000:69-71). While the Monday *Diwaniyyat* may rightly be viewed as an exceptional set of circumstances, there are also the more common media reports of police raids on *diwaniyyat* suspected of holding illegal pre-election primaries to select their candidates, along with the government's bold decision in 2008 that led it to start demolishing the thousands of *diwaniyyat* that encroached upon public land in violation of Legislative Decree Number 105 of 1980 Concerning the System of State Property, popularly called the Public Property Law.

dawawin that bypass the formality required when elders are present¹¹⁶ that offer youthful indulgences such as video games, cards, and televised football matches.¹¹⁷ These *dawawin* are often scorned by elders as places that promote frivolity and idleness, but they are invaluable for many young men, as was lucidly articulated on one occasion: “I cannot stand to be in my house more than thirty minutes a day... I just eat my lunch there and sleep there. The *diwaniyya* is my life.”¹¹⁸

It might appear remarkable that the *diwaniyyat* of Kuwait have persisted in spite of the pressures that could have hastened the decline of such a traditional institution: the influx of petrodollars, suburbanization, and modernization, just to name a few (Slyomovics 1998:162). What this neglects are the contesting factors that have endowed the *diwaniyyat* with their resiliency: the financial windfall brought by the distribution of oil rents (Elimam 1996:666); the utility of connections in an overgrown bureaucracy with restricted accessibility (Hertog 2010b:292); the fluidity between the formal and informal spheres of activity (Keshavarzian 2007:61); and a legal loophole that allows meetings away from state oversight (Tetreault 2000:61-62). The next section builds upon these parameters to present the sudden expansion of the *diwaniyyat* in the middle of the 20th century in historical perspective. This is followed by a discussion of the Kuwaiti guestroom as a site for brokering *wasta* and navigating the channels of the welfare state.

The *Diwaniyya*: Elite Origins to Popular Proliferation

As previously mentioned, the *dawawin* found throughout Kuwait City can be somewhat correlated with the occurrence of guestrooms and guesthouses observed in the

¹¹⁶ Megbel. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on April 2, 2007.

¹¹⁷ Farah. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 27, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Yousef. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on December 13, 2007.

wider Middle Eastern milieu. This classification includes the Jordanian (Antoun 1972, 2000; Baylouny 2006) and Syrian (Khalaf 2000) *madafa*, the Turkish *misafir odasi* (Stirling 1966) or *oda* (Aswad 1967), the Iraqi *mudhif* (Baram 1997; Fernea 1970), and the Pakhtun *hujra* (Barth 1972; Edwards 1996). Obviously each of these samples, along with the Kuwaiti *dawawin*, varies in their specific attributes. Nonetheless, Ali Jihad Racy's brief description of a *madafa* captures some of the nuances commonly found in many guestrooms:

The emphasis on lineage, social status, and generosity is traditionally epitomized by the *maḍāfah* (guest house) tradition. A shaykh, or any leading member of the tribal group, may have his own guest house, usually a tent next to, or part of, his own family tent or house. The *maḍāfah* (literally “place of hospitality”) is where a chief or an eminent individual receives guests periodically... The guest house may serve as a context for socializing, solving political disputes, and seeking the chief's council or arbitration. In the *maḍāfah*, hospitality is expressed through a well-established social ritual, namely coffee drinking. Characterized by a set of carefully observed etiquettes... this ritual confirms the host's social prestige and consequently his prerogative to exercise generosity. [1996:407-408]

Clearly, the iconic deployment of *mu'azib*, or the expectation of hosting and the dispensation of patronage (Gavrielides 1987:157-161), marks the centrality of the *madafa* for reinforcing position against the backdrop of socialization in the Levant. Richard Antoun portrayed these ideal types of guestrooms as “first rank” in terms of their beneficence (1979:42) for the overall community standing of their hosts (Antoun 1972:106). Similarly, Gabriele Vom Bruck went so far as to assert that there existed the expectation in northern Yemen that privileged households were required to open their doors to their neighbors if they were have their claims to superiority backed by the popular recognition of those within the community:

... [Their] houses were principally open to anyone who desired to visit or to make a request or complaint. There has always been a remarkable absence of threshold

fear among low status individuals. They entered the houses of superiors, acting as if patronage were the price for the acknowledgment of high status. [1999:154]

Employing idioms not too distant from those outlined above, Fahad Al-Naser's depiction of the *diwaniyyat* in Kuwait reflects Racy's emphasis upon comportment, group solidarity, and the notions of hierarchy and privilege that can define these arenas. In his synopsis,

[The] *diwaniyah* refers not only to the practice of visiting but also to that part of a house [that] is reserved for the entertainment of visitors, especially male colleagues, friends, and other guests. Generally, this place is exclusively for men, where they get together and relax after a day of work. Sometimes the setting can be a tent, a pavilion, or an open area inside or outside the house. It is furnished with comforts for sitting and drinking tea, sipping coffee, and smoking so that the cliques can chat comfortably for hours. In general, the size, furnishings, and shape of the *diwaniyah* vary. Some families can afford only a small room while the very wealthy may have a large auditorium-like area, with furniture and decorations worthy of a palace. The appearance and comforts of one's *diwaniyah* represents one's status, wealth, and dignity. [2001:5]

Departing from the prototypical guestroom summarized by Racy, Al-Naser's commentary reveals the disparate tendencies that are evident in the nature of Kuwait's *diwaniyyat*; instead of a principal shaykhly *diwaniyya* in each district or neighborhood to which residents are obliged to offer their respect and pay their homage, the Kuwaiti *dawawin* are much more "populist" in terms of their distribution. This is not to suggest that all of Kuwait's guestrooms are homogenous, or that there is no conception of rank amongst the *dawawin*, as guests are keen to note the differences between the extents of various hosts' outlays and expenditures when it comes to catering to their visitors; for instance, in one attendee's opinion, "meat, not falafel, for dinner"¹¹⁹ is the minimum price for his attendance. Likewise, the *diwaniyyat* of the well-connected, such as the *khudamat* (services) guestrooms hosted by the so-called "service" MPs who can access

¹¹⁹ Tahir A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

state resources for their clients,¹²⁰ are envied almost as much as they are disparaged. Contrasted against the guestrooms found in other settings, where such preeminent institutions are the hallmarks of local status and the “primary venue[s] for politicking and business deals” (Meneley 2007:220), the *diwaniyyat* of Kuwait are far more dissimilar in their orientation.

Of course, this was not always the case. Prior to the exportation of oil from the country’s Burgan fields in 1946 (Ismael 1993:78) and the phenomenal sums of cash that the government lavished upon its citizenry through its charitable, redistributive welfare apparatuses (Tetreault 2000:156), Kuwait existed as an oligarchy of merchant families whose interests were guarded by their respective shaykhs (Slot 2003:11) and their collective control over the economy (Ismael 1993:35-36). Within such a highly stratified socioeconomic environment, it is not surprising to find that *diwaniyyat* of this time period were correspondingly arranged in a manner that was indicative of these prevailing conditions. While British political resident H. R. P. Dickson designated the men’s portion of pastoral tent as representing the “*diwaniyah*” (1949:191), and some Kuwaitis would even go further to claim that tent-based hospitality is the basis for all contemporary ideals of communal generosity,¹²¹ it is actually Dickson’s notations on what he called the *majlis* that are most recognizable as a *diwaniyya* of the historic, pre-oil town:

A casual visitor in Kuwait town who drops into a shaikh’s or prominent merchant’s morning *majlis* or reception apartment, will be given a cup of coffee on arriving, and another ten minutes after, which is then followed by the passing

¹²⁰ Tahir A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

¹²¹ Those who adhere to this line of thought typically contend that the men’s side of the Bedouin *bayt sha’ar* (literally “house of hair” or goat hair tent) as once found in the Arabian Peninsula is the structural and functional precursor to the modern *diwaniyya*. Abdul Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 30, 2006.

round of frankincense or scented wood ‘*udh*, placed on top of a small quantity of lighted charcoal and handed round in a *mabkhar* or hand censer. That is the signal that he should take leave. [1949:197]

It is during this maritime phase of Kuwait’s past, especially before the transition to its hydrocarbon-based export economy, that the origins of the contemporary *diwaniyya* become more strongly associated with what some believe are its *hadhar*, or town / urban dwelling populace (Peterson 1977:298), roots. Longva gives this category more meaning in her explanation that, “In present-day popular speech, the term *hadhar* designates those Kuwaitis whose forefathers lived in Kuwait before the launch of the oil era (1946) and worked as traders, sailors, fisherman, and pearl divers” (2006:172).

Expectedly, many of those with *hadhar* pedigrees are quick to pinpoint the heritage of the *dawawin* within their own, personalized historical experiences. For example, Abdul, the current patron of a long-established Kuwaiti merchant family, cites his present *diwaniyya* as the continuance of a tradition that his ancestors started along the shores of the Gulf in Kuwait Town during the 1780s. Accordingly, Abdul’s recollections of the *diwaniyyat* mirror his family’s seafaring background and their involvement in regional trade:

The *diwan* is a gathering [from when] men’s lives were based on the sea and people sailed to India and West Africa. Sailors would join captains who advanced them money for their families. Pearl divers would return with pearls to repay these merchants and captains for the advances. This would result in gatherings to discuss the division of pearls. Also, the *diwan* was a place to gather to wish *haji* pilgrims off as well as to welcome them back... In the past, all of Kuwait’s *dawawin* were concentrated on present day Arabian Gulf Street between today’s American Hospital and the British Embassy. Thus, in the past the *dawawin* were in a centralized location... There are [still] specialty *dawawin* that are the continuation of tradition. These include fisherman, ship builders, and carpenter *dawawin*; even though the descendants of these professions may no longer practice these trades, they still meet as their ancestors once did.¹²²

¹²² Abdul. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 11, 2006.

This same maritime theme for the genesis of the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya* is echoed in the account given by Yousef, a local historian who specializes in the country's prepetroleum legacies. However, Yousef's narrative is much more explicit in its recognition of the class interests that were embodied by the early *dawawin*, insofar as the rituals of hospitality were considerably beyond the means of the average inhabitants of Kuwait Town:

A diwaniyya was a place for people to meet and a place for guests to stay overnight. The higher classes did not want to visit tea or coffee houses, [so] in the past coffee was roasted in front of the guests so they could smell it and people [even] used to compare which *diwaniyya* had the best coffee. During the pearl diving era, it was the merchants who hosted and owned the *dawawin*; not the sailors. [This was a] place to exchange market information... the owner of the *diwaniyya* would read telegrams in his *diwaniyya* informing him that his ship or ships arrived safely at a distant port, for example, Bombay. [These early] *dawawin* [were a] focal point for a neighborhood, [there was] usually only one per district owned by the wealthy who could afford to entertain guests. After the Second World War, the *diwaniyya* were a place where men would listen to the radio to learn of events... The *dawawin* on Gulf Street were once the great ones and they used to sit right on the shore before the land was reclaimed. Now, they sit facing the street.¹²³

Another motif for the beginnings of the *diwaniyya* is embedded in the political knowledge that prior to Kuwait's emergence on the world stage as an oil exporting nation, the ruling Al Sabah dynasty was limited in its capacity for economic self-sufficiency; it was confined to the authority dictated by the merchants (Longva 1997:22) in exchange for the tariff fees their activities generated (Crystal 1995b:21) and the near total employment that they offered the settlement. Thus, the pre-oil Al Sabah style of rule was limited locally to resolving disputes (Shuhaiber 2003:102-103) and the provision of an administrative structure that reinforced domestic labor relations between the merchants and the rest of the community (Tetreault 2000:36). When questioned about

¹²³ Yousef A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 28, 2007.

the precursors to today's *dawawin*, Ahmad, a longtime *diwaniyya* host with political ambitions, answered in a way that very lucidly affirms this institution's historical importance due to its former position at the crossroads between the oligarchy and the sovereign:

People gather through the *diwaniyya*. Kuwait [is] historically an open and diverse community; a merchant community and a seafaring community. Historically, Kuwaitis gathered together to protect themselves; the *diwaniyya* allowed connections and the exchange of information for safety [from] Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In this way, the *diwaniyya* of the past was an archaic media form [that] fostered the exchange of information. Historically, the exchange between the Emir and the people was facilitated through the *diwaniyya*. The Emir had to listen to the merchants because the merchants controlled the country's economy before the oil era. All of this communication took place in the *diwaniyya*. [These] early *diwaniyya* [were] only for distinguished families and the rich and powerful.¹²⁴

Hence, it can be seen that these *hadhar* chronicles of the origins of the Kuwaiti *diwaniyyat* are fairly uniform in terms of their treatments of the social, political and economic conditions that fostered the rise of the early guestrooms: they were established by the commercial establishment during times of favorable trade as far back as the late 18th century (Delmas 2007:3) in an era when ordinary laborers could not afford the costs associated with extending such hospitality on a regular basis. These reception rooms were also the sites where the reigning authority of the Al Sabah was balanced against the perceptions of what the oligarchy held to be in their best interests.

Understandably, the discovery of oil and its later exportation forever changed the social, political and economic arrangements upon which the country's maritime status quo had been created and, consequently, this had profound repercussions for the future popularization of the Kuwaiti *dawawin*. First, the redistribution of oil revenues stripped the notables' of their control over the economy and supplanted it with general civil

¹²⁴ Ahmad A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 28, 2007.

employment (Ghabra 1997:361) that led to an unprecedented rise in personal income (Hill 1975:537). With its petrodollars, the Al Sabah regime emerged as the state's sole economic patron and in the process it absorbed the citizenry in its entirety into a new relationship of welfare clientelism (Shah 1995:1018). After the Kuwait Development Board eradicated the old township's structures in the 1950s and 1960s (Mahgoub 2008:154-156) in favor of modernist plans of steel and concrete (Dickson 1971:191), the coastal city that materialized (Ansari and Qutub 1983:52) looked more like a foreign architectural import (Mahgoub 2008:164) that scarcely resembled anything from its earlier heritage (Al Bahar 1985:65). For the *diwaniyyat* of pre-oil Kuwait, their numbers were reduced from one historian's count of 250 to the six that remain today along Arabian Gulf Street. Apparently, it took the intervention of Shaykh Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah (r. 1977 – 2006) to spare these last structures from the designs of modernization (Abdullah 1995:28).

On the other hand, the virtual disappearance of the community's pre-oil *diwaniyyat* did not necessarily translate into fewer *dawawin* on the landscape of the new post-oil settlement. The expansive development of orderly residential districts replete with stylish Western-inspired villas (Al Bahar 1985:63), while innovative for the local populace, was hardly a complete break with the past as the *diwaniyyat* were rapidly incorporated into the city's architectural realignment (Mahgoub 2007:82). In this regard, Yagoub Y. Abdullah pointed out that, "Interestingly, most of the families who held diwaniyyas continued to build new diwaniyyas, even after the discovery of oil and the subsequent economic development and prosperity" (1995:28). It can be surmised that the families that Abdullah referred to can only be the mercantile elites since they were

unchallenged in their capacity to absorb the financial outlay that hospitality demanded in pre-oil Kuwait. Further still, the spatial expansion of Kuwait City and the suburbanization of its residential areas meant that *diwaniyya* visitations would require more mobility than before when the neighborhood *dawawin* were the norm. The effect of this urban transformation on customary visiting practices is noted by Abdulrasool Al-Moosa:

A long-standing feature of social life in Kuwait has been the gathering of neighbours and friends in the evening in a specially adopted part of the house called the *diwaniyya*. *Diwaniyya* meetings have been much altered by changes in the geographical distribution of the population. Formerly, *diwaniyyas* served their local neighbourhoods. Redistribution of the population since the 1950s has meant Kuwaitis forsaking attendance at their local *diwaniyya* in favour of traveling long distances to join groups having no links with the residential districts within which they live. A large percentage of Kuwaitis (77.8) still frequent *diwaniyya* meetings. [1984:50]

It cannot be overlooked that this matter of the mobility required to meet one's *diwaniyya* obligations in the burgeoning rentier state is more than an issue of personal logistics, as entire *diwaniyyat* may be relocated when their hosts decide to move their households into different quarters while leaving their guests behind in the process.¹²⁵

The redistribution of the nation's oil proceeds did more than reconfigure the options available for the prepetroleum *diwaniyyat* of the merchant elite; it also introduced sweeping changes throughout Kuwaiti society that allowed nationals of modest means to replicate what was once seen as a prohibitive token of high social status. With the government's allocation of jobs that are only "nominally tied to services rendered" (Herb 2009:382) and a myriad array of entitlements (Crystal 1995b:79), allowances, social services (Al Qudsi 1981:401), stipends, and public assistance (Longva 1997:53), discretionary incomes increased (Elimam et al. 1997:90) to such a degree that prolific

¹²⁵ Essa A. A. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 19, 2007.

hosting and visiting became a viable reality for the populace at large (Al-Kandari 2002:68-69) and especially for the growing ranks of the educated classes (Delmas 2007:3). This radical adjustment in local hospitality is markedly clear in the observations of two men old enough to have witnessed these events:

In the past, in the 1930s and 1940s, [there were] few rich people with the money to support a *diwaniyya*, so few *diwaniyya* existed. The increase in *diwaniyya* in the country resulted from the economic growth with oil.¹²⁶

After the country's oil wealth was distributed to the population it became popular for more families to have a *diwaniyya*. A *diwaniyya* is a sign of prestige and people want a *diwaniyya* simply to say that they have one.¹²⁷

With this spread of the *dawawin* to the households of most Kuwaitis, the institution morphed from being solely the preserve of the elite to now representing a variety of pursuits and identities: young men's recreation, professional affiliations, interest groups,¹²⁸ family responsibilities (*silat al-rahim*),¹²⁹ sectarian, or *bedu* and *hadhar* distinctions.¹³⁰ In effect, it is not an exaggeration to assume that, "Nowadays, nearly every household has a *diwaniah*; although the size and structure may vary according to financial position and the availability of space" (Al-Naser 2001:11).¹³¹

As the outwardly symbolic markers of success now within the budgetary allowances of most of Kuwait's nationals and at the center of most facilitatory endeavors, as will be discussed in the next section, the *diwaniyyat* are near-universal commodities for homeowners. So ubiquitous are the *dawawin* that, "Most houses have a *diwaniyya*

¹²⁶ Ahmad A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 28, 2007.

¹²⁷ Abd Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 26, 2007.

¹²⁸ Farah A. N. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 27, 2006.

¹²⁹ Mishari A. F. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 5, 2006.

¹³⁰ Zaid. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 29, 2006.

¹³¹ To give some numbers to support this assertion, there is the directory, *Diwaniyya; The dawawin and diwaniyyat in the State of Kuwait (diwaniyya; al dawawin wa al diwaniyyat fi dawlat al kuwayt)*. Issued every year since 2003 during Ramadan by Delta Group Publishing, the 2005 edition listed 3,522 *dawawin*. However, this catalog is far from complete and many proprietors' establishments are not included.

but not all are in use. It is an extension of the house that people have in case they do ever need it.”¹³² Yet, unlike the *diwaniyyat* of the pre-oil merchant elite, these post-petroleum reception rooms are visibly different in their presence on the modern Kuwaiti cityscape. Noticeably, these new *diwaniyyat* do not always conform to the architectural models of the past that would have had these rooms attached to the main household either directly or encompassed within the household’s courtyard (Islam and Al-Sanafi 2006:85, 90-91). In the post-oil designs, a number of *diwaniyyat* began appearing as entirely separate structures that were unconnected to the principal residence:

The *diwan*, or social gathering place for men, is still a desired space, although it is incorporated in only a few of today’s residential designs. Quite often, the *diwan* is built as an independent structure in the garden of the residence and more popular in use are those which exist independently on a separate land lot, detached and often not related in design to the dwelling... The *diwans* vary in size and spatial configuration, although they are almost always one level... They are usually built as independent units in one corner of the garden. [Al-Bahar 1985:72]

There are two premises in Al-Bahar’s observations that should be further clarified because they are very distinct occurrences. The *diwaniyyat* which “exist independently on a separate land lot” (1985:72) are the large, palatial, freestanding reception rooms operated by wealthy families who own the lots on which they are built. Some have speculated that this style became fashionable for the elites beginning in the 1980s and that it has proliferated ever since as a display of status compounded by rampant competitive consumerism.¹³³ Without question, the costs associated with these extravagant *diwaniyyat* make them less common than the other variety presented by Al-Bahar, the *diwaniyyat* “built as independent units in one corner of the garden” (1985:72). Aside from the obvious expenditures that differentiate these more humble structures from

¹³² Mishari A. F. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 29, 2006.

¹³³ Dhari. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 11, 2007.

the aforementioned opulent stand-alone type, the questionable legality of the smaller constructions has even fueled recent discord over their existence in Kuwait City's residential areas.

There is no precise record documenting the timeline or circumstances that encouraged the building of new *diwaniyyat* in such a way that suddenly broke with earlier conventions; nevertheless, there are a few possible explanations. One position contends that after the 1980s, a reduction in the size of property lots left little remaining space for the construction of a *diwaniyya*. Real estate agent Fadahlah Nasser expressed this same sentiment when quoted in the local media during the debates surrounding the illegally constructed *diwaniyyat*, "In the eighties, a landowner may have owned 1,000 square meters and have been able to build a house and a *diwaniyya* all on his land – but now houses are built on 300 to 500 square meters and landowners are using every square meter just to build their house" (Al-Khaled 2008:3). The implication here is that reduced property lot sizes drove homeowners to erect their *diwaniyyat* on public land outside of their estates' boundaries. Another frequently given reason for the growth of the illegal *diwaniyyat* focuses on the period immediately following the Iraqi occupation (Ibrahim 2008:4) when the surrounding desert was still too littered with mines to permit camping. To avoid these dangers, some Kuwaitis built faux tent-like structures (*khaima*) that, ignored by the government despite their illegality by being unattached to the household and located on public grounds, evolved over the years into permanent *diwaniyyat*; sometimes, these structures were still built well after the Gulf War and into the 21st century.¹³⁴ Legally, these faux tents and any other illicit constructions on state land are subject to removal by authorities at any moment. Yet, as one host of a pseudo-tent

¹³⁴ Abd Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 26, 2007.

diwaniyya confessed only a few months before the 2008 enforcement of the Public Property Law enabled municipality teams to remove these guestrooms, “No one cares too much even though everyone knows.”¹³⁵ Regardless of the precise circumstances, it is irrefutable that a long, protracted “silent encroachment” (Bayet 2002:19) took place as citizens staked their claims to state properties without censure over the course of several decades.¹³⁶ The episode detailed below is a perspective that is not too uncommon amongst proprietors of *diwaniyyat* unlawfully built on public land; namely, that the arbitrariness of earlier enforcement (Heydemann 2007:27-28) led to an expectation that legal action would never be forthcoming:

Before the [Iraqi] invasion my regular *diwaniyya* was inside the house. After the invasion, I built a *diwaniyya* outside of the house. This [second] *diwaniyya* was for neighborhood news but it is gone now. After the invasion laws were looser and [people] began building *diwaniyya* outside their houses. When I first built my house, I never imagined building a *diwaniyya* on that land [outside it]. But for two or three years I saw that everyone else built these so I got the idea and thought, “Why not?” The idea for my [outside] *diwaniyya* was for gathering everyone in the neighborhood.¹³⁷

What this last discourse shows, apart from the blatant illegality of the proprietor’s guestroom, is the diversity of Kuwait’s contemporary *diwaniyyat* structural legacy that ranges from unpretentious “small, cheap... [*diwaniyya* that] ministers and businessmen would not visit”¹³⁸ to those which cost hundreds of thousands of dinars and are considerable investments for their hosts. Here, the formality or informality of the structure only describes the processes involved in its construction (Yacobi and Shechter

¹³⁵ Abdul. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 10, 2007.

¹³⁶ The office of Saud Al-Khatrash, the coordinator charged with removing all illicit structures on state property beginning in 2008, estimated that by November 2010 it had demolished 13,000 illegally constructed *dawawin*. These numbers were delivered to the author by the office of Saud Al-Khatrash by fax on November 28, 2010. The document provided is an overview of all demolitions titled, “Total Number of Removals of Unlicensed Structures” (*ahsah bi’adda ezalat al ghuraf al kharjiyat*). The specifics for the *dawawin* sum were given as a handwritten addendum by Al-Khatrash’s staff.

¹³⁷ Hasaawi. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 9, 2010.

¹³⁸ Taher. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 15, 2010.

2005:511), the actual content and the privileges that are manifest by socializing in the *diwaniyyat* are hardly indifferent.

The *Diwaniyya*: The Ascent of Institutionalized Social Capital

The state's munificence with its oil rents provided more than simply the disposable fiscal capital with which its citizens could invest in imitating the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2003:195) of the pre-oil elites by constructing their own *diwaniyyat* and displaying the kinds of hospitality that used to be reserved for only a few privileged families (Al Kandari 2002:68-69). Rather, these institutions have become transformed into indispensable resources for providing attendees with the avenues needed to access, trade, and apply influence in its various guises. The most straightforward explanation for this is that the Kuwaiti *diwaniyyat* regularly bring together so many bureaucrats, supplicants, and bureaucratic brokers in a familiar environment beyond the confines of official oversight (Tsai 2006:125-127). All of this maneuvering requires locating the right gatekeeper, someone who controls access "not to something owned by the gatekeeper, but to benefits *external* to both the gatekeeper and the client-gatekeeper relation" (Corra and Willer 2002:180). Here, as in other brokerage contexts, facilitation is the resource that is being pursued and not personal materials or individual wealth. If any ultimate costs are incurred, they are shouldered by the state since it is the holder of whatever is being sought (Ledeneva 2000:185, 190).

It is within the institutional setting of the *diwaniyyat* that contacts (*wasta*) can be accessed to expedite, circumvent, or legally secure (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:7, 18-20, 32) state entitlements that might otherwise prove elusive. Each of these traits is distinctively

identified as guestroom commodities in the opinions of a young urbanite lawyer who worked in a private firm. This man was prideful of his *hadhar* roots and he held a very jaundiced view of what he believed transpires in the Bedouin *diwaniyyat*; tribal transactions that he conveyed to be in stark contrast to what he saw as the justified exchanges necessary for the urban community:

The tribal shaykh *diwaniyya*, city Kuwaitis are against this. [Why?] The only purpose is to help tribesmen in exchange for [National Assembly] votes, not to help the larger Kuwaiti community. Tribal Bedouin *diwaniyya* would not assist *hadhar* Kuwaitis, not part of the tribe. But, a city Kuwaiti may go to a *diwaniyya* to get their lawful rights. The Bedouin *diwaniyya* helps tribesmen access goods and services that they do not deserve, like elevate someone in a job who is not qualified.¹³⁹

Even at face value, the lawyer's comments do not deny that the *diwaniyyat* can be used to service the needs of any Kuwaiti; his only issue is about the types of privileges that are traded. In his estimation, the Bedouin misuse their *diwaniyyat* to solidify their political base in exchange for ill-gotten advancements and favors, whereas the *hadhar* Kuwaitis approach the guestrooms to sublimate administrative wrongdoings. Of course, this is not the case, as almost every male Kuwaiti of any background is aware, and this statement is more reflective of the general “hadhar claim that the badu are alien elements in Kuwaiti society... [trying] to lay their hands on welfare goods and services” (Longva 2006:172).

A more balanced impression is to be found in Valerie Marcel's overview of the *diwaniyyat* as fulcrums for *wasta*, brokerage, and favoritism and the ramifications of these practices for the Kuwait Petroleum Company:

Diwaniyyas are the channel through which *wasta* is exercised and special favors are granted. *Wasta* can help KPC by enabling its professionals to appeal to MPs in these informal networks and counter pressure from other, interfering MPs. The *diwaniyya* practice has strong potential applications to the extent that it allows informal relationships across the formal hierarchy. It is also a place in which to

¹³⁹ T. A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

raise awareness of problems, to debate issues and to promote a better understanding of the needs of the oil industry. On the other hand, some favors are detrimental to the NOC because they are won through the *diwaniyya – wasta* channel and bypass regular management processes. For example, favors sometimes involve granting a job to someone who is not qualified. Thus it is important for KPC to insulate its management decisions from the social pressure of these networks. [2006:61]

Certainly, the ascent of the *dawawin* into commonplace forums has contributed to these reception rooms becoming the country's unrivaled marketplaces where brokers with accessibility can negotiate their petitioners' requests. Moreover, it is important to note that this does not occur at the level of solitary individuals but through an institution where membership or attendance can confer the valued credentials (Portes 1998:4) needed to tap into the repertoire of privileges that the paternalistic rentier state can provide. Or, in one guest's appraisal, creating the perception that one is a member of the "closed circle"¹⁴⁰ of a *diwaniyya* is sometimes enough in itself to suggest the possession of invaluable *wasta* endorsements:

The *diwaniyya* reflects its owner. Sometimes, someone will attend a *diwaniyya* so that others will think that he has connections. The host of the *diwaniyya* may not help you, but others will think that you have access to the *wasta* in that *diwaniyya*.¹⁴¹

While this review is initially unfavorable from this interviewee's vantage point, what is communicated in this passage bears a striking resemblance to the classic argument that weak ties are actually instrumental for bridging the gaps between socially distant individuals and groups (Granovetter 1973:1370-1371). It is entirely possible that the visitor in question and the host can link others in a way that is more beneficial than their personal positions would suggest to the disinterested observer (Boissevain 1966:24-25). Besides, an attendee might not require *wasta* directly from the host since he can

¹⁴⁰ Hanan M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 30, 2006.

¹⁴¹ Dhari. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 11, 2007.

capitalize on his fellow guests who all have an unknown number of contacts outside of the *diwaniyya* that they are visiting on any given night. This is in fact the amorphous feature of the *diwaniyyat*, with their countless ranks situated between the individual and the state's administrative allocations, which allow for the everyday “raw material of politics” (Barnes 1969:107) to unfold.

It is in the spheres of Kuwait's high politics that the country's *diwaniyyat* become most visible. During election cycles, the guestrooms are essential for putting candidates and constituencies into contact with each other. This is true whether the contests are for seats on supermarket cooperative boards, sports clubs, or for representation in one of the municipalities.¹⁴² Yet, all of these smaller elections pale in comparison to the contentiousness that surrounds the politicking that takes place for the National Assembly and the roles that the *diwaniyyat* play in this process. Although tales abound about vote-buying, the use of “dinar-packed Chanel handbags” (Tetreault 2006) to sway the female vote, and voter registration fraud (Tetreault 2000:124), the *diwaniyyat* are not immune to the electoral intrigues that neatly bind the community to the apparatus of the state.

The most infamous tactic is the illegal pre-election primary when *diwaniyya* attendees will select who they will vote for before going to the polls. The tribes and those with *badu* pedigrees are usually accused of employing this strategy to consolidate their strength in the National Assembly (Gavrielides 1987:166-170) and this is a common theme in Kuwaiti *hadhar* depictions of how Bedouin politics work.

Only the tribal areas have *diwaniyya* voting; it is frequent in places outside Kuwait City, like in Jahra. Members of a *diwaniyya* will decide to all support one candidate to increase at least one person's chances of winning an election. This is especially true if there are several candidates from a specific *diwaniyya*. This way

¹⁴² Muhammad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 8, 2006.

the *diwaniyya* does not split the vote and guarantees itself at least one of its members will be in Parliament.¹⁴³

Others, however, have been less dismissive of this phenomenon amongst the *hadhar* and readily detect it as an expected feature of the country's sociopolitical mechanisms. Prior to the redistricting of Kuwait's electoral districts in 2006, Mary Ann Tetreault tied the casting of "one-eyed" ballots by voters back to pre-arrangements that had been made in the guestrooms. The goal of this procedure was to concentrate the members' votes on one candidate at a time when voters could select two. As a result, the *diwaniyya* voters ensured that they did not unwittingly defeat their own interests by boosting an opponent's returns through secondary voting. Tetreault implies that there are rewards for *diwaniyya* supporters of a successful National Assembly candidate but she does not specify what these are:

Kuwait's small, two-member districts offer closely knit *diwaniyya* communities the opportunity to affect elections directly. Members pledge support to a favorite candidate and sometimes, to increase his chances of winning, agree to cast "one-eyed" ballots. By selecting only one candidate instead of two, these *diwaniyya* members increase the concentration of the vote for their favorite and thereby the chance that he will win – and be grateful for their support. *Diwaniyya* members are sure to be the first to inform him of that, too. [Tetreault 2003:38]

While unstated, the payoff for hosts and guests is not ambiguous: support in these circumstances is wagered under the assumption that government *wasta* will be forthcoming from the appreciative officeholder. For some, this might be along the lines of, "Get my son a job at Kuwait Oil Company and I will get you twenty votes."¹⁴⁴ Yet, for a whole collectivity there is the belief that parliamentarians in the good graces of the regime can mediate of the behalf of everyone in a *diwaniyya* that aided a victorious campaign:

¹⁴³ Hanan M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 30, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Tahir. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

People believe that the government controls the MPs and the National Assembly as a whole by having MPs who are loyal to the government. For their loyalty, these MPs have government *wasta* in different ministries. As a result, this allows supportive *diwaniyya* hosts to be rewarded by the winning candidates that they supported during the elections. These *diwaniyya* hosts and their guests have access to their MP's *wasta*, say for access to employment openings.¹⁴⁵

Still, unanticipated outcomes are far from impossible and it is not unlikely that a *diwaniyya* will put their efforts towards backing what ends up being an unrewarding bid for the National Assembly. At first glance, it could appear surprising that in one instance when this happened, when support was miscalculated, voting en masse remained preferable to individual balloting and the status of the *diwaniyya* host remained unscathed:

My uncle told his guests that this politician played games and next time they must be more careful. This did not hurt my uncle as a host because the guests feel that they have more of a presence in politics if they act as a group... Also, the *diwaniyya* guests are loyal to their host and respect his decisions [and] the guests believe that the host has been right more times than he has been wrong. These guests know that their host has the relations, the connections, the *wasta* to advance the needs of the group and they do not have this as individuals.¹⁴⁶

What can be seen here, though, is that the host's misguided efforts were forgiven when his mistake was weighed against the benefits that come from his contacts. Moreover, his guests risk undercutting one of their own sources of *wasta* if they haphazardly cast their votes in a manner that deprives their host of his connections. This is the interrelationship between hosts and guests that matters in elections and makes the *diwaniyyat* so alluring for candidates who seek a support base; “power groups are not interested in individuals per se, but in the numbers an individual can mobilize” (Rosenfeld 1972:69).

For guestroom proprietors, an adequate guest roster is crucial for attracting the attention of politicians who can make the channels into the state less formidable.

¹⁴⁵ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

Basically, “An owner of a *diwaniyya* is respected by members of parliament if the *diwaniyya* is large enough. The owner has many friends and many votes around him, and the owner has influence over members.”¹⁴⁷ Such a host who can marshal many guests into a voting bloc is called an “election key” (*al-mufta al-intikhabi*). Nicolas Gavrielides claimed that this was a novel phrase when he encountered it, in the parliamentary elections of 1985, when it was used to describe “persons with wide social and economic contacts who acted as campaign managers” (1987:178). Today, Gavrielides' definition fits the ideal image of the *diwaniyya* host who wants to use his position to further his political, social, or economic ambitions¹⁴⁸ by brokering votes for candidates and arranging bureaucratic favors for guests.

A host with good relations inside and outside of his *diwaniyya* usually has a large group of people who highly regard his opinion. This man may be the head of a family, but he is seen as an “election key” because he is a host of a *diwaniyya*. A candidate for the National Assembly will visit a host's *diwaniyya* before an election to discuss ideas with the host and build relations with the host. If the host is convinced by the candidate, the host will move to persuade his *diwaniyya* guests to support this candidate because the host is campaigning for this candidate. If elected, the candidate is now an MP, but if this MP makes decisions in the National Assembly that are unpopular to the *diwaniyya* host and his people, the host will support another candidate in the next election. This is the power of the [*diwaniyya*] host.¹⁴⁹

Categorized in the standard rhetoric of patron-client exchange, “election key” proprietors are strategically positioned to remedy the shortages of a broad clientele (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984:167) by rallying support for politicians and providing administrative inroads for visitors. This is not a rigid patron-client relationship between “election key” hosts and their guests, as it is not exclusive or compulsory (Wolf 1966b:87), since all parties are probably circulating through multiple *diwaniyyat* during the week. The lack

¹⁴⁷ Reyadh. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 5, 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Haya. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 1, 2006.

¹⁴⁹ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

of a “clear hierarchy between the parties involved, who rather act like partners or friends” (Hertog 2010:130) is a popular perception of how these transactions occur but this does not alone disqualify these relationships from being clientelistic. Declarations of interpersonal obligation, solidarity and equality cannot conceal the asymmetrical advantages (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984:48-49) that “election key” hosts enjoy in terms of the bureaucratic access that is bestowed by grateful MPs.¹⁵⁰ Visitors, for their part, are incorporated not in the sense that their host is their protector. Instead, the moral indebtedness that comes with hospitality is more accurate; ethical reciprocity (Herzfeld 1987:79-80) substitutes for political imbalances and can disguise the existent power differentials (Edwards 1996:152) between “election keys” and their guests under the rubric of gracious demeanor (Shryock and Howell 2001:255).

There is no reason that politicians have to use the guestrooms of “election keys” to funnel bureaucratic gifts to members of their electorate. The roles of the parliamentarian, “election key,” and *diwaniyya* host do not have to be segregated and there is no mutual exclusivity implied for those who choose to engage in such activities. Indeed, for these are the “service candidates” who trade,

Favors for favors, measured in votes as well as in direct campaign contributions, are the province of the “service candidate” who acts both as ombudsman and benefactor to individual constituents in his district... Constituents who approach service candidates find it easier to obtain scarce and selective benefits... than if they were to apply through regular bureaucratic channels. [Tetreault 2000:115]

It is just as convenient for these politicians to host their own *diwaniyyat* as it is for them to visit other proprietors. Victorious “service candidates” are regarded as “service MPs” with the disparaging *khudamat* (services) label carried over to their guestrooms; hence, the “service *diwaniyya*” or, more simply, just “services” for the reason that these are the

¹⁵⁰ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

sites where bureaucratic privileges are most easily dispensed to solicitors from the very politicians who have the accessibility that is required. This is succinctly explained by Tahir, a well-informed but intermittent *diwaniyyat* visitor who is very attuned to the mechanisms of Kuwaiti politics:

The “service *diwaniyya*” – *khudamat* – is new [and it came] after oil [and is] based on “service” National Assembly members. There are “position” National Assembly members who stand on principles and issues for the public good, not the individual. “Service” National Assembly members service the needs of individuals and not the community. These National Assembly members provide favors and offer favors, these favors are provided in the National Assembly member's *diwaniyya*. Favors are exchanged to individuals for votes when the elections are held.¹⁵¹

It can be added to this synopsis that the “service *diwaniyya*,” and the “service candidate” for that matter, is only useful due to the structural inefficiencies of the Kuwaiti bureaucracy. Its particularistic distribution of privileges (Cooley 2001:166), its bloated public service sectors, and the absence of regulatory transparency (Hertog 2010b:292) means that the administrative arenas are unnavigable without facilitatory relationships (Joseph 1999:67). Furthermore, “service candidates” and their *khudamat* guestrooms are not accidental. Progovernment MPs are known to have silent partners in the regime who compensate obedience with graft to protect their allies at the polls (Tetreault 2000:115).¹⁵²

Methods like vote-buying can bypass many social complications for a candidate with deep enough pockets. In the 2006 elections, it was rumored that the going price for

¹⁵¹ Tahir. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

¹⁵² Saud Joseph proposes that this same degree of personalized political power in Lebanon is so pervasive that, “the norm of operation was intervention – so much so, that government agencies had difficulty working at all without the personal intervention of political leaders” (1990:145). Many in Kuwait would view this as indistinct from their own administration.

votes was around KD 2,000 (U.S. \$7,000.00) per ballot,¹⁵³ which is no different from the sum recorded for the 1985 campaign (Gavrielides 1987:178). This can simplify life for an elected official by limiting his responsibilities once he is in office due to the finality of the exchange closing the potential for an open-ended, enduring relationship (Toren 1989:143-144).¹⁵⁴ With money, there is no need for a politician to dispense state favors or carefully budget his *wasta* privileges because the transaction is immediately concluded (Parry and Bloch 1989:5-7). While there is no way to know for certain what the success rates are for vote-buying candidates, their overtures can be speculative at times when they are presented before the audience of a *diwaniyya*:

Members of parliament campaigning in elections, these members of parliament may speak to [the] guests of a poor *diwaniyya*, a *diwaniyya* in a poor state of repairs, and they have been rejected by its members. So, to win them over, the candidates have offered to repair the *diwaniyya* in order to gain the support [the votes] of the guests. In the two cases of this that I witnessed, the candidates were asked to leave, run out of the *diwaniyya*, and told by the host that, “This *diwaniyya* is too good to host people like you.” But, this may work better in a *diwaniyya* that is small and close-knit. It is more difficult in a large, formal *diwaniyya* where the host may not know, or be close to, all of his guests.¹⁵⁵

There are several issues that are raised by this ploy aside from it blatantly insulting the host's hospitality and drawing attention to his guestroom's inadequacies. Primarily, it puts a price on the geniality of the *diwaniyya* and violates the etiquette of reciprocity in the same vein that, “one should not reciprocate an invitation to dinner at someone's home with a cash payment” (Granovetter 2007:154-155). More detrimental to the attendees,

¹⁵³ Miq. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 7, 2006.

¹⁵⁴ Frederick Charles Huxley observed this exact conundrum with vote-buying in Lebanon. What makes this interesting is that, like Kuwait, Lebanon is a country where politics and *wasta* frequently intersect and voters have to weigh long-term gains against their short-term needs. Huxley's comments are very applicable here: “The contrast between exchanging votes for money as opposed to exchanging votes for *wasita* is quite striking. Surely this is a clear example of the difference between economic exchange, which does not establish any further obligations or relationships but is terminated by the transaction, and social exchange, where the parties involved in the transaction establish a more enduring relationship based on the obligation to make future returns” (1978:36).

¹⁵⁵ Muhammad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 3, 2007.

however, is that this technique declares that further social relations are undesirable (Sahlins 1981:278, 298), which in turn betrays the internal facade of status equivalence that is shared within the *diwaniyya*. By turning a social encounter into a mere payment for services (Malinowski 1984:181), the pretense of solidarity between equals who help each other out is commoditized into a market transaction devoid of any future sociability (Granovetter 2007:161). Much like a bribe, the offer of, “Material payment in return for favors... means the absence of any possibility of a personal relationship or of having friends in common... [It] is an acknowledgment of social inferiority, like accepting a tip or gratuity” (Lomnitz 1988:44). Yet, despite the prospect of these social pitfalls compounded with the shame of being “run out of the *diwaniyya*,” the story does not completely disavow that this tactic might appeal to a small enough gathering sitting together in the right *diwaniyya*.

More frequent, though, are the *diwaniyyat* that exist outside any functional capacity that would allow them to be branded as *khudamat*. Also, most proprietors are not in any position that would allow them to be legitimately recognized as “election keys” by candidates or by their communities. This does not discount the fact that former MPs can be as instrumental as incumbents for relaying requests from *diwaniyya* guests to current officeholders¹⁵⁶ although these facilitators can still be called formal political actors due to their personal expertise (Palmer 2002:212) about the state's legal and bureaucratic framework (Cohen 2004:5). However, in the guestrooms of the rank and file who are not overtly political and who do not barter their votes for administrative favors, networks of informal relations are crystallized to produce, reproduce, and maintain the social inroads of connectivity needed in Kuwait to ensure that the benefits of

¹⁵⁶ Jamal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on April 4, 2007.

the rentier state do not remain too far out of reach.

Therefore, these “neutral” guestrooms, named as such only because they stand apart from the kinds of direct electoral racketeering that typify “services” in all its forms, are still venues for a population that is literally a “nation of bureaucrats” (Herb 2009:375) even when the brazen patronage of “election keys” and *khudamat* is missing. This distinction means that the flow of favors inside these *diwaniyyat* are increasingly horizontal (Lomnitz 1982:53-54) with more generalized and indefinite expectations for repayment (Sahlins 1981:194). Because these *diwaniyyat* are based on notions of kinship, friendship, and workplace ties instead of political expediency¹⁵⁷ they exhibit a style of interaction that is more akin to social support than it is to cliency. The relationships that bind these members to each other are made up of a mixture of ingredients that combine “emotional aid, services, financial aid, companionship, or information” (Wellman and Wortley 1989:277). Participation can be as informal as dropping by when one has free time to the obligatory attendance that some men who host expect from their sons and nephews.¹⁵⁸ Seemingly innocuous, these *diwaniyyat* represent all that is ordinary and routine about guestroom visitation in Kuwait; coincidentally, this is also the characteristic that makes them all the more emblematic of the normalcy that is attached to their utility for accommodating brokers.

It is often said in Kuwait that, “You may not know the person you need but you know the *diwaniyya* you need to find him,”¹⁵⁹ and, “People can be contacted through a

¹⁵⁷ This is not to say that there cannot be overlapping interests within a single guestroom. A “service” politician or “election key” can also be a kinsman, a co-worker, and a friend; thus, making it difficult in these cases to draw a line between pure “services” and uncalculated aid. The point here is that the majority of *diwaniyyat* are not *khudamat* and do not host elected politicians or appointed officials.

¹⁵⁸ Tahir. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Youssef A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on April 2, 2007.

diwaniyya. If you want to locate someone find the *diwaniyya* where he sits.”¹⁶⁰ What these refrains underscore is how important Kuwait's guestrooms are for providing a medium of access that puts individuals into contact with others that, given the nature of many of the favors, make the state into an interpersonal asset (Joseph 1990:144). These remarks also hint at ways that difficulties can be taken care of by searching through guestrooms that are reputed to host certain visitors; for example, employees of particular ministries, municipalities, or departments who know how to move past bureaucratic roadblocks (Singerman 2006:17) and who have the credentials that are only supplied by a personal touch (Hoodfar 1997:229-232). The encounters that Fahad has gone through illustrate this trend quite well, and at the same time they reflect the casual indifference of a practice that has become imbued with everydayness:

I do not enjoy my father's *diwaniyya* because little important information is exchanged, just the normal, “How are you?” and “Oh, fine.” But I do attend the *diwaniyya* held by the men on my mother's side of the family. [Why?] *Wasta*. If I need anything I go there and ask. If I have a problem with a ministry, I go there. They [the guests] say, “Oh, what do you need? We will talk to them.” And, everything will be taken care of and there is no problem. So, I go there instead of to my father's [*diwaniyya*].¹⁶¹

As this case indicates, Fahad, like so many others, finds that the connections that can be activated by attendance in a *diwaniyya* serve as an outlet to a broader spectrum of contacts that can help him in his search for redress. Plus, Fahad is not swapping his political autonomy for assistance by way of a *khudamat* or an “election key.” His kinship network is viable enough that he does not have to locate “services” as long as he fulfills his familial obligation to visit where his maternal relatives sit.

¹⁶⁰ Samer. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 8, 2006.

¹⁶¹ Fahad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 11, 2007.

This last narrative brings up a final topic, and that is that neutral *diwaniyyat*, *khudamat*, and “election key” guestrooms are not intrinsically unique as far as the favors that their attendees can hope to procure; there are no inherent first or second order resources (Boissevain 1974:147-148) that delineate one *diwaniyya* from another or define why a visitor would choose an “election key” over a sitting with family members. The differences lie in the range of contacts that reside within, and radiate out from, a specific *diwaniyya*. It is preferable to resolve problems without resorting to “services” since doing so avoids “a very definite obligation” (Boissevain 1966:22) but this scenario is not always possible. If it was, then there would be no need for *khudamat* guestrooms and bargains with “election key” hosts. However, Kuwait's welfare regime expresses its ubiquity by selectively dispensing privileges and rights through personalized channels that empower local gatekeepers (Tetreault 2000:115). These gatekeepers are approached in the *diwaniyyat* and the real choice between a neutral guestroom, a *khudamat*, and an “election key” is determined by the constraints of one's connections.

CHAPTER 5

THE KUWAITI *DIWANIYYA* THROUGH FOUR CASE STUDIES

The case studies selected here demonstrate the diverse array of options that are possible for any Kuwaiti male seeking an evening in the company of his peers, relatives, or colleagues. With few exceptions, these pretenses must not be mistaken for casual informality. Instead, as these chronicles indicate, nearly every *diwaniyya*, from the most humble to the more extravagant, provides its attendees with an indispensable forum for accessing, trading, and applying influence in its various manifestations. Indeed, these are the country's veritable marketplaces where brokers with resources negotiate their petitioners' requests.

There are a couple of significant points of context that cannot be neglected when weighing the implications of these examples. Foremost is that these *dawawin* are not special nor are they incomparable to any others. They are purely sound exemplars of some of the possibilities that are available to men of all ages in Kuwait City. There are such innumerable amounts of variations in terms of intentions, personalities, means, and general wherewithal that any indiscriminate *diwaniyya* model would invariably be intellectually dishonest. Nevertheless, the cases that follow are still familiar enough to be instantly recognizable to anyone with even minimal exposure to these guestrooms; whether directly, as a host or guest, or indirectly through newspapers and ordinary daily

gossip.

Secondly, though of equal importance, is that those present in a *diwaniyya* at any given time do not necessarily act in unison as a harmonious, holistic entity. Definitely, there are planned programs with speakers, topics or candidates scheduled, whereas on other occasions an individual with a dominant disposition might carry the evening's conversation. Even so, at the opposite end of the spectrum there are those frequent moments when multiple conversations are taking place all at once between different groups of varying sizes. The aim of this clarification is to underline the fact that while a particular *diwaniyya* can be perceived externally as an amalgamation of its members, internally there is less certainty about the robustness of these ties. Therefore, careful attention is given to the precise interactional setting since "the *diwaniyya*" can encompass an ill-defined collection of relationships.

Case Study Number 1: Introduction

This first review is a departure from the later analyses of Kuwait's *diwaniyyat* in that it offers a unique perspective of the country's guestrooms. Rather than exploring a *diwaniyya* from a participant's point of view, neither a host nor an attendee will appear as the central focus. At the core of this incident is a demonstration of how the ambitions of one man, Uncle Ali, are kept in check by the communal interests of an institution that he blatantly ignored: a *diwaniyya* composed of local elders.

In addition to the interactional politics between Uncle Ali and the unnamed guestroom that eventually reversed his personal objectives, this episode serves to highlight the intersection at which actors, *diwaniyyat*, and national representation all

come into contact. Specifically noteworthy here is the role that a *diwaniyya* assumes in filling the social space existent between an individual and the state; a gap that has been called the “raw material of politics” (Barnes 1969:107) to denote the utility of ostensibly nonpolitical institutions in shaping political outcomes.

Finally, Uncle Ali’s encounter with his neighborhood elders’ *diwaniyya* illustrates the tactical use of *wasta*, interpersonal connections, and social capital to mediate local differences and simultaneously acquire government resources. Hence, by deploying the necessary *wasta*, a community-level dispute over a state-level competition is defused by funneling public assets into a private coffer; thereby validating the stations of all parties involved by confirming one side’s ability to give and the other’s willingness to receive (Mauss 1954:10-11).

Case Study Number 1: Uncle Ali’s Bid for Parliament¹⁶²

Amongst his peers, Uncle Ali is quite often heralded as the quintessential portrait of modern-day success in Kuwait City. In the realms of traditional values and customary virtues, Uncle Ali enjoys a strong reputation within his community and he boasts a large family that is widely recognized for being in fine standing. Uncle Ali also owns a lucrative construction business that he runs with the assistance of his two sons. Unmistakably, Uncle Ali’s repute through the years as a respectable patriarch and an adept entrepreneur has earned him a considerable amount of local goodwill, or at least the reverence of others.

When the Emir of Kuwait, Shaykh Sabah, dissolved the National Assembly

¹⁶² This example is based on an interview with one of Uncle Ali’s relatives that was conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 5, 2007.

(*majlis al-umma*) on May 21, 2006, Uncle Ali saw this as an opportunity to set his sights on a different objective: he decided that he would campaign for one of his district's two seats in the general elections scheduled for June 29, 2006. However, there is a crucial detail that must be taken into account to fully understand Uncle Ali's course of action; primarily, the fact that he had no political platform, no legislative agenda, nor any economic scheme. Moreover, he held no illusions that he would ever have to develop such an inventory to effectively contend for a place of his own in the National Assembly, and there are several reasons for Uncle Ali's cavalier attitude towards his prospects in Kuwait's electoral cycle. First, Uncle Ali harbored no desires to ever become a career politician. His overriding motivation was that he yearned for the prestige that he assumed came with holding office and he coveted the title that would have signaled his triumph to everyone: *naeb majlis al-umma* (Delegate of the National Assembly). Essentially, Uncle Ali's aspirations at this juncture in his life stemmed from the realization that he was satisfied he had fulfilled all that was possible for both his family and his business. Outside of the esteem that he envisioned for himself in the National Assembly, Uncle Ali could not picture any other way to garner more accolades than through an elected position. Lastly, and just as important for Uncle Ali's dismissal of prototypical electoral protocol was his fervent belief in the reliability of his networks of extended kin. He was confident that the strength of his good name amongst his kinsmen and their connections would be enough for him to collect the votes he needed on the day of the elections. Further still, Uncle Ali anticipated that by virtue of his proprietorship of a well-known company he could count on some extra ballots to be marked in his favor. Altogether, Uncle Ali viewed himself as a competitive candidate and he fully expected to

be an MP in the next parliamentary session.¹⁶³

Not surprisingly, there was another parliamentary hopeful in Uncle Ali's district who was dismayed about the prospects of facing him in the upcoming elections.¹⁶⁴ However, unlike Uncle Ali, this opponent had already rallied the members of a neighborhood *diwaniyya* to the side of his campaign in an advantageous maneuver meant to add legitimacy to his bid for office. More significantly, though, was that Uncle Ali's adversary had not sought backing from one of the more common *diwaniyyat* composed of card players, family members, or even coworkers who regularly meet to commiserate over their professional woes. Instead, Uncle Ali's rival chose a *diwaniyya* of impeccable status; it was the *diwaniyya* where the elders from the district's most venerable families sat together weekly to discuss a variety of subjects ranging from politics and trade to marriages and household news. Aside from these topics of conversation, what really mattered was that these were men of substance whose opinions carried weight far beyond the confines of this one *diwaniyya*. Once Uncle Ali's opponent succeeded in convincing the elders that they would benefit from his plans for office and that his victory would

¹⁶³ To provide numerical context to Uncle Ali's ambitions the final tallies for the second seat winners give an idea of the minimum number of votes that he would have required. At the time of Uncle Ali's bid, there were 25 districts and each had two seats in the National Assembly that were awarded to the two candidates from each constituency who received the most votes. Therefore, in the 2006 election Uncle Ali would have needed anywhere from a low of 1,461 (District 2, Al-Murqab) to a high of 7,085 votes (District 15, Al-Farwaniyah), with an average of 3,759 ballots, to secure his electoral district's second parliamentary seat. Of course, this is speculative and assumes that Uncle Ali's candidacy could simply have matched the numbers generated by other successful second-place district officeholders without accounting for the variables that a novel candidate introduces into an election. Nonetheless, this count does place Uncle Ali's objectives in perspective by indicating the level of support that he expected to be able to generate based solely upon his kinship and business affiliations. All election figures were compiled from Michael Herb's Kuwait Politics Database at <http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/database.htm>, accessed on March, 06, 2011; and the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) at <http://www.kuna.net.kw>, accessed on March 06, 2011.

¹⁶⁴ Every district produced multiple candidates beyond the two who would go on to represent each constituency. Several areas (District 7, Kifan; District 15, Al-Farwaniyah; District 23, Al-Sabahiya; and District 25, Umm Al-Haiman) yielded the fewest contestants (six) while District 10, Al 'Adiliyah, witnessed the most with 16 challengers who contested for a spot in the National Assembly. On average, ten candidates were listed on the ballots for each district. These figures are derived from the results reported by Michael Herb in his Kuwait Politics Database at <http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/database.htm>, accessed on March 06, 2011.

ultimately further their interests, a clear distinction from Uncle Ali's undefined docket, all that remained was one final obstacle: Uncle Ali.

Even without the support of such a prestigious *diwaniyya* located right in the middle of his own district, Uncle Ali was still poised to be a formidable contender as the elections approached. This perhaps explains why he never tried to secure the elders' sponsorship before embarking upon this undertaking. Whatever Uncle Ali's reasons might have been, he could not shield himself permanently from this particular *diwaniyya's* influence after its cohorts had settled on who was to be their candidate for the National Assembly. One day, following the acceptance of his proposal to the *diwaniyya*, Uncle Ali's challenger visited him to inform his counterpart that it was he, and not Uncle Ali, who had won the elders' endorsement. With this revelation, the opponent kindly requested that Uncle Ali withdraw from the race; but not before first asking Uncle Ali if there was anything, absolutely anything, which he required to make his departure more amicable for those concerned. Uncle Ali merely retorted, "No, nothing."

Uncle Ali's rival returned to the *diwaniyya* to report to the elders what had transpired and how he had failed to come to terms with Uncle Ali. The opponent explained that he attempted to reason with Uncle Ali and negotiate a sound offer that was supposed to have prompted him to retire from the elections. Yet, all of this, he argued, was in vain because of Uncle Ali's stubbornness and his refusal to acknowledge the good judgment of others. Obviously, this account was troubling to the elders and if this issue was not resolved it could completely derail not only their outlook for the election itself but their collective presence as powerbrokers in the local community if it should become

known that their will can no longer be brought to bear its intended results. Without hesitation, the elders quickly notified Uncle Ali that they wanted to meet with him at their *diwaniyya*.

Uncle Ali arrived at the *diwaniyya* with his two sons by his side and their entry was met with the familiar rounds of greetings and salutations that typically accompany any guest's appearance in one of these establishments; although, the circumstances for this visit were far from the expectations that normally characterize a routine social call. Soon after dispensing with these niceties, the elders moved on to the more pressing affair that had brought them all together on this night: Uncle Ali's recalcitrant stance regarding his candidacy for the National Assembly. The elders, along with their own nominee who was present for this meeting, wanted Uncle Ali to clarify why he continued to cling so desperately to his National Assembly ambitions when their man was such a viable alternative for the vacancy. Also, they needed Uncle Ali to tell them in no uncertain terms why he had flatly rejected his rival's efforts to reach a compromise once he learned that this opponent was acting on behalf of their *diwaniyya*. Of course, these questions were not put forth with the intention that Uncle Ali would ever be able to answer them in a manner that could have assuaged the elders' worries since they had already selected their candidate. Rather, this was a gesture proffered to Uncle Ali so that he might have a chance to respond; this was not a reprimand or a scolding, it was an inducement to renew talks and make sure that all parties were given the liberty to justify their positions. Only then, with everyone's rationales made as forthright as they cared to advertise, could the real query begin: What would it take for Uncle Ali, with the elections drawing near, to accept the preferences of this *diwaniyya* and abandon his pursuit of a seat in the next

National Assembly?

Despite the *diwaniyya*'s façade of congeniality coupled with its ambience of hospitality and egalitarianism, Uncle Ali was truly humbled in the presence of such concentrated social pressure. It had been easy for him to send his opponent away empty-handed the time they had spoken together privately, face-to-face, but on this evening the situation was more delicate. Uncle Ali either had to personally turn his back on all those before him in the *diwaniyya*, and be scandalized for his obstinacy by their censure and backbiting in any number of his future endeavors, or he could entertain another sequence of negotiations that could bode well for all involved. In this instance, before the watchful eyes of those gathered in the *diwaniyya*, Uncle Ali turned to his sons and asked them if they could think of any aspect of their business that was suffering and could use some help. His sons replied that for nearly six months they had been trying to obtain construction permits for two of their seaside properties but all of their efforts had fallen short. At that moment, Uncle Ali faced his opponent and told him in front of the elders that if he gets these licenses he will leave the race and vacate his bid for the National Assembly.

Two days later, Uncle Ali received two permits that cleared the way for his company to start its building project. As promised, Uncle Ali withdrew his candidacy and his challenger clenched one of their district's seats in the National Assembly. Still, apart from these tangible political inroads and work certificates Uncle Ali acquired a less concrete, albeit equally substantial, gain. The men of the prominent *diwaniyya* now see Uncle Ali as a sensible, rational individual who is willing to downplay his own aims and acquiesce to mediation. Through this lens, Uncle Ali has elevated his stature to that of a

man who listens to the appeals brought by others and is open to reconciliation. Simply stated, Uncle Ali is not one who is going to limit the range of options that he has available.

Case Study Number 1: Discussion

Uncle Ali's brief flirtation with Kuwaiti parliamentary politics provides an insightful look at one particular interchange where local-level interests impinge upon state-level delegacy. However, Uncle Ali's tale is not entirely exceptional and it fits neatly into the wider context of the country's electoral maneuverings. As early as the 1986 election, exactly 20 years before Uncle Ali's aborted campaign, Nicolas Gavrielides already noted the chronic absence of any issues or principles from National Assembly candidates:

The vast majority of the candidates had no platforms or programs. Some justified this by saying that a platform restricts a candidate, reduces his flexibility and makes him a slave of his words. Others simply published their picture and name claiming that people know who they are and where they stand. Yet others claimed that platforms belong to political parties which have no place in a small country like Kuwait which is after all 'one family.' [1987:174]

Apparently, Uncle Ali planned to utilize this same strategy of relying on his array of contacts to mobilize a voter base that was already knowledgeable of his personal, family, and business attributes; or, phrased another way, Uncle Ali's approach illustrates some of the means by which "social capital serves to enhance human capital on the cheap" (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998:581).¹⁶⁵ Plus, the intervention of group solidarities to

¹⁶⁵ There are countless instances recorded elsewhere of these types of techniques for collecting electoral support. For example, in the Moroccan countryside Lawrence Rosen described a local election in terms that could easily be applied here: "Throughout the course of the campaign, then, each of the candidates concentrated on forging and solidifying a wide range of personal ties rather than on making any direct

restrict the pool of candidates contending for the National Assembly is a well-tested, though formally outlawed, device in Kuwait. While the tribal primaries, a process where members of tribes meet to preselect their candidates in order to eliminate the weakest and improve the tribe's chances at the polls (Alnajjar 2000:245-246), easily attract the most attention (Gavrielides 1987:166-170), comparable nontribal mechanisms (Al-Kandari and Al-Hadben 2010:278) are no less prevalent. Mary Ann Tetreault, in her description of *diwaniyya* voting, underscores this trend for those without tribal affiliations:

...diwaniyya voting is not unusual in Kuwait. It is a strategy that works like a tribal primary or a family council where participants agree ahead of time on one or two candidates as a way to concentrate their votes and improve the likelihood that their choices will win. [2000:118]

Although there is no certainty as to whether or not Uncle Ali would have won an available seat in his district's election, when he canceled his bid he increased the odds of the *diwaniyya*'s candidate emerging victorious by allowing the elders to condense the field of nominees.

Uncle Ali's case also features another theme that frequently arises in local statecraft: land, property development, and building licenses. Ever since the highly criticized government redistribution schemes in the 1950s and 1960s, land has remained a contentious issue in the eyes of many Kuwaitis (El-Katiri et al. 2011:9-10), especially in light of the fact that the state still owns anywhere from 90 – 95 percent of the country (McClenaghan 2007:57-61). It is for this reason that almost any construction project requires securing state land and the proper certificates; and success with the former does not necessarily imply that the latter will follow. The way this works is that the government will lease land on a build, operate, transfer basis, allowing for private

ideological appeals... [T]here was very little reference at all during the campaign to any partisan ideas or affiliations" (1972:222).

development and earnings, until it takes over the venture when the contracted timeframe expires. The problems for developers emerge when they try to steer their projects through the required agencies: there are obstructions derived from the “parliamentary suspicion that major contracts unfairly enrich merchants who gain them through corruption and influence” (Herb 2009:386-387); and, to introduce further delays there is the ever-present swollen bureaucracy with its sluggish licensing procedures (McClenaghan 2007:57-61). These are the very hurdles that confronted Uncle Ali and his sons in their commercial activities and they proved to be enough of a hindrance that Uncle Ali was willing to wager his political future on the possibility that he could put these items to rest.

Yet, at the heart of this anecdote lies the institution, a revered *diwaniyya*, which presided over a clash between individual desires and group sentiments to satisfy district representation in the National Assembly by offering a remedy for Uncle Ali’s dilemma with the state’s convoluted construction licensing protocols. All of this came to fruition with the nimble treatment by the *diwaniyya* elders of what Richard Antoun coined “institutionalized deconfrontation;” whereby,

The encounters-by-mediation are not in fact encounters; they are institutionalized deconfrontations: issues are resolved in the guest house by manipulating the idiom of blame and honor... At the end of the process a fiction of amity is established; it is unclear who has “won” and who has “lost,” since intangible rewards (honor, respect, prestige) are balanced against tangible rewards in a skillful manner, and the parties resume social relations. A process that began as a political process, a competition between clearly delineated opponents for scarce resources and prizes, has ended as a process of social control in which men are led to subordinate their interests for the sake of the wider social unit. [1979:156]

When Uncle Ali’s opponent resorted to the members of the *diwaniyya*, the politics of etiquette (Antoun 1997:159) left Uncle Ali with few choices aside from the inevitable: a

“person-to-person, open give-and-take... managed by the elders” (Antoun 2000:450). While Uncle Ali’s story deviates from Antoun’s Jordanian model in some of its elements, the mediators are not neutral but are interested parties and there was no conflict in the sense of a trespass by either Uncle Ali or his challenger (Antoun 2000:447-448), Antoun’s depiction is still a useful analytical foundation for examining how reconciliation was achieved one night in this *diwaniyya*. In this trial, the challenger revealed the extent of his network of supporters (Rosen 2006:169) and Uncle Ali yielded to the wishes of the group, but not before he was allowed to name the price for his compromise. At the conclusion of all “the tactical facades – the bluffs, grand postures, and imperceptible dodges – so common to tournament settings” (Shryock and Howell 2001:255), everyone involved was justly rewarded and, drawing from Antoun’s deductions (1979:156), there were no losers: Uncle Ali gained his permits and for his conciliation he even furthered his own reputation; his opponent earned a spot in the National Assembly; and the elders of the *diwaniyya* got their man into office to reinforce their influence in local affairs.

Case Study Number 2: Introduction

The following narrative revolves around the advent of a multifamily *diwaniyya*, the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, and traces its trajectory beginning with its conception and ending at the point of its implementation. Like other *diwaniyyat*, its membership readily endorses its overt persona and this instance, Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* is put forward as a conglomeration of individuals whose families are all descended from a common ancestor, Mahmoud bin Abbas. This statement of purpose is immediately evidenced upon entering

Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* as an oversized genealogical chart greets every caller and shows how those present are related. Presumably, these relatives have elected to gather together regularly so that they may restore their former kinship ties and rectify what had become a state of familial disunity.

Less obvious and more concealed are the conflicts that have arisen over the components of prestige that complement attachment to any Kuwaiti guestroom like Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* that can boast a broad base of supporters. Outside of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, not all of Mahmoud bin Abbas' heirs have accepted this arrangement and these malcontents have made no secret of their suspicions of the motives of one participating family: the Al Najjar. Anwar Al Haddad, whose course of action will be subsequently summarized, is infamous amongst his kinsmen in this regard. Also internally, some descendants have privately voiced their unease over the growing influence of the Al Najjar, a form of power that has only been possible through the efforts of all families agreeing to meet in a cooperative setting. The story of the Karami – cum – Al Muallim illustrates an attempt by one lineage to adjust this prevailing balance of authority inside Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*.

The analysis of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* will demonstrate how the construction of this guestroom was formulated to accommodate deviations in its genealogical makeup. Not unexpectedly, a few lineages are absent from the gigantic, decorative family tree exhibited in the foyer and are largely unmentioned in the popular narratives indicative of the fellowship that binds the rank and file in Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. Likewise, in another departure from the strict observance of genealogical rigidity, one line, the Al Basir, has been elevated to a level on par with the lineages stemming from the first generation of

Mahmoud bin Abbas' descendants. Lastly, the general notions of power that the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* supposedly imparts upon its devotees will be examined with specific attention given to how the reunion of these five lineages can become a manifest symbol of social ascendancy in Kuwait City. This will also shed light on why Haitham Al Najjar, the implicit host of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, is such a contentious figure for some of his relatives.

Case Study Number 2: The Invention of the Five Family *Diwaniyya*:
An Expression of Sentiment or the Manipulation of Tradition?¹⁶⁶

The extended Al Najjar family gathered in 2000 for the solemn occasion of a funeral for one of their revered matriarchs. In addition to these immediate relatives, members from four other lineages with whom the Al Najjar share a kinship tie made customary appearances so that they might offer their condolences and pay their respects. These extended mourners represented the families of the Karami, the Al Basir, the bin Abbas, and the Al Haddad.

Yet, very early in the course of the three day bereavement period all of those who were present took note of an unmistakable realization: To their surprise, with so many faces from multiple generations of descendants in attendance, they found that they simply did not know each other. The vagaries of time had served to separate these five families despite their common progenitor and now they could scarcely identify one another in an intimate setting. Three elders from the Al Najjar, recognizing this as an inexcusable shortcoming to their ideal of familial closeness, discussed amongst themselves a way to

¹⁶⁶ The data for this case were compiled from observations and interviews at Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* between 2006 and 2008. Guests and family members were also interviewed away from Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* over the same time period.

remedy their collective negligence. At this small meeting, it was proposed that perhaps a *diwaniyya* formed under the auspices of the apical lineage that united all of the families, that of Mahmoud bin Abbas, could bring everyone together. After subtly inquiring with the others about the feasibility of such an undertaking, on the last day of the rites held to honor their deceased matron, the men from Al Najjar publicly asked that all five families join together in a concerted effort to renew their lost ties; a summons that culminated with an impassioned speech from one of the esteemed Al Najjar seniors encouraging a restoration of familial communion.

In the summer of the following year, 2001, the first meeting was organized by the Al Najjar in the home of one of their elders with the men from all five families under the pretense of rebuilding the bonds of kinship. Tariq Al Najjar, one of the original three who initially envisioned reuniting the lineages under a joint banner, estimated that roughly 120 attendees from the Al Najjar, Karami, Al Basir, bin Abbas, and the Al Haddad were present for this preliminary session. Of those who were there, 20 signed a pledge signifying their intent to participate in a combined *diwaniyya* meant to strengthen their families' overall position vis-à-vis each other and the community at large. However, calling upon the families to collaborate was hardly a novel approach as proven by several earlier attempts. During the 1970s, a regular *diwaniyya* was extended to all of the descendants of Mahmoud bin Abbas but it failed when members from each of the five families instead chose to start their own separate *diwaniyyat*. Later, in the 1980s, a patriarch from the Karami opened his *diwaniyya* to all of the heirs of bin Abbas. After a few years, this *diwaniyya* also closed due to a combination of factors: the host's erratic work schedule limited the time that he could devote to operating the *diwaniyya* along

with what some in the family have postulated as the Karami *diwaniyya*'s apparent lack of goals or objectives. To overcome these previous shortfalls, and to make sure that these mistakes were not repeated, the founders of this latest incarnation of a bin Abbas *diwaniyya* have strived to emphasize the links of kinship and the commonality of interests that should ideally accompany this lineal heritage. Furthermore, its originators focused on a series of organizational principles that can most appropriately be described as adhering to a corporate-type structure.

The tradition of decent promoted by the Al Najjar for this *diwaniyya* draws its membership from the five families identified as successors to the legacy of a shared forebear, Mahmoud bin Abbas, an 18th century religious functionary¹⁶⁷ who lived in what is now southeastern Fars Province in Iran where he held several area villages as part of a *waqf* endowment. Towards the end of the 1700s, bin Abbas left home with his four sons and stopped in Kuwait en route to Mecca to perform the *hajj*.¹⁶⁸ While in Kuwait, bin Abbas made preparations for his sons to remain in the town and await his return. Yet, this was the last time that the sons would see their father again; Mahmoud bin Abbas died at some point on the pilgrimage and never made it back to Kuwait.¹⁶⁹

The five families that comprise today's Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* distinguish themselves as the direct descendants of the sons that stayed behind when bin Abbas departed Kuwait two centuries ago (see Figure 5.1). Their relatedness to each of Mahmoud bin Abbas' sons is illustrated in Figure 5.1. With the exception of the line of

¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the specifics of Mahmoud bin Abbas' religious position are unknown and whether or not he was a part of the orthodox clerical establishment are speculative. Hence, his role could have been informal, like a teacher, caretaker, or *muezzin*.

¹⁶⁸ As early as 1709, Kuwait was already noted by regional travelers as a stopping point for pilgrims on their way to Mecca (Haarmann 2003:30, 37). By 1907, these *hajj* caravans became a source of tax revenue for Shaykh Mubarak Al Sabah (Alghanim 1998:139).

¹⁶⁹ For Muslims, death in fulfillment of one's religious duties is an auspicious event that signifies martyrdom and grants the soul of the deceased an immediate passage to paradise (Lewinstein 2001:83).

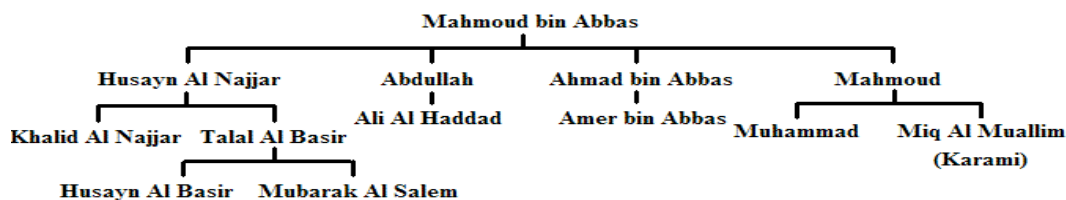


Figure 5.1: Mahmoud bin Abbas (d. late 18th century) and His Sons

Ahmad bin Abbas, who have retained the ancestor's name, and the Al Basir, literally translated as "the wise," these family names reflect the occupations that Mahmoud bin Abbas' progeny adopted in Kuwait Town: carpentry (Al Najjar), blacksmithing (Al Haddad), and teaching (Al Muallim). Noticeably, Karami (generosity) is included in parentheses under Mahmoud b. Mahmoud bin Abbas' lineage and this is due to a lack of familial coherence dating back at least dating to the 1960s. At various intervals, different households within this patrilineage have given themselves the moniker Al Muallim, Karami,¹⁷⁰ and Mahmoud, with some families freely switching between these either separately or in combination.¹⁷¹ Most recently, in 2010, some of the Karami have officially changed their surnames by registering with the government as Al Muallim and they are encouraging others, for reasons that will be discussed next, to follow suit. Yet, this is precisely the predicament that was conveyed by a senior from the Al Najjar: once the state made all nationals register family names, the bin Abbas became divided when they chose to select surnames derived from the occupational statuses that connected their

¹⁷⁰ Karami, as a family name, was created in the 1970s by members of the Al Muallim who wanted to distinguish themselves from the others. The basis of the name is founded on the idea that a teacher (*muallim*) like their ancestor must surely have been generous (*karim*) and was probably often referred to as *karami*.

¹⁷¹ An example of this can be seen with the use of the first name "Ahmad," a hypothetical descendant of Miq Al Muallim b. Mahmoud b. Mahmoud bin Abbas. Depending on his family's disposition and the nature of their relations both internally and externally in regards to their lineage, "Ahmad" could assume several surnames that are all able to convey similar notions of descent. The fictional "Ahmad" could be known as Ahmad Karami, Ahmad Karami Mahmoud, Ahmad Karami Mahmoud Abbas, Ahmad Al Muallim, and so on.

different branches to Mahmoud bin Abbas' sons. Recast in another way, bin Abbas is put forth as the indicator that is forever permanent, whereas all subsequent manifestations are demoted as being merely transitory.

Since its inception, the membership of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* has been arranged into different committees, subcommittees, councils, and boards. In part, this is to prevent it from collapsing like its predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s; also, it is hoped that this attention to orderliness will enhance the guestroom's presence on an already crowded field of *diwaniyyat*. After the pilot meeting in 2001 to gauge the potential appeal of a collective *diwaniyya* composed of Mahmoud bin Abbas' heirs, the 20 signatories who expressed interest were commissioned to collect genealogical and contact data for their families. At their first few gatherings, every member of the "Committee of Twenty" (*lejenet al-ashreena*) wore nametags to overcome the unfamiliarity that had embarrassed them at the funeral just a year earlier. Then, once all of the family information was compiled, the Committee of Twenty was dissolved and a seven-person team took its place. Known as the "Blessed Seven" (*saba al-mubaraka*), this group was tasked with putting together a constitution, determining the rules for spending any monetary contributions given to the *diwaniyya*, and creating more committees and posts as well as the obligatory regulations that govern these positions.¹⁷² At the same time that the

¹⁷² The Blessed Seven eventually constructed a 26 article constitution that defined membership for the *diwaniyya* as based on descent from Mahmoud bin Abbas; designated the *diwaniyya* as the site for male heirs of Mahmoud bin Abbas to meet and named the *diwaniyya* Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. In addition to these formalities, the constitution established a Board of Directors composed of one elected member of at least 18 years of age from each family; it set up a Consultative Committee made of one elder from each lineage to resolve major crises like family disputes; and it founded a ten-person *Diwaniyya* Committee (chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, treasurer, three financial officers, and three information center posts) with two members from each family, each of whom must be 21 years old or older. With the exception of those on the Consultative Committee, who are appointed for life, most positions are five year terms awarded by nomination and consensus. This process was witnessed in 2004 at the trials for the first ten-member *Diwaniyya* Committee when there were a total of 11 aspirants but one withdrew to prevent any feelings of

Blessed Seven labored to organize the *diwaniyya*, its roster already began meeting weekly in the ground floor of a house dedicated for the purpose by Haitham Al Najjar. Haitham lived in the other levels with his family and was one of the three Al Najjar elders who, while in the process of mourning his late aunt, had sought opinions for guidance on this very project. When the Blessed Seven at last submitted their recommendations to the personnel of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, their tenets were accepted unquestionably and without debate.

In spite of the outward displays of unanimity that characterized the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* in its formative stages of development, there were deep-seated concerns about the nature of the newfound power of those involved with it. Particularly, from the outset some kinsmen have harbored anxieties over what they viewed as the dominance of a single lineage, the Al Najjar, that they argue manipulated familial sentiments to broaden their own base of supporters. These detractors reinforce their case by pointing out that while three Al Najjar were solely responsible for the whole Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* scheme in the first place, presently one of their numbers, Haitham, is both on the Board of Directors and acts as the Chairman of the *Diwaniyya* Committee. Of course, the location of the *diwaniyya* is also in Haitham Al Najjar's home and, his critics complain, he postures as the de facto host of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* when it is actually supposed to be an egalitarian assemblage of families. Because some of the important heads of these families attend Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, the dissenters grumble that Haitham's

ill-will from developing within the *diwaniyya*. Most of these committees meet as their members deem it necessary and posts are only vacated prematurely in the event of voluntary departure or missing three consecutive meetings or in the case that five absences are recorded in the span of one year. Annually, the *Diwaniyya* Committee will present a review to the entire Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* of its activities for the previous 12 months. However, the *Diwaniyya* Committee is ultimately charged with elevating the community profile of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* and networking with other *diwaniyyat*.

pretentiousness is turning their collective weight into his personal influence; to protest, several prominent descendants have promised to boycott the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* for as long as they perceive the Al Najjar to be in charge.

Undoubtedly, Anwar Al Haddad is the most notorious abstention from Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. Years ago, Anwar's sister married into the Karami line and currently her husband and one of their adult sons are active members in the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. Nevertheless, Anwar's own descent from Mahmoud bin Abbas coupled with the attendance of his brother-in-law and beloved nephew have not been enough to sway his attitude; to the contrary, Anwar remains not only dismissive but openly hostile towards the five family conglomerate. Although other members of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* regularly host their own *diwaniyyat* on the evenings that they are free, Anwar conspicuously set up his *diwaniyya* so that it convenes on that same night. Publicly, this is a blatant declaration of irreconcilability because Anwar, by scheduling his *diwaniyya* on the exact day as Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, reduces the likelihood that he or Haitham Al Najjar will ever be able to visit each other since they are both concurrently hosting visitors. Moreover, Anwar's ploy can potentially divide Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*'s guests since his maneuver is a clear message to anyone who would consider meeting under the guise of Mahmoud bin Abbas: "Come to my *diwaniyya* instead of his;" in this instance, the usage of "his" denotes Haitham Al Najjar, who Anwar believes is really controlling Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* behind the scenes.¹⁷³ Needless to say, the split between Anwar's *diwaniyya* and Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* generates a great amount of family gossip and intrigue, but Anwar is adamant that he will continue to oppose the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* until the Al Najjar family relinquishes their hold over it.

¹⁷³ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 19, 2007.

Even within the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* itself, regardless of its mission statement that all members are equals as heirs of Mahmoud bin Abbas, there are ongoing contests for status, rank, and recognition. The transformation of the Karami back into the Al Muallim is one such case in point. In the four decades since some of the Al Muallim changed their names to Karami, more than a few of the converts admit that those who stayed the course as Al Muallim have done well for themselves. Further still, there are Al Muallim in Kuwait unrelated to Mahmoud bin Abbas' lineage who are held in high admiration and have made the moniker "a good, respectable name."¹⁷⁴ The Karami, on the other hand, have remained practically unknown beyond the ties of their immediate or extended kin. They hope by reclaiming the Al Muallim surname that they too might become associated with the wider reverence that the label enjoys in Kuwait City, a condition that they fully expect to transfer to their advantage in the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. According to this line of thought, if the Karami can unify themselves by reverting to the more established Al Muallim family name, they will be able to elevate the profile of the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* while improving their own standing inside it. As it is now, the Al Najjar are the paramount leaders in Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* due to their line's social visibility and its preeminence in its commercial dealings; if the Karami want equivalence, they will have to realign behind a similarly compelling standard: Al Muallim.

Case Number 2: Discussion

A few points about the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*'s genealogy warrant mention here, the most obvious of which is that not all of Mahmoud bin Abbas' patrilineal heirs are included in the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. For instance, the lineages of Mubarak Al Salem, a

¹⁷⁴ Muhammad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 18, 2007.

direct relation of Husayn Al Najjar, and that of Muhammad bin Mahmoud are excluded without a reason or explanation being provided. Without hazarding too much speculation as to why this might be the case it should suffice to say that any range of possibilities, from Peters' "area of ambiguity" (1960:41) that allows for a degree of practical adaptation to adjust the genealogical framework and permit "each element in this scheme... to move in its own orbit... [and] combine in different ways" (Marx 1979:125) to Cuisenier's antagonistic lineage fragmentation (1976:147-148), could plausibly account for these omissions.

Another observation is that the five family mythos of the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* stems from its namesake's children despite the fact that he sired only four sons. In this case, the Al Basir are accorded recognition as a distinct, independent lineage even though they are lineal descendants of Husayn Al Najjar, one of Mahmoud bin Abbas' sons and the progenitor of the Al Najjar line of affiliation. Hence, patrilineally, the Al Najjar and Al Basir are closer to each other than they are to either the Karami, bin Abbas, or the Al Haddad; and, to be exact, the Al Basir should be incorporated into the Al Najjar lineage as revealed by their own genealogical understanding of their relationship to Mahmoud bin Abbas. Therefore, the structure of birthright that unifies the members of the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* is selectively based on ancestry to four of Mahmoud bin Abbas' sons and one of his grandsons. Some lineages are ruled out, as seen with those of Mubarak Al Salem and Muhammad bin Mahmoud; while another, that of Talal Al Basir, is actually a sublineage afforded the generational equivalence of one of the original four sons. This is how five families came to be linked through four sons to their common forebear and it is the rationale for membership in the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*.

Then again, genealogical accuracy is far less consequential for the attendees who sit in, or the families who abstain from, Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. Rather, the questionable intentions behind the Al Najjar's desires to create the Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* are the real sources of hearsay and rumor. These arguments have a tendency to express angst over Haitham Al Najjar's exploitation of what Richard Antoun classified as ideological resources: the "symbolic gestures of unity" (1979:43) that emerge when familial obligations incumbent upon individuals serve to bring a larger group of kinsmen together (Antoun 1979:43-44). Preceding the founding of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, the funeral of an Al Najjar matriarch offered just such a compulsory occasion (Altorki 1977:281-282) that united Mahmoud bin Abbas' legacy, and continuing to this day the guestroom of the five families is frequently vindicated as an enduring tribute to her memory. Yet, since the creation of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* some of its members have reluctantly conceded that their *diwaniyya* is devoid of any genealogical equivalence and that despite their *hadhar* backgrounds, Haitham Al Najjar has become the embodiment of a *badu* councilman. In the words of one Al Muallim kinsman who routinely sits in Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*,

[Haitham Al Najjar]... is a leader by his personality and is like a Bedouin councilman even though he is not... [He] is the head man. Bedouin families are called tribes and this man, the councilman, rules the tribe. [The traits of this man] include success, power, a respectable age of 40 years or older, and he is selected by popular opinion or agreement. His opinion effects group and tribe voting.¹⁷⁵

It is the very prospect that Haitham Al Najjar used his wealth to donate a furnished space for a *diwaniyya* replete with domestic servants, and utilized a cunning emotional ploy to manufacture a following, that some relatives now find unsettling. The skeptics, a few of whom do not abstain from Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*, contend that Haitham has conveniently positioned himself to represent the reunited families by virtue of having crystallized a

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 5, 2006.

collectivity (Krause 1998:7) whose interests he can claim to champion. From this perspective, Haitham Al Najjar's magnanimity is reminiscent of Peter Blau's "paradox of social integration" (1967:44) whereby the benefits of social attraction are confounded by the "fears of [social] dependence" (1967:43). Here, Haitham is attractive for the time, resources, finances, and disposition he has at his disposal to support a weekly *diwaniyya*; the uncertainties and doubts lie in the undefined, expected acquiescence that is typically associated with such lavish hospitality (Herzfeld 1987:77, 86).

What remains unresolved, however, are the vague references to Haitham Al Najjar's burgeoning influence that his foes fear is being built on the backs of their families' reputations. The issue of greatest concern is Haitham's role as a host to the respected elders from the other four lineages who regularly visit Al Abbas *Diwaniyya*. If Haitham is viewed as a leader rather than a peer amongst equals, as understood by the membership, outsiders will give more substance to his words due to the belief that he carries clout with multiple groups of kinsmen. Minimally, this perception might allow Haitham Al Najjar to enjoy favorable business opportunities since he could possibly epitomize a point of access to an extensive base of consumers or investors. At the other end, though, are the gains that Haitham can accrue by parlaying his status as a *diwaniyya* host into that of an "election key" (*al-mufta al-intikhabi*) for parliamentary candidates in order to open "the gates for them to reach certain families, tribes and other social groups" (Gavrielides 1987:178). This support comes with the expectation that a successful candidate will channel the rewards of his office, his government-sanctioned *wasta*, back to those who endorsed him during the elections; that is, the *diwaniyya* hosts who mobilized their guests into voting blocs. Consequently, the availability of MP *wasta* can,

as one visitor to Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* phrased it, elevate hosts into men who “can make things happen... they have power in the country.”¹⁷⁶ At the moment, this power is the subject that fuels the opposition to Haitham Al Najjar’s standing as the veritable host of Al Abbas *Diwaniyya* by bringing into question his desire to establish a supposedly egalitarian guestroom without projecting the outward appearance that the other lineages are merely serving as his clientele.

Case Study Number 3: Introduction

This next case addresses the rapid ascent and precipitous fall of *Diwan* Al Redha, a *diwaniyya* founded for the explicit purpose of raising awareness of patients’ rights in Kuwait and combating bureaucratic misappropriations of medical resources. Its proprietor, Abd al-Aziz Al Redha, is a longtime promoter of healthcare reform in the country and he brought together a cadre of likeminded individuals to aid him with his cause. Mostly unrelated to each other, the central bond that united Abd al-Aziz’s guests was their interest in improving Kuwait’s standards of medical coverage. Based on these characteristics, *Diwan* Al Redha clearly fits the profile of a political association (Bailey 1969:24) even though it could easily be classified as a clique (Boissevain 1974:174, 179).

Soon after Abd al-Aziz’s *diwaniyya* commenced its operations, he parceled out the duties for its day-to-day functions, along with matching titles, to his most intimate confidants. Subsequently, Abd al-Aziz extended his ambitions to a second *diwaniyya*, what he termed the Area Five *Diwaniyya*, and he began to envision a political future for himself. However, it was precisely at this point in time that Abd al-Aziz’s aspirations took an unexpected turn.

¹⁷⁶ Ali. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

For the time that it lasted, Abd al-Aziz was at the forefront of all of his *diwaniyya*'s initiatives, making its presence known throughout Kuwait by broadcasting its agenda when it suited him and overseeing *Diwan Al Redha*'s collective shunning of projects by similar groups if they neglected to issue him a formal invitation. Still, despite all of his tireless lobbying, self-promotion and zealous networking, Abd al-Aziz failed to take into account the sentiments of his own supporters. By his own reckoning, Abd al-Aziz imagined that he was the face of *Diwan Al Redha* and thus an irreplaceable activist for overhauling the country's healthcare administration. Contrastingly, Abd al-Aziz's guests did not share his vision of leadership as they actually viewed themselves to be the real driving force that gave *Diwan Al Redha* its substance. At this impasse, *Diwan Al Redha*'s brief existence was brought to an end after only a few short years, and it is for this very reason that it is such a remarkable record.

The rise and decline of *Diwan Al Redha* aptly illustrates the symbiotic dependencies that exist between hosts and guests (Meneley 1996:104) and how dissatisfaction can engender dissolution. It also shows the plasticity that single-stranded, single-interest ties can provide for members of a group when there are no overlapping obligations that must be considered (Wolf 1966b:81-83). In this sense, Abd al-Aziz's visitors did not rely exclusively on his services, and in the absence of any other commitments to him, they were able to walk away when he defaulted on their expectations.

Case Study Number 3: Dissent within the Ranks and the Collapse of a Special Interest *Diwaniyya*¹⁷⁷

Abd al-Aziz Al Redha has spent most of his life as an outspoken advocate for the restructuring of his country's healthcare system. Since as early as the late 1980s, he has been involved with an assortment of ministries and parliamentarians in an attempt to eliminate the bureaucratic hurdles, administrative grafts, and other questionable practices that plague the state's medical services. Particularly, he has campaigned against the relatives of the sick who try to use their convalescent relations for their own governmental benefits, such as monetary payouts for family member caregivers who see the infirm as a source of regular income. Although Abd al-Aziz is now a retired pensioner operating a small shop specializing in medical devices, he once presided over a prominent national guild devoted to patients' rights until the moment that his political fortunes were suddenly reversed.

Away from the public eye for years, though always working behind the scenes to help his friends, associates, neighbors, and family, Abd al-Aziz at last answered the calls of his supporters to reclaim his role as a community activist. To announce his return, Abd al-Aziz opened a *diwaniyya* in his name, *Diwan Al Redha*, and he posted signs in his neighborhood directing visitors to his home. At the launch of *Diwan Al Redha*, Abd al-Aziz used his old contacts with the media to make sure that this event did not pass unnoticed. He even went so far as to have Shaykha Fariha Al-Ahmad, the sister of the Emir of Kuwait, Shaykh Sabah, oversee the inaugural ceremony for his *diwaniyya*. Much of this fanfare can be attributed to the mission statement that Abd al-Aziz heralded for

¹⁷⁷ All of the information presented for this case was collected via observations and interviews at *Diwan Al Redha* between March and December, 2007. Interviews outside of *Diwan Al Redha* with its members were conducted during this same period.

Diwan Al Redha: it was a special interest *diwaniyya* dedicated exclusively to promoting equal access to state healthcare services and ending the abuses that tarnish the system, especially the efforts by those who divert resources away from patients and into their own personal accounts.

Abd al-Aziz's weekly guest list was comprised of individuals he had directly or indirectly aided at one time or another and the companions who shared his concerns. He appointed a few of these closest companions to volunteer positions within the *diwaniyya*: a secretary who recorded minutes, attendance, and contact information for attendees; a *diwaniyya* manager who supervised refreshment inventories and maintenance; two public relations officers who circulated announcements via short message services (SMS), kept track of other *diwaniyyat*, and notified members when Abd al-Aziz would be visiting another *diwaniyya*; an accountant who was in charge of donations to offset members' medical expenses and listed obituaries when needed; and a computer administrator who digitalized all materials related to *Diwan Al Redha*. All of these posts were indefinite in their duration and could have been reassigned if vacated for some reason or if Abd al-Aziz deemed that a change was in order. It must also be noted that these appointments were not mere honorary titles; Abd al-Aziz insisted that an orderly division of labor was necessary if his *diwaniyya* was going to operate efficiently. Moreover, Abd al-Aziz saw to it that *Diwan Al Redha* adopted the appearances of an official organization and a trip to a print shop provided all of the paraphernalia required to convey legitimacy: business cards, stationary, letterhead, invitations, and greeting cards to send to MPs during Ramadan. Further still, Abd al-Aziz instituted a dress code to discourage causal, Western attire. On the premises, *dishdashas* were mandatory but *ghutras* and *igals* were labeled

as optional, albeit strongly encouraged, accessories. He called this their “uniform”¹⁷⁸ and it was meant to maximize the visual impact that *Diwan Al Redha* imparted upon outsiders and to ensure that its roster was never taken too lightly.

The level of involvement that Abd al-Aziz invested into *Diwan Al Redha* cannot be quantified but it would not be an overestimation to conclude that he spent at least part of every day performing some task or favor under the pretext of attending to his *diwaniyya*'s affairs. One of the responsibilities that he and his cohorts fulfilled was locating weekly speakers who would commit to scheduling a visit to the *diwaniyya* on its regular meeting night. As soon as a visitor was confirmed, all members, as well as anyone else in the *diwaniyya*'s registry, were informed of the impending occasion by text messages dispatched by the *diwaniyya*'s PR personnel. Typically, these special guests were politicians, delegates from the National Assembly, doctors, or ministerial executives. Oftentimes, newspaper reporters and television crews were invited to publicize the latest happenings at *Diwan Al Redha* as they pertained to policymaking and its effects on the healthcare establishment. Not infrequently, Abd al-Aziz monopolized these opportunities in the limelight to pronounce his thoughts on the topics at hand and to express what he perceived to be the immediate needs of the community.

When he was not hosting his *diwaniyya* on its official night, Abd al-Aziz went out calling on the *diwaniyyat* of legislators, representatives, statesmen, and other sundry authorities who might wield some form of political influence. Ostensibly, Abd al-Aziz wanted to inform these lawmakers of the inadequacies of Kuwait's medical system. However, Abd al-Aziz's visits were never without a degree of prearranged showmanship: he never ventured alone on his outings because, in his words, to prove one's power in

¹⁷⁸ Abd al-Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2007.

Kuwait, “you must have people with you,”¹⁷⁹ and this was a chance for Abd al-Aziz to demonstrate that he had such a following. Also, at the conclusion of these formal appointments Abd al-Aziz prompted his hosts not to forget to repay his visit, an obligation that he undoubtedly capitalized on by always summoning the media to cover these impending engagements at his *diwaniyya*. For Abd al-Aziz, this was just another part of his efforts to further bolster the public visibility of the *diwaniyya* that bore his name.

Within a year of starting *Diwan Al Redha*, Abd al-Aziz broke ground on another guestroom south of Kuwait City. Owned by one of his Bedouin associates whom he had traded favors with before, in private talks Abd al-Aziz nonetheless referred to it either as his *diwaniyya* or as a branch of *Diwan Al Redha*. In his public discourse, Abd al-Aziz portrayed it simply as *mintaqat hamsa* (area five), a designation based on this *diwaniyya*'s location in Kuwait's fifth electoral district. According to Abd al-Aziz, he was worried that if he was too specific with this *diwaniyya*'s moniker, then it might be perceived as exclusive to only certain residents. For example, if it was called “Mangaf *Diwaniyya*,” perhaps people in Riqqah and Ahmadi would not feel welcomed. So, to maximize the potential number of guests, Abd al-Aziz dubbed it the “Area Five *Diwaniyya*” to attract the entire electorate.¹⁸⁰ This way, he explained, the Bedouin who are concentrated in the fifth district could attend his *diwaniyya* without the inconveniences of a long drive into the city; if the Bedouin cannot come to his *diwaniyya* then Abd al-Aziz promised that he would take his *diwaniyya* to them.

¹⁷⁹ Abd al-Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 3, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ This district includes the residential areas of Mangaf, Riqqah, Ahmadi, Fahaheel, and Sabahiya.

Still, Abd al-Aziz's admitted *hadhar*, or as he phrased it his "downtown roots,"¹⁸¹ were a liability for him at the Area Five *Diwaniyya* because he lacked the requisite *badu* credentials needed to draw a Bedouin crowd. It is for this reason that the Bedouin owner of the property hosted the Area Five *Diwaniyya*; the Bedouin, Abd al-Aziz asserted, are more apt to patronize one of their own. As for Abd al-Aziz, he anointed himself the "Spokesman" (*al mutahadith*) for his *diwaniyya* and the "Committee Chairman of Diwan Communications" (*ra'is lejenet diwan al-tawasul*)¹⁸² for both locations.

The unveiling of the Area Five *Diwaniyya* coincided with Abd al-Aziz sitting in with the Municipality Council (*al-majlis al-baladi*) as a consultant for improving the quality of healthcare beginning at the local level. Abd al-Aziz's fundamental agenda was to petition the Council to implement building codes that would incorporate new accessibility standards for the elderly and the disabled. Around this same period, Abd al-Aziz decided to test the political climate to see if he could resuscitate his earlier career as a solicitor for patients, but this time he set his sights on a subsection within the National Assembly. Quietly campaigning to get his name back into circulation after more than a decade in retirement, Abd al-Aziz had quickly broadened his range of allies from the very day that he introduced *Diwan Al Redha* to his coterie. In fact, a bulletin board installed on the wall of *Diwan Al Redha* proudly notified visitors, and reminded members, of Abd al-Aziz's accomplishments; the newspaper clippings, photographs, and miscellaneous accolades all served as testimonies celebrating his meteoric revival.

Yet, abruptly and without any pronouncement, the lights at *Diwan Al Redha* were extinguished and the door was locked. Initially, Abd al-Aziz claimed that he temporarily

¹⁸¹ Abd al-Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 27, 2007.

¹⁸² Abd al-Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 27, 2007.

closed the *diwaniyya* so that he might take advantage of the pleasant weather to go camping in the desert. Later, he blamed the co-owners of a restaurant, one of whom was his cousin, for bringing him in to mediate a dispute that they were having over the eatery's finances. His role in resolving this discord, Abd al-Aziz professed, deprived him of his evenings. Even on the nights that Abd al-Aziz was still to be found at his *diwaniyya*, he was reclined on one of the benches outside of it in the company of his confidants, the officeholders of *Diwan Al Redha*, and the occasional passerby. At this time, Abd al-Aziz embarrassingly confessed that he lost the key to his *diwaniyya* and chose to cancel it rather than subject himself to the ridicule that advertising his absent-mindedness to his guests would surely have generated.

Ghanim, one of the insiders at *Diwan Al Redha*, tells quite a different story. As he recounted, Abd al-Aziz's ambitions to once again secure his place in Kuwait's political arena had inflated his ego so much that it caused a rift to develop amongst the guestroom's peers. Accordingly, many of the members of *Diwan Al Redha* came to believe that Abd al-Aziz was claiming too much personal credit for the collective endeavors put forth by everyone at the *diwaniyya*. It was the general opinion of these members that they were just as deserving as Abd al-Aziz in terms of the successes achieved by *Diwan Al Redha*. More tellingly, there were several aspirants within the ranks who estimated that they could sufficiently replace Abd al-Aziz and perform all of his functions if he continued with his denials of their contributions.

Faced with these threats, Ghanim says that Abd al-Aziz lashed out at his accusers and declared, "Fine, if you think you can do this, then do it!"¹⁸³ Thereafter, Abd al-Aziz barred the entrance to *Diwan Al Redha* and effectively closed it down. Ghanim

¹⁸³ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on December 13, 2007.

maintains that Abd al-Aziz did this to send the clear message to his detractors that he alone protected the interests of Kuwait's patient population and there was no one else in the country capable of filling this role. At the same time, Abd al-Aziz wanted to reinforce the notion that *Diwan Al Redha* and the activities associated with it were entirely of his making. Instead of dispelling his challengers' accusations, Abd al-Aziz was trying to prove to them that he garnered all of the recognition because ultimately everything rested solely upon his shoulders. Afterwards, as the weeks passed Abd al-Aziz talked less about his future with the National Assembly and, with the exception of the core group of backers who still rallied around him, Abd al-Aziz's former guests left him and dispersed elsewhere.

Case Number 3: Discussion

Abd al-Aziz's short-lived experiment owning and operating *Diwan Al Redha* bears an unmistakable resemblance to Bailey's classic definition of a political association in which members share only a civic awareness with one another and little else (1969:24). By the same token, *Diwan Al Redha* can just as conveniently be labeled a clique if Jeremy Boissevain's criteria of a band united by common interests with membership designated according to core, primary, and secondary followers is applied (1974:174, 179). Alternatively, Baylouny's research on the recent growth of kinship organizations in Jordan could also pertain to *Diwan Al Redha* with only minor allowances: participants are not limited to kinsmen although it is a service-oriented alliance with an organizational model based on the older, more recognizable form of the local guesthouse (2006:353). The point here is not to compartmentalize *Diwan Al Redha*

because it obviously has traits that can extend into a number of classificatory schemes. On the other hand, it is the nature of Abd al-Aziz's relationships with his followers that might better explain his fleeting notoriety.

Abd al-Aziz created *Diwan Al Redha* out his desire to combine patient advocacy with his own personal political objectives. He never stated as much but his sequence of actions leads to this conclusion: Abd al-Aziz was a former political actor whose fall from grace was momentarily suspended when he presented *Diwan Al Redha* to the public just as he privately moved to market himself throughout Kuwait City. Unfortunately for Abd al-Aziz, the bonds that were manifest between him and his supporters were noticeably deficient in their multiplicity; they were all solely invested in reforming the healthcare system without any other substance upon which to base their rapport. *Diwan Al Redha's* heavy reliance on a single component to demarcate their affairs left Abd al-Aziz vulnerable (Wolf 1966b:81-83) to defections when he could not marshal the trust or moral compulsion for his roster to stay the course with him (Cohen 2004:89). This is the exact kind of flexibility that Dresch had in mind when he wrote of the tribesmen in northern Yemen, "Nor are they pinned down by a shaykh's access to funds from elsewhere; just as one can choose his arbitrator, so one can choose one's patron, protector or leader. A shaykh's following can therefore grow and shrink quite freely with circumstances" (1984:42).

In a related scenario, it is entirely possible that Abd al-Aziz exhausted the social credits, or at least the influence that he proclaimed to possess (Bailey 1972:40), that he depended on to make his entourage materialize in the first place. If this is the case, Peter Blau eloquently expounds on the repercussions:

Superior status that empowers a person to command a variety of services from others enables him to gain many advantages. But if securing these advantages requires making too stringent demands, he depletes his power and endangers his status for several reasons. The costly services he forces others to supply to him may make it profitable for them to relinquish the benefits on which his power rests in favor of the lesser benefits that can be had from another person at lesser cost. If he must often prod others into furnishing services to him, moreover, it shows them that he is dependent on them and thus reduces his power over them. [1967:136]

It is not unreasonable to assume that if Abd al-Aziz was drained of his instrumental value, his initiative of delegating *diwaniyya* tasks and his eager consumption of the praises lavished upon *Diwan Al Redha* conflicted with his members' sense of accountability. Again, once Abd al-Aziz was devoid of any substantial credit and unable to call forth the "interchangeability of obligations" (Rosen 2006:169) that accompanies multiplex bonds of reciprocity (Peters 1972:183), his utility evaporated and he was compelled to unceremoniously shutter his *diwaniyya*.

Case Study Number 4: Introduction

This final case study is a series of vignettes that reflect a few of the more frequent themes that emerge when Kuwaitis talk about the *diwaniyyat* and the purposes that they serve in the country. The first two items, "Workplace Permits" and "Making the Grade," portray the guestroom as the locus of intercessory dealings despite the fact that the supplicants are not regular guests but unexpected visitors (Stirling 1966:240). These callers sought the familiarity of the *diwaniyya* to plead their cases to their arbiters; in one instance this is a host and in the other it is an occasional member.

In "Community Charity," a couple of prominent *dawawin* are described as veritable arenas for conspicuous displays of hospitality, generosity and largesse.

Certainly, hosts are not bound by altruism alone and they are fully aware that their donations are scrutinized by their guests, a realization that is not overlooked by petitioners. Lastly, “The Pastimes of Youth” explores a young men’s *diwaniyya* (*diwaniyya al-shabab*) that was started when its proprietor and his classmates returned to Kuwait City after studying in the United States. Because these youth *diwaniyyat* are typically dismissed by Kuwaiti elders as wastes of time, the inclusion of the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya* provides an interesting glimpse at the socialization of young adults on their own terms.

In spite of what may initially appear to be a divergent survey of guestroom topics that ranges from negotiated settlements to youthful distractions, there is a common thread that connects each of these narratives to one another: the need to create, maintain, or access networks of informal relations outside the boundaries of official institutional settings (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984:283, 297). Moreover, as the profiles below plainly reveal, all of these networks are dependent upon the *diwaniyyat* to serve as their outlets to a broader spectrum of contacts.

Case Study Number 4.1: Favors in the *Diwaniyya*:
Workplace Permits¹⁸⁴

Isa and Aziz are two young professionals, each in his mid-twenties, employed in Kuwait’s private sector. Both were educated in the United States where they received their degrees in engineering and now they are coworkers at the same construction firm. During their absence from Kuwait, Isa and Aziz admit that they lost touch with the rituals of *diwaniyya* visitation that characterize male Kuwaiti social life. Aside from the weekly

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 17, 2006.

family *diwaniyya*, which seems to them more useful for kinship obligations than anything else, neither Isa nor Aziz developed much of a *diwaniyya* routine until the demands of their workplace took over.

When a Member of Parliament failed to approve their company's building project, Isa and Aziz were asked to talk to the politician since they had been so instrumental in developing the plans and were in the best position to explain its parameters. After some deliberation, Isa and Aziz decided that the most prudent approach would be to sit with the MP in his *diwaniyya*. Once they found out the details of the *diwaniyya*; its location, the day of the week that it meets and its hours, Isa and Aziz visited the parliamentarian's *diwaniyya* on one of its regular, formal nights. On their first call, Isa and Aziz introduced themselves, the company that they represented, and gave the MP a brief summary of the construction job. They returned the following week and were able to spend a little longer with the politician, this time talking more about the building proposal as well as some casual topics.

Back at their offices, before Isa and Aziz even had a chance to entertain the possibilities of another visit to the MP's *diwaniyya*, one of their managers informed them that the company's project had received its necessary approvals. In a show of appreciation, later in the week Isa and Aziz made a brief appearance at the *diwaniyya* to convey their personal gratitude to the MP. Although they have no intentions of becoming regular guests at this *diwaniyya*, out of respect they do plan to at least make Ramadan visits.

Case Study Number 4.2: Privileges in the *Diwaniyya*:
Making the Grade¹⁸⁵

Yousef rarely, if ever, visits his family *diwaniyya*. He is a university student with a vibrant social life and he prefers the companionship of his fellow age-mates in any number of the coffee shops spread throughout the city to the deferential setting he finds in the *diwaniyya* of his elder male kinsmen. Without question, for Yousef an evening of cards, playing contentious hands of *kout bo sitta* interspersed with relaxing inhalations of flavored *shisha*, easily trumps the pageantry and restraint that he associates with the *diwaniyya*.

However, a phone call that Yousef received from one of his friends, Fou'ad, caused him to temporarily change his usual nightly schedule of studying and spending time with his companions because over the course of their conversation it was made painfully clear that Fou'ad was in dire straits. Fou'ad had just spent the last two years at a local vocational school (*al-maahad al-tatbiky*) studying to be an accountant but now the completion of his certificate was in jeopardy; for the fourth and last time, Fou'ad failed his final accounting exam and he would not earn his credentials. Out of a sense of desperation, Fou'ad reached out to Yousef for one apparent reason: Yousef's uncle, Zayd, was Fou'ad's accounting professor.

Yousef invited Fou'ad to accompany him to his family's *diwaniyya* on its formal meeting night so that they all three might discuss this matter in a more congenial environment than that offered by an uncomfortable college office. Yousef also arranged for Zayd to be there since his uncle only periodically drops by from time to time.

However, when Yousef revealed to his uncle the purpose of their appointment so that he

¹⁸⁵ This entire episode, from being with Yousef the moment the initial phone call was received to the meeting at the *diwaniyya*, unfolded in the author's presence in Kuwait City on March 8, 2008.

could get an impression of what to expect, Zayd positively replied, “If he is your friend, do not worry. I will give him an A.”¹⁸⁶ That evening, Yousef, Fou’ad, and Zayd sat away from everyone else in the *diwaniyya* and huddled together talking in hushed tones with lighthearted mannerisms that gave no indication of the seriousness of the question at hand. In under a half-hour it was all over. At that point, they all stood, cheerfully shook hands, and Fou’ad left. According to Yousef, on that night Fou’ad passed his exam.

Case Study Number 4.3: Hospitality in the *Diwaniyya*:
Community Charity¹⁸⁷

It is not uncommon for large, prestigious *diwaniyyat* to be patronized by the destitute and the needy, especially for alms and sustenance during celebratory periods such as Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. Oftentimes, many *dawawin* may leave their doors unlocked and stock fresh, light foods like flatbread, dates, butters, and jams throughout the week for members and outsiders alike. At other intervals, someone from “off the streets”¹⁸⁸ might even come forward with a far more considerable request.

Bilal’s family’s *diwaniyya* is an enormous, free-standing, multistory palatial structure that is nowhere near any of its members’ residences. Built in the 1980s, Bilal’s family *diwaniyya* was funded with proceeds provided in the will of his late great-grandfather, a man who envisioned all of his kinsmen one day meeting together under the same roof. However, this ostentatious display frequently invites the attention of the less well-to-do in the neighborhood who are, for a variety of reasons, desperate for immediate assistance.

¹⁸⁶ Yousef. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 8, 2008.

¹⁸⁷ This case study is comprised of observations and interviews at Bilal’s family’s *diwaniyya* on November 5, 2007, and an interview conducted with Bilal in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 3, 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Bilal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 3, 2007.

Most people can find out by word-of-mouth when Bilal's family convenes for its official night at the *diwaniyya*. This is when everyone is present but more importantly it is when the host of the *diwaniyya* is expected to be in attendance. For those who require some form of aid, this formal gathering of the *diwaniyya* members is the most pragmatic moment for visiting because a host does not wish to look bad in front of his guests. Hence, a request made of a host in the company of his guests is likely to be granted, either out of genuine concern for the petitioner or out of the desire to maintain appearances before one's peers.

To illustrate these tendencies, Bilal relates several occasions when indigent strangers sought help at his family *diwaniyya*. For instance, there was the man who, upon entering the *diwaniyya* and being greeted by the first elder in the room, instantly asked this senior for 600 KD (U.S. \$2,150.00). Although this caused a degree of embarrassment for the host, since the request was directed to his guest instead of to him, he nevertheless rapidly dispatched one of his brothers to sequester the new arrival to an adjacent chamber. Inside, the man confessed that he owed his bank this sum for a loan and that a lawsuit had already been filed against him. He feared that if he could not come up with the money, he faced losing everything. The host's brother gave the visitor the full amount and he left without further incident. No one from the *diwaniyya* has ever heard anything from this man again.

At another renowned *diwaniyya* that Bilal visits, the host is a local landlord who owns several properties in the area. One evening, Bilal stopped by to briefly catch up with some of the regular guests who he knew would be assembled. At some point, a man from the Levant, possibly *bilad al-sham*, entered the *diwaniyya* and presented himself to

the host. This visitor rented an apartment from the host and he had fallen behind by two months on his payments. Right there, in front of everyone, the renter begged the host to forgive his debt, to think of the family that he has to feed, and to let him start over fresh with a new beginning. The host nodded his head and conceded to his tenant's request to expunge the outstanding balance. At the conclusion of this scene, the proprietor insisted that his renter remain at the *diwaniyya* so that he might take a serving of tea with the all the other guests.

Case Study Number 4.4: Camaraderie in the *Diwaniyya*:
The Pastimes of Youth¹⁸⁹

Every year, countless Kuwaiti students travel abroad to pursue degrees and academic credentials. Thus, it is hardly exceptional that Jalal spent his entire undergraduate career in the United States where he specialized in architecture at the University of Kansas. While there, he befriended several other Kuwaitis who were studying in the same department. After he graduated, Jalal returned to Kuwait and started working for a private engineering conglomerate. However, he never lost contact with his former classmates; some completed their education at the same time as Jalal, and moved back into the country and into the job market when he did, whereas others made their way home at a later date.

Initially, once in Kuwait, Jalal and his fellow alumni began meeting weekly at a *diwaniyya* hosted by the brother of one of his schoolmates. This arrangement did not last long because Jalal's group felt that they lacked any bonds with the other participants.

¹⁸⁹ This narrative is based on observations and interviews held at the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya* on July 12, 2006. Two interviews with guest Samer were conducted away from the guestroom on July 8, 2006, and July 13, 2006.

The graduates, with their newly minted diplomas, wanted to rejuvenate the camaraderie that united them in their previous experiences overseas and this *diwaniyya* could never fill that yearning for them. So, they agreed that they would convene regularly at the guestroom in Jalal's family's house, a decision that marked the birth of the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya*.

Jalal's *diwaniyya* met for only a short period before it outgrew his family's household. Rapidly, it expanded its ranks to include more Western-educated workplace colleagues who had professional training similar to that of Jalal and his original cast of cohorts. To accommodate this increase, and to relieve his family from any more of the nighttime outbursts that are a common feature of his congregations, Jalal moved his *diwaniyya* to a prefabricated building that was constructed exclusively for this purpose adjacent to the family home.¹⁹⁰ Costing roughly 10,000 KD (U.S. \$35,000.00), Jalal's parents shouldered most of the outlay so that no expense was spared: granite tiles, glass basins, carpets, and a humongous flat screen television. Furthermore, Jalal's mother and father are supportive of his *diwaniyya* because, like so many parents in Kuwait, they are comforted by the peace of mind that comes with knowing exactly where their son is in the evenings.

The nature of interaction at the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya* is deliberately informal and it readily dismisses the ceremonial luster that exemplifies the behaviors found in more established *diwaniyyat*. Noticeably, salutations are circulated without any fanfare, clothing is a mix of *dishdashas* and Western casual wear, and two guests usually sit glued

¹⁹⁰ Jalal admits that this is technically illegal because it is a structure that is unattached to the main household. However, this technicality is often ignored since it is rarely enforced. What mattered for Jalal was gaining the permission of his neighbors so that his family would not be reported to the municipal authorities. To secure their consent, Jalal agreed that his *diwaniyya* would not have any windows on the side facing his neighbor's property.

to the latest version of FIFA Soccer for the Sony PlayStation. In sharp contrast to the family *diwaniyyat* or traditional guesthouses, there are no seating arrangements according to status or age, nor are there any domestic servants to tend to the guests; and the host, Jalal, scarcely commands any distinctive courtesies. If anything, some families are wary of their sons' nocturnal habits at Jalal's *diwaniyya* due to the inexistence of any kinship ties that would inform them of the type of people that Jalal comes from.

Yet, this is the precise rationale that inspired the formation of the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya*: a mutual expatriate encounter coupled with an occupational cohesion that could not be contained by local categories. So, it is quite normal to find Jalal and his guests getting together at the *diwaniyya* to relive their days in United States by watching American football games or keeping track of NBA scores. Simultaneously, though, for those who are fixtures at the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya*, the work-related concerns that they share are an added source of unity that can offer empathy following bad days, provide information and prospects on job vacancies, and give guidance and suggestions for overcoming any assortment of professional difficulties.

Case Number 4: Discussion

The circumstances that brought Isa and Aziz, the junior engineers, as well as the conditions that conspired to gather Yousef, Fou'ad, and Zayd, the respective nephew, pupil, and professor, are relatively straightforward: the need for intercessory patronage to “weave in and out of the bureaucracy, the offices of politicians... workplaces... [and] schools... in order to fulfill individual and collective needs” (Singerman 2006:17). For Isa and Aziz, the habitually elusive permissions required for construction projects (Herb

2009:386-387) necessitated a personal appeal to the MP responsible for blocking their firm's venture. This sort of errand is not an unknown practice for lobbyists who must turn to those MPs who operate the so-called *khudamat* guestrooms or simply "services." Mary Ann Tetreault's observations about this kind of politician are succinct and to the point: bureaucratic favors are exchanged for votes with constituents who cannot navigate the administrative channels on their own (2000:115). What can be added to Tetreault's synopsis is that Isa and Aziz, like so many solicitors, found that their quest for favors led them directly to the nighttime facility where their claims would be given more careful consideration: a service *diwaniyya*.

Fou'ad's situation also led him to a *diwaniyya* as he tried to salvage a grade that would allow him to complete his accounting diploma. Unlike Isa and Aziz, though, Fou'ad's networking took him on circuitous route through a friend and to that friend's uncle, two contacts who could not be further from the typical *diwaniyya* regulars. In spite of this, a *diwaniyya* was still chosen as the site where Fou'ad would resolve his dilemma. For Fou'ad, Yousef, and Professor Zayd, the *diwaniyya* provided a familiar, reassuring location that alleviated any misgivings or anxieties that the parties may have been harboring. The *diwaniyya*, as a location, afforded each of the participants with some feeling of security since the whole engagement would transpire in a predictable setting (Goffman 1959:92, 95) with commonplace conventions (North 2004:6, 25, 34-36). Moreover, the neutrality of the venue was enhanced by the absence of any host – guest asymmetry (Oldenburg 1999:xvii) that, when combined with gifts and favors on the part of the former, can imply the latter's inferiority, helplessness, and indebtedness (Abu-Zahra 1974:126-127).

Bilal's stories of hospitality in the upper echelons of Kuwait's *diwaniyyat* are insightful for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is that the public does not hold all guestrooms in the same regard. Just as Richard Antoun discovered with the guesthouses (*madafa*) in Kufr al-Mar, Jordan, some *dawawin* can be classed as "first rank" for their beneficence (1979:42), the quality of guests they can attract (Benedict 1974:38), and for their hosts' repute within the community (Antoun 1972:106). With an esteemed guestroom like Bilal's family's *diwaniyya*, the host's reputation for generosity is critical if he is to reaffirm his own claims of social worth and the *noblesse oblige* that his renown rests upon (Edwards 1996:67). Although this exposes the host to the risks of negative reciprocity if his charity is willfully manipulated to weaken his position (Rosenfeld 1974:151) or to gain concessions that would otherwise be refused without an audience, it avoids a shameful refusal (Deshen 1984:215) due to expectations that are analogous to those of the privileged households depicted by Vom Bruck in northern Yemen where patronage is a prerequisite for those families that wish to have their high rank recognized by others (1999:154). Among some of Kuwait's elites, this price is negligible since dispensing patronage and "feeding the people" (Anderson 1978:182) in the *diwaniyya* still stand as hallmarks of social legitimacy.

The Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya* represents a visible departure from the usual standards of hosting and hospitality in the guestrooms of Kuwait City. Primarily, it deviates from the adult male-oriented *diwaniyya* and all of the supervision, deferential displays, and *tahashsham* (modest or controlled behaviors) that the presence of one's elders demands (Abu-Lughod 1999:108, 112-113). Thus, in the milieu of the prototypical *diwaniyya* with its mixture of senior and junior attendees,

... [Young] men have less autonomy and must defer to senior men like their fathers, uncles, lineage elders, elder male cousins, and older male in-laws, those men who represent the patricentered system's interests and have authority over them. That is, young men must *tahashsham* too; they must do many of the same things that women must do in front of senior men -- like refraining from smoking, talking, and laughing and avoiding any mention of love or sexuality. [Abu-Lughod 1986:164]

In Jalal's *diwaniyya*, though, any mode of respect based on age-sequencing is missing from the candor that animates its late-night activities, and this is one plausible explanation for why these youth *diwaniyyat* are frowned upon with such disapproval by the country's patriarchy. Yet, it is the inescapable component of dislocation among the participants of the Jalal Al Nafisi *Diwaniyya* that is immediately evident: each member's extended educational sojourn imparted a sense of "chronic uprootedness" (Levi-Strauss 1961:58) that the attendees hope to remedy by reveling in the nostalgia of their times abroad. Unsatisfied with conventional *diwaniyyat*, Jalal and his companions share a bond of temporary expatriation that cannot be too different from Salman Rushdie's own reflections on displacement: "[We] are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times we fall between two stools" (1991:15).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This study started with the very basic objective to understand why Kuwaiti men choose to visit any number of the country's countless guestrooms. At a superficial level, it is quite possible to imagine these *diwaniyyat* as vestigial institutions that have been transferred from some moment in Kuwait's distant pre-oil past to populate its current postpetroleum urban landscape (Al-Naser 2001:6). With the disappearance of so many analogous institutional forms in the Middle East during the latter half of the 20th century, due to mixed combinations of political, economic (Khalaf 2000:114-115), and social changes (Antoun 2000:452), it is not difficult to see the *diwaniyyat* as historical anomalies that have defied the odds to persist well into the present era. This fragility of *diwaniyya*-like establishments in the contemporary Arabic-speaking world was witnessed by Richard Antoun who, when reflecting on waning numbers of *madafas* in Kufr al-Mar, Jordan from 1960 to 1986, concluded that, "The weakening of kinship ties, the decline in multiplexity, and the development of differences in social status have taken their toll on the guest house" (2000:452). Undoubtedly, this same mixture of transformative elements can be said to apply to Kuwait in the context of its postpetroleum existence (Al-Naser 1986:1-3). Yet, while guestrooms in other communities have withered under the pressures of modernity and a variety of changing circumstances, the *diwaniyyat* of

Kuwait have not only endured but proliferated to a point of unimaginable ubiquity across its cityscape.

The simplest explanation for the survival of the *diwaniyyat* is that the structural causes that have eliminated comparable guesthouses elsewhere cannot be applied to Kuwait. An obvious distinction is that whereas most previous academic efforts have focused on the mechanisms of hospitality, power and influence in rural guestrooms,¹⁹¹ the *diwaniyyat* have long existed in a metropolitan environment and have been tightly intertwined with the apparatuses of official governance.¹⁹² So, the economic and political realignments that Barth saw in the Swat Valley that redirected local investment and authority towards the cities to undercut the village men's houses (1966:16-17), or the introduction of outside wage-earning opportunities for landless peasants that Kanaana viewed as detrimental to the continuation of Palestinian landlords' *diwans* (1975:10-11), have no parallel in the developmental track that laid the foundations for today's Kuwaiti *diwaniyyat*. Nor has Kuwait faced anything like the planned political displacements that unseated rural elites who were unnecessary, or even a dangerous challenge, to the logics of new regimes; a process Sulayman Khalaf recounts for Syria at the outset of its

¹⁹¹ For a sample of some of this scholarship, there is Antoun's aforementioned work in Jordan (1972, 1979, 2000); David Edwards' inclusion of the Pakhtun guesthouses in his monograph on Afghanistan (1996); Fredrik Barth's Pakhtun men's houses in the Swat Valley (1966, 1972); the Turkish depictions provided by Paul Stirling (1966) and mentioned by Barbara Aswad (1967); and the *diwankhanas* in Edmund Leach's (1940), Fredrik Barth's (1953), and William Masters' (1954) analyses of Iraqi Kurdistan. Van Nieuwenhuijze, in a generalized portrait of "typical" village life in the region, even included guesthouses as an expected characteristic of rural communities across the Middle East (1962:298-299).

¹⁹² This does not mean that participants, particularly hosts, in rural guesthouses are detached from broader political processes. As Robert Fernea correctly points out, tribal authority in southern Iraq often depended on a shaykh's abilities to mediate with state functionaries on the behalf of his fellow tribesmen, and it was not uncommon for these negotiations to occur within a *mudhif*. However, moving past these local officials to higher-level authorities was more infrequent (1970:20, 53). With so many resources, political and material, located in urban centers (Chaichian 2009:17), formerly it was possible for enterprising men of influence from the countryside to simply relocate to cities to expand their range of contacts and improve their positions vis-à-vis their petitioners (Lancaster 1997:81-82, 116). For the members of Kuwait's *hadhar* merchant class, the physical proximity of their *diwaniyyat* to the powerbrokers of the regime has never been problematic.

Ba'athist transition: "Populist socialist policies touched on the material base of cotton shaykhs and wealthy lineage heads and politically marginalised them from meaningful participation in the political process. For some shaykhly families the downfall of their position was dramatic" (2000:116). Not surprisingly, once Syria's provincial "cotton shaykhs" were rendered politically impotent, their *madafas* became little more than nostalgic reminders of their lost dominance (Khalaf 2000:116) in a manner that is strikingly similar to the irrelevance of village landowners' *diwans* in Palestine in the years after 1948:

The former landlords, however, continue to keep the *diwan* open, the coffee hot and ready, and the whole routine intact, as if the village men and the guests are about to arrive – but neither the village men nor the guests do any more... because the landlords have lost all the leadership functions which used to attract the village men and the other guests to their *diwan*. Only members of this class still play the game by the old definitions: they treat each other as chiefs and leaders, and hold unreal conversations about topics that are irrelevant in terms of space, time or even function – about chiefs, emirs, or kings from the past, about their exploits in raids against other tribes, their generosity to their guests, their courage, and amusing anecdotes about their experiences. [Kanaana 1975:11]

However, this type of disenchantment, that of an undermined, disaffected class of nobles when there is a disruption to the administrative status quo, is actually contrary to the Al Sabah's style of management. From the time that Kuwait's first oil revenues were collected, co-optation and appeasement have all but been forced upon the prehydrocarbon notables (Crystal 1995b:76-77), whether these were tribal luminaries from the desert or merchant patricians settled in the town (Gause 1994:54). Hence, the *diwaniyyat* were not impelled to become outmoded relics symbolic of an obsolete aristocracy mired in political disfavor; instead, they were able to evolve into the country's post-oil emblems of

social grandeur.¹⁹³

As a matter of fact, both oral and published accounts confirm that almost as soon as the petroleum-enriched national treasury grew and the state's distributive apparatuses began disbursing its rents, the *diwaniyya* was rapidly adopted (Al-Naser 2001:10-12; Abdullah 1995:30-32)¹⁹⁴ by Kuwait's emerging class of salaried public servants. With the pre-rent relationship between the government and the elite preserved, if not solidified to an even greater degree, after the proceeds from the initial oil boom began to accrue (Gray 2011:12), the institutional legitimacy (Dacin et al. 2002:46-47) of the *diwaniyyat* was not threatened by power shifts towards "new organizational forms" (Rao et al. 2000:249). Thus, the guestrooms, the pre-oil "signs of position" (Goffman 1951:304), were readily appropriated by the civil service bourgeoisie (Leys 1965:228) of the rentier nation to convey "the ideal of enlightened consumption" (Grier 1988:94). Just as being a person of standing in Kuwait before petroleum exports necessitated taking part in men's hosting and visiting circuits (Al-Naser 2000:7), with the exception of the poor seeking alms or other kinds of support,¹⁹⁵ the rentier incarnation of the *diwaniyya* can oftentimes

¹⁹³ Andrew Shryock makes an interesting observation about the sometimes contentious move from the past into the present for a *diwan* in Jordan. A man who has preserved his standing, Shaykh Sa'ud, seems to celebrate, or objectify, his own continuity by outfitting his *diwan* according to two halves that represent this transition: a "Bedouin authentic" (1997:53) section and a contemporary half, both of which send the message to all visitors that, "I am Sa'ud Mani' Abu l-'Amash. Inheritor of two worlds, master of each" (1997:54). This same impression is difficult to escape in many of the *diwaniyyat* of established families in Kuwait where dhow and baghlah models might signify a merchant lineage's guestroom, or parlor murals of village scenes from Failaka Island or the Al-Hasa skyline in Saudi Arabia can be proud pronouncements of their hosts' pedigrees. Like in Shryock's example, though, these declarations of the past sit adjacent to modern conveniences: flat screen televisions, Western furnishings, and entertainment centers. Not unexpectedly, upstart *diwaniyyat* appear to frequently lack such ancestral décor with its historical confirmations.

¹⁹⁴ Abd Aziz. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on October 26, 2007. Ahmad. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 28, 2007. Yousef. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 2, 2006.

¹⁹⁵ A. B. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 4, 2007.

carry the connotations as the place where “decision makers,”¹⁹⁶ “family power,”¹⁹⁷ and “respect”¹⁹⁸ all converge. Simultaneously, though, it must not be overlooked that the popularization of these parlors has, in the eyes of some, diluted their former pretenses as Kuwait’s premier institutions.¹⁹⁹ Of course, the means for this mass hospitality and the leisure required to pursue it on such a remarkable scale have only been feasible because of the regime’s allocative welfare schemes²⁰⁰ coupled with its relatively relaxed attitude regarding private gatherings (Tetreault 2000:61-62).

Clearly, as briefly outlined, modernity has a plurality (Englund and Leach 2000:225-226) that is neither inherently facilitatory nor inhibiting for guestrooms; rather, the precept that “global modernity is often reproduced as local diversity” (Sahlins 1993:2) suitably shows that what decimated the closest correlates of the *diwaniyya*, sites like the abovementioned *madafas* and *diwans*, is woefully inapplicable to the case of Kuwait. Yet, the institutional durability of the *diwaniyya* and its continued vitality into the present-day is in no way an indication of it being a static, unaltered curiosity (Gluckman 1968:221-223) left over from the age of seafaring mercantilism. Today, what were sanctuaries of exclusivity share the field with establishments that range from the

¹⁹⁶ Hanan. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 30, 2006.

¹⁹⁷ E. A. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 3, 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Reyadh. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on July 5, 2006.

¹⁹⁹ This sentiment is expressed in various ways. One occasional host of a guestroom was dismissive of smaller establishments, claiming that: “They do not represent the *diwaniyya*... They do not belong to the big families. They are not real *diwaniyya*. They are small, they do not have history” (Fahad A. N. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on November 4, 2010). Another man, an intermittent guest, was forthright with his and his uncle’s mocking dismissal of “middle class” *diwaniyyat* for what they deemed to be second-rate hospitality (Tahir A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007). Comments like these almost echo Erving Goffman’s thoughts on the flows of status symbols between social groupings: “As a result of the circulation symbols, however, a sign which is expressive for the class in which it originates comes to be employed by a different class – a class for which the symbol can signify status but ill express it” (1951:304).

²⁰⁰ Ahmad A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 28, 2007.

humble to the palatial and exhibit gradations of parochialism and inclusiveness.²⁰¹ Still, acknowledging that it is a very specific state of affairs and mannerisms²⁰² that has permitted Kuwait's *diwaniyyat* to flourish after the influx of oil monies does not explain why these parlors keep attracting visitors through their doors on a nightly basis. The argument proffered by this research is that the Kuwaiti welfare system has provided another reason, either intended or inadvertent (Bill and Springborg 2000:14-18), for men to vigorously socialize and cultivate contacts: a swollen, over-staffed, underperforming bureaucracy in which personal references are far more persuasive (Farah 1989:111) than formal tenets (Weber 1964:343) or notions of procedural impartiality (Rothstein and Teorell 2008:170). The premise here is that guestrooms within this rentier climate of rampant patronage can accommodate supplicants and benefactors by straddling the "culture / state nexus" (Steinmetz 1999:3) and collapsing the two into a coherent network of interpersonal exchanges (De Sardan 1999:41).

Guestrooms for Bureaucrats

One of the more commonly held misconceptions about rentier nations is that when governments' depend on external sources of revenue that do not tap into their citizenries' personal budgets, a wedge is formed that serves to distance the populations from the workings of statecraft (Gray 2001:1-6). The alleged result of this fiscal independence for the state is that it is freed from any expectations that it will be held accountable its public (Ross 2001:332-333). Plainly put, the rentier government's message to its citizenry is clear: "Instead of 'no taxation without representation,' the

²⁰¹ Tahir A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

²⁰² Ahmad A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 28, 2007.

rentier state says ‘no representation without taxation’” (Okruhlik 1999:296). This is the lack of political responsiveness, which is nothing more than a poorly conceived derivative of economic autonomy, that is presumed to define all of the rentier state’s interactions with its respective social actors (Rosser 2006:20-21). Fortunately, scholars are gradually beginning to move away from this reductionist stance (Gray 2011:10), with its reliance on “the size and nature of countries’ natural resource endowments” (Rosser 2006:7), as a comprehensive breakdown of how states and societies are supposed to encounter each other in rentier economies.²⁰³ Part of this revisionism demands the inclusion of local specificities (Gray 2011:12) precisely like the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya* for its role as a “bridging institution” (Furger 2001:219) that is as much a piece of the country’s social fabric as it is an extension of the state, albeit informally with intermittent monitoring and policing by the regime to ensure that the guestrooms stay within their legal limits (Redman 2012:38-39).²⁰⁴

A substantial component of this dynamic, the proposition that Kuwait’s guestrooms are more firmly bound to the government’s maneuverings than they might casually appear, entails a careful evaluation of what the state’s presence in Kuwaiti society translates into for everyday practices (Gupta and Sharma 2006:278-279). This is not to discount the already known occurrences of politicians using these parlors to reach their constituents during the election cycles for national or municipal offices (Stephenson

²⁰³ Recent studies by Michael Herb (1999, 2002, 2009), Steffen Hertog (2005, 2007, 2010b, 2011), and Gwenn Okruhlik (1999) exemplify this new direction in rentier thought. Also, Matthew Gray (2011) traces this transition from what he terms the “‘Classical’ Rentier State Theory” of the 1980s and 1990s to contemporary “Second Phase” and “Third Phase” adjustments to rentier theory.

²⁰⁴ The most common policing seems take place during elections to prevent guestrooms from hosting illegal primaries.

2011:188).²⁰⁵ Yet, these “service candidates” with their self-styled “service *diwaniyyat*”²⁰⁶ are the numerical exceptions to the many thousands of guestrooms that fill the country’s neighborhoods. So, to refine how access to the state and its resources is arranged for an ordinary petitioner with a routine request, attention has to be devoted to the company held within the walls of the sundry, run-of-the-mill parlors.²⁰⁷ With these guestroom stipulations in mind and turning to the state, from a day-to-day perspective it is hardly an exaggeration to label the Kuwaiti governmental framework as pervasive. A portion of its all-encompassing portfolio of benefits for citizens includes free educational opportunities, health services, public pensions, insurance, loan forgiveness, marriage funds, utility subsidies, housing awards, and periodic Emiri grants for discretionary spending. To this limited sample of individual privileges it can be added that infrastructural projects, a sovereign wealth fund, monetary transfers to civil institutions, private sector subsidization, and low or interest-free corporate loans (El-Katiri et al. 2011:6-24) are further indicative of the state’s societal entrenchment via its “paternal largess” (Hertog 2011:3).

However, demonstrating the Kuwaiti government’s “embeddedness” (Granovetter 1985:493) by way of its bestowments to the citizenry is only a partial picture of where state and society intersect. A key claim of this analysis is that reifying the mere existence of welfare without due consideration for its channels of distribution is a simplistic and very myopic interpretation of the realities of allocative rentierism. In actuality, the regime’s massive employment of its nationals in order to pay out additional rents (El-

²⁰⁵ It should be recalled that such formal politicking is itself is a complex of techniques that can involve anything from participatory politics to outright regime-backed patronage for some candidates (Tetreault 2000:115).

²⁰⁶ Tahir A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

²⁰⁷ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on February 25, 2007.

Katiri et al. 2011:19-20) and “use... bureaucratic employment as a patronage resource” (Hertog 2011:5) has placed much of the daily functioning of the state directly into the hands of its citizens. While it is true that the dynastic Al Sabah family has systematically monopolized the highest ranks of government (Herb 1999:8, 30, 68-69), the tangible operation of the state and the processing, hindering, and hastening of the regime’s entitlements is left to the populous. It is therefore reasonable in this synthesis of Kuwait’s rentier machinery that if the state’s entry into society is precipitated by virtue of its welfare practices (Horn 1988:403), and creating dependencies over time (Hertog 2011:4-5), there is a counterbalance that has been fueled by society’s encroachment into the state that is a result of almost all employed Kuwaitis serving in some bureaucratic capacity (El-Katiri et al. 2011:19). By this contention what is revealed is not a state “above and beyond the social world” (Pieke 2004:518) as an aggregate entity (Gupta 1995:393)²⁰⁸ that mysteriously funnels rents to the populous. The reality is a complicated state-society interchange in which capital is supplied entirely by the government (Salem 2007:9-10) while its circulation is controlled and directed by an immense public bureaucracy.

The byproducts of this administrative model with its emphasis on wealth sharing and the “proliferation of sinecure or luxury employment” (Nagi 1982:190) for all citizens are multifaceted to say the least. Seen from an organizational standpoint, this employment policy has led to a “flabby” (Hertog 2011:5), uncoordinated bureaucracy (Eifert et al. 2003) noted for its low levels of productivity, widespread inefficiencies (El-Katiri et al. 2011:21), and regulatory redundancy (Hertog 2011:95). Again, many of

²⁰⁸ This approach is a hallmark of traditional rentier thinking that “work mostly with macro-aggregates such as ‘state,’ ‘society,’ or ‘business’” (Hertog 2011:3).

these bureaucratic ineptitudes are tied to the minimal qualifications needed to fill posts (Abdalla and Al-Homoud 2012:10) designed to satisfy the delivery of rents instead of meeting public necessities, which Michael Herb describes below:

The paychecks that Gulf citizens receive from jobs held in the public sector are nominally tied to services rendered, but their pay might better be thought of as a monthly disbursement from the national trust fund. Politics and the price of oil in world markets, rather than local labor markets, determine the size of stipends paid to citizens. The number of citizens hired by the government is driven not by government need for employees but instead by the supply of citizens, with most new entrants to the job market receiving a position. [2009:382]

When all of these public sector traits are combined with a standard of employment security that is unlinked to job performance (Abdalla and Al-Homoud 2012:5, 10), the delays and lags that accompany this leviathan bureaucracy have come to be an expected nuisance of doing business with the state.²⁰⁹

Nonetheless, the same features of the Kuwaiti bureaucracy that make it seem so cumbersome have endowed it with incredible latitude for flexibility. Particularly, the unrealistic and often criticized (Jaffe 1973:1186-1187) Weberian conventions of rationalized civil service efficiency that isolates bureaucratic actions inside a “clearly defined sphere of competence subject to impersonal rules” (Weber 1964:343) are completely invalid for Kuwait.²¹⁰ Once weak managerial oversight (Vandewalle 1998:27) and ambiguous departmental goals are affixed to lax hiring protocols and administrative bloat (Al-Dekhayel 2000:90-91), the possibilities for the “individuation of action” (Hoag 2011:82) are left open hidden behind a thick veil of bureaucratic incoherence (Hoag 2010:7, 9-10). Thus, weaving through this maze of tangled bureaus typically requires that petitioners “develop strategies to ingratiate themselves with [state]

²⁰⁹ Faisal. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 3, 2007.

²¹⁰ Kuwait is not special in this regard and it is doubtful that Weber’s ideals about how a bureaucracy should function can be reflected in any country’s administrative frameworks.

workers” (Lipsky 2010:9), and in Kuwait the method of this ingratiation is by familial and social bonds. Knowing someone, generating face-to-face or secondary “friends of friends” (Boissevain 1974:3) as contacts, otherwise known locally as *wasta*, can alone mean the difference between “excessive bureaucratic inflexibility, sluggishness, and bungling” (Werlin 1972:249) and ministerial satisfaction.²¹¹ To give an example of *wasta*’s applicability to a broad spectrum of affairs, Sa’eda Kilani and Basem Sakijha provide a good synopsis of its manifestations in Jordan that is equally suitable for Kuwait:

Wasta intervention permeates every decision point in life – entry into higher education, obtaining a job or promotion, importation of goods, passports, and licenses, disputes with other citizens, and accusations of law-breaking. Each of these domains is covered by formal rules, but Wasta involvement expands the range of possibilities for outcomes of various Wasta situations. [2002:32]

For the most part, this should not be taken to imply that these are strict, asymmetrical patron-client relationships (Wolf 1966b:86-87) or even balanced exchanges with finite expectations for repayments (Sahlins 1981:195).²¹² Primarily, *wasta* bureaucratic favors in Kuwait are comprised of interpersonal obligations that are customary and habitual (Ledeneva 1998:4), executed to forge, reinforce, and maintain social alliances (Mauss 1954:70-72). Since the material costs are absorbed at the expense of the state (Ledeneva 2000:190) and other supplicants (Kilani and Sakijha 2002:33), the central resource being sought is the access and information needed to circumvent the administrative red tape that extends all the way across the municipalities, the state offices, and the ministries (Hertog 2005:130).

²¹¹ Khalid A. R. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 22, 2009.

²¹² The exceptions to this mode of exchange are, of course, the “service deputies” who support the regime in return for constituent patronage (Herb 2002:43).

This is the colossal administrative backdrop, joining bureaucratic authority in superfluous departments with the “self-interested invocations of the law by state functionaries” (Hoag 2010:7), that results in the public sector illegibility (Das 2007:172) that contextualizes the purpose of this study posed at the beginning of this chapter: Why do Kuwaiti men visit the *diwaniyyat*? The answer lies in the replies that Kuwaitis volunteered whenever the topic of the *diwaniyyat* was raised. Invariably, these responses were centered on the guestrooms’ association with *wasta* connections and the politics of favoritism.²¹³ Likewise, it was scarcely unusual for an intimate exchange about *wasta* to eventually lead to explanatory tales of guestroom collusions; either relating to firsthand, immediate involvements or anecdotal presumptions about the sources of someone else’s fortunes.²¹⁴ Yet, these stories of patronage in men’s parlors are easily lost when they are detached from the transpositions of state and society that occur so regularly under the implicit provisions of Kuwait’s rentier contract. It is for this reason that the pathways of power in Kuwait have to be clarified to give substance to all that guestroom *wasta* embodies and why it is so essential. This means always including in the discussion such rentier characteristics as the unequal parceling of rents (Okruhlik 1999:299-300) and the personalization of official agencies (Field 1985:95-96). In other words, because *wasta* is such a considerable facet of *diwaniyya* life, and local *wasta* and state institutions are almost always moored to each other (Hertog 2005:130), to ignore or understate the nature of Kuwaiti rentierism is to miss the key rationale that underpins the utility of the personal connections fostered in these guestrooms.

²¹³ Farah. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 27, 2006.

²¹⁴ Tahir. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 24, 2007.

It would be cynical and mistaken, though, to categorically file the transactions that take place in the *diwaniyyat* as overt, rent-seeking behavior (Yates 1996:22). More often than not, hosts and attendees are engaged in a fluctuating assortment of socializing agendas that mirror their predispositions for companionship – tribal, *hadhari*, political, social, professional, and familial interests.²¹⁵ In spite of this, these parlors are still instrumental for accelerating the bureaucratic process or bypassing it altogether. This is because *wasta* is the currency of these social relationships; it is the expectation of “helping out” and the mutual assistance that is given during times of need (Joseph 1990:155); it is “not a relationship for the sake of exchange but an exchange for the sake of a relationship” (Ledeneva 2000:184). To be clear, *wasta* is an advantageous association that is capable of yielding resources (Joseph 1990:144) but it is not the actual return itself (Portes 1998:5). Activating bureaucratic *wasta* in Kuwait can be as much about fervently searching for needed contacts as utilizing the “moral and emotional content” (Joseph 1990:144) of extant relationships that, due to the nation’s high rate of public employment (El-Katiri et al. 2011:19), make it plausible that nearly everyone already knows a civil servant.²¹⁶ In terms of guestroom rapport, irrespective of the primary motives that one might harbor for visiting, the fact that Kuwaiti men are getting together automatically increases the likelihood that administrative *wasta* is somewhere in the room.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Anonymous. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on June 27, 2006.

²¹⁶ This is just as true for actors in the private market provided the sector’s heavy subsidization by the government (El-Katiri et al. 2011:20-21) and the state’s unwieldy contractual requirements (Herb 2009:386-387).

²¹⁷ Furthermore, it was found that *wasta* does not have to be restricted to those in attendance at a guestroom. Several *diwaniyyat* hosts kept updated lists and computer rosters of visitors’ family members that included information about their jobs, spouses, and children, and these directories could be consulted for assistance or to reach out during life-cycle events. On one occasion when a member was contemplating a political campaign, the host sent a servant to fetch the register so that they could search for anyone who

What must be remembered is that Kuwait's *wasta* trails can inevitably be traced back to state-sourced rewards (Hertog 2005:130) that are the calculable dividends of these relationships after these benefits have entered into the social capital of families, friendships, and acquaintances. In this sense, the activities of the state and its workings have become incorporated into the social milieu of interpersonal attachments (Chung and Hamilton 2001:329-335) to give some semblance of predictability to an erratic administration and lend personal credentials to its "abstract rules" (Joseph 1990:144). For men, the *diwaniyyat* that are spread throughout Kuwait represent the sites where the tendencies for socialization and gaining privileged bureaucratic information are consolidated under the banner of congeniality. This socializing mostly revolves around the economies of "good-faith" (Bourdieu 1990:114-115, 119) that come with closeness and trust, thereby devoid of explicit requisites for compensation (Wolf 1966a:10-13). However, social climbers and statesmen with a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1990:66) do appropriate this same cachet of guestroom hospitality for their own individual aims.²¹⁸ The clout of the parlors comes from concentrating these obligations of familiarity with the "honest graft" of bureaucratic insiders (Riordon 1905:3-10) along a blurred continuum of altruism and manipulation (De Sardan 1999:34-35)²¹⁹ to fabricate the state's allocations into socially traded, personalized handiworks.

might carry votes, influence, or be interested in advising the prospective contender. Observations recorded at Anonymous *Diwaniyya* on July 23, 2006.

²¹⁸ Youssef A. M. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 27, 2007.

²¹⁹ Ali A. K. Interview conducted in Kuwait City, Kuwait on March 16, 2008.

Directions for Further Study: Towards an Anthropology of
Gulf Rentierism?

Any cursory review of the ethnographic literature on Kuwait will find that it is extraordinarily thin and sparse.²²⁰ While there are no compelling reasons as to why this is the case, it is disappointing considering the country's meteoric rise from an impoverished coastal township to a resource-rich metropolis in the span of only a few years. Certainly, there have been sporadic attempts in the decades since the country's oil started flowing into world markets to rehabilitate this shortcoming.²²¹ Nevertheless, as helpful and insightful as these contributions are,²²² the bulk of this research has been conducted by political scientists, economists, historians, and area specialists, not anthropologists. Although these studies fill a significant knowledge gap, many are limited in their ability to shed light on Kuwaiti social life owing to their focus on "macro-outcomes" (Hertog 2010b:284) or their conflation of the "macro, meso and micro" (Hertog 2011:266). The multitudes of divergences that occur between national institutions, societal groups, and individual actors remain largely unexplored.

²²⁰ Qualifying this lack of anthropological research about Kuwait is most easily accomplished by the simple task of attempting to locate these materials. Presently, any discipline-specific search on Kuwait will not yield many results. To place this in perspective, a keyword search for "Kuwait" in the titles or abstracts of the 93 anthropological journals stored with the online database JSTOR returned only seven results dating back to 1950 (Recovered from <http://www.jstor.org> on September 14, 2012). Using the exact same search parameters with another online resource, the American Anthropological Association's AnthroSource, produced just two articles from its 32 available journals (Recovered from <http://www.anthrosource.net> on September 14, 2012). Similarly, a search of paper titles with the term "Kuwait" at the American Anthropological Association's 2008 and 2011 meetings located two presentations, while a title and abstract search of the 2008 and 2009 meeting programs found only the author's paper (Recovered from <http://www.aaanet.org/meetings/program/> on September 14, 2012). Ruud Strijp's two volume bibliographic set on Middle East cultural anthropology finds 26 articles and three monographs about Kuwait published between 1965 and 1992 (1992:252, 392, 428; 1997:24, 135). Although this does not account for anthropological work that is transmitted through other academic channels, like regionally-focused publications and conferences, it does denote a conspicuous shortfall within the general anthropological media.

²²¹ To get an idea about Kuwait before it was transformed by oil revenues there are the eyewitness accounts by British Political Agent H. R. P. Dickson (1949, 1956) and Alan Villiers (1948, 1969, 2006), as well as the historical primary documents analyzed by B. J. Slot et al. (1991, 2003).

²²² Some of these works include those by Anh Nga Longva (1997, 2006), Attiya Ahmad (2012), Peter Lienhardt (1993), and Sulayman Khalaf (1992, 2008).

Some portion of the responsibility for these omissions must be put on the assumptions that are presumed to be a part of rentier theory itself. At the heart of this quandary is the stress that rentier thought places upon the macro effects that externally-derived rents (Okruhlik 1999:295) are expected to produce for economic and political systems (Krause 2009:4). The problem is not that the rents obtained from nonproductive economic activities cannot be found to have consequences – it is self-evident that they do. Instead, rentier theory has placed far too much emphasis on the economy as the driver of oil states (Okruhlik 1999:296) and the societies within them (Gray 2011:17). This is what may be called rentierism’s “structural / statist” (Moore 2002:36) approach that is loaded with serious drawbacks when it comes to grasping the nuances of rentier societies. Take, for instance, one of rentierism’s more dubious notions: that state and society are effectively segregated when the government is economically self-sufficient. When this prospect has warranted a reexamination, it is often within the purview of formal institutional politics like Kuwait’s National Assembly (Gray 2011:6, 11) with scant regard given to the “everydayness” of the state’s welfare structures for its residents. Or, there is the related viewpoint that, “The role of the distributive system is not to adjust an existing distribution of income but, rather, to ensure that all Kuwaitis gain from oil rents” (El-Katiri et al. 2011:27). The concern here is that this broad perspective tells very little about how the state’s petroleum monies are sent back to the populous aside from the state’s regulatory initiatives that, as documented here, are by no means guarantees for fulfillment or even suggestive of equitable disbursement (Okruhlik 1999:299-300).

The main issue is a twofold dilemma. On the one hand, rentierism was expanded beyond its capabilities for scrutinizing the “effects of oil rent and remittances on the

relative strength of the state and the private sector” (Chaudhry 1989:111) to become used as an economic predictor of how socialization and societal habits transpire in rentier nations. Illustrative of these inclinations are the tired, exhausted themes that posit the existence of a distinct mindset for populations of rentier states, a “rentier mentality” that discourages personal ingenuity (Yates 1996:22) and encourages a blind dependency on the government. This rendering of rentierism relies heavily on the belief that in these countries, “Reward – income or wealth – is not related to work and risk bearing” (Beblawi 1990:88). Hence, rentier citizenries are basically “bought off” (Gray 2011:6), depoliticized and made acquiescent by regime spending strategies (Ross 2001:332-335, 347-349), to become the pacified recipients of government rents or mechanical rent-seeking “vampires dependent on state expenditure” (Yates 1996:35). The intellectual inadequacies of such speculative reasoning (Hertog 2010b:283-284), not to mention the detachment from empirical evidence, are now rightfully undergoing a reevaluation (Okruhlik 1999:295-297).

The second part of rentier theory’s predicament, if it is to advance as a viable discourse about rent-receiving countries and their internal dealings, is how it will report the impact that rents have on society and do so without repeating its earlier drawbacks. This requires abandoning simplified models weighted towards economic factors and official institutional rhetoric and integrating “more specific, and changing, social and cultural contexts” (Gray 2011:17). Then, it might be possible to get a more accurate indication of the ways that rentier states, and the provisos of citizenship, are actually experienced by those who live within their borders. To overcome this conundrum, local finesse will have to be included in rentier state theory and backed with a solid

ethnographic framework.

The possibilities for this socially-attentive agenda for rentier research seemed promising as recently as the late 1990s when Gwenn Okruhlik identified the fundamental avenues for grassroots rentierism in Saudi Arabia. She wrote that, “The prosperity of private citizens is dependent upon the acquisition of government wealth, with access to contracts, information, jobs in the public sector or infrastructure governed by family relations, friendship, religious branch, and regional affiliation” (1999:297). Regrettably, Okruhlik’s awareness about the human investments and social corridors through which a rentier state’s mission is realized has not been followed-up by further investigations (Rosser 2006:21) except for Steffen Hertog’s inquiries into the “political sociology of rent circulation” (2010b:282). Hertog lays out the parameters of his methodologies and topical directions for tracking Saudi Arabia’s rents in a fashion that is evocative of what an ethnography of rentierism might look like:

To tease out the channels through which oil income has influenced Saudi politics, I chose a strategy that required more than a year of field research... tracing the *sociology* of rent distribution in the kingdom. If income matters, how so? What exactly is done with it? What do people do when they build a rentier state and negotiate policies within it? Who gets access to state resources and how? What kinds of power relations are established in the process? To tackle these issues, I had to look at concrete social networks within and around the Saudi state. [2011:2-3]

Hertog admittedly waded into “virgin territory” (2010b:284) with his query and in the course of it he shows that the relevant social deficiencies that plague rentier thought demand fewer deterministic deductions (Rosser 2006:21-22) and more on-site analysis. Moreover, he pushes past the known brand of the rentier “state... as the prime mover of the economy” (El-Katiri et al. 2011:5) and merges into what these rents really signify beneath the “state-idea” (Abrams 1988:82).

By tracing the money and the litany of brokers, gatekeepers, and intermediaries who watch over how rents are dispersed and consumed (Hertog 2007:545-548) the localized footprints of a rentier state can no longer be hidden under the heading of “the state.” It is only by peeling back these layers of officialdom that an uncharted glimpse emerges into how the cogs of a welfare government operate and, notably, where the “official purposes of public office are challenged by strongly supported counter-conceptions” (Leys 1965:225). Still, pinpointing and exploring this junction should not be the finale for rentier theory; instead, it can serve as the preface for discerning the socio-cultural dimensions of the “officially illicit favour” (De Sardan 1999:41) for personifying the state’s abstruseness (Joseph 1990:144). In the Gulf, where these are newly minted states (Fox et al. 2006:13) that were hurriedly put together (Hertog 2007:541-545), “the logics of the familiar” (Sahlins 1999:xvi) are credible counterbalances (De Certeau 1980:4-5) to the administrative monoliths. This is not to propose that, “the social structure in the Gulf seems to be, perhaps, the most impervious to change, vis-à-vis economics and ideas” (Fox et al. 2006:13) or that some stagnant sort of relational primordialism is dictating such personalized encounters with the state. Rather, it asks where have the politics of interrelational reciprocity (De Certeau 1980:5) been altered, extended, and regressed in conjunction with the rubrics of rentier governmentality (Gupta and Sharma 2006:277-278) and in what ways has rentierism refined the criteria for forming affiliations? Plus, how have these states and their variations on rentier ideas and systems (Abrams 1988:82) been shaped and reconstituted (Wittrock 2000:44-45) by the social practices over which they preside (Mitchell 1999:77-78) and partake?

Answering these questions will not suddenly resolve all of rentier theory's errors but it will make it more robust by giving it precision that goes "beyond generalizations about patronage and the 'buying off' of social groups" (Hertog 2010b:314) to reveal how rents have been assimilated into, and molded by, local cultures. Also, there is still the persistent neglect of globalization's contemporary effects (Gray 2011:19-20)²²³ at the social or transnational level for the citizenry populations in the Gulf's rentier states (Al-Rasheed 2005:2-6).²²⁴ For Kuwait, where the citizens enjoy the latest communication devices (Mellor et al. 2011:22-23), Deborah Wheeler is correct to ponder whether "some power to shape national sentiments can be lost by the state" (2000:444) without elevating telecommunications into becoming a politically causal agent (2006:22-23). What remains to be seen is if these global processes, not as technologies but as interconnectivities, are capable of straining the social pacts that have underwritten the nimble arts of governing in the Gulf (Al-Rasheed 2005:10-11). However, this has to be approached with the same careful attention needed to realign present conjectures about rentierism's comprehensive, engulfing propositions (Gray 2011:10-12) with the realities of active societal spheres filled with transacting individuals and groups (Hertog 2007:545-547). It is in this vein that the Gulf's globalized modernity and its rentier lineages (Chaudhry 1994:1-2) must be grappled with, "without unduly imposing a rigid and misleading institutional gridlock on an unwieldy and complex historical reality" (Wittrock 2000:50).

²²³ The usage of contemporary globalization for the Gulf is to distinguish it from its earlier seafaring and long-distance trading incarnations (Khalaf 2006:247).

²²⁴ The globalized immigrant labor force in the Gulf has received much more attention (Al-Rasheed 2005:2-3). For some examples in Kuwait, see Longva (1997), Russell (1989), or Shah (1986, 1995, 2000). A brief sample for the Gulf in general might include Gardner (2010), the volume edited by Kamrava and Babar (2012), or Nagi (1982).

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