



START OF TRANSCRIPT

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Hello I'm Clement Paligaru and welcome to Ear to Asia where we talk with researchers who focus on the region with its diverse people, societies and histories. Ear to Asia is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In this episode we look at how Kuwait is walking the Sunni Shia tightrope and trying to hold it altogether.

Kuwait, a small oil producing country in the Persian Gulf first appeared in the spotlight of international media when Iraq invaded it in 1990. It regained its independence after the UN-approved coalition led by the United States, invaded and defeated Iraq in 1991. In 2015 Kuwait was once again thrust into the media spotlight when a terrorist bombed a mosque in Kuwait City where the majority of worshipers were from the Shia sect. The terrorist was from an affiliate of Daesh or Islamic State, often referred to as ISIS. While

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the overt motive for this act of terrorism was payback for Kuwait's opposition to Daesh, the attack introduced sectarian violence to a country where a Sunni majority and a rather large Shia minority coexisted in relative harmony.

Prior to this 2015 terrorist attack the Arab uprising in 2011, also known as the Arab Spring, and the subsequent civil war in Syria exposed sectarian fault lines in Kuwait in surprising ways. At the time, one senior US Government official even described Kuwait as the fundraising epicentre for terrorist organisations in Syria. In the wake of the mosque bombing incident, the Kuwaiti Government passed several anti-terrorism laws, but some observers, like Human Rights Watch, claimed the laws are designed to suppress political dissent.

So how effective are these laws at reducing the risk of terrorist attacks in Kuwait? Are such laws the way to maintaining social harmony in a multicultural or at least a bi-sectarian population?

To answer these and other questions is Dr Kylie Baxter, a specialist in Middle East and Islamic politics from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Dr Baxter is the author of several books on Islam and the Middle East, numerous journal articles and monographs. Kylie, welcome to Ear to Asia.

KYLIE BAXTER

Thank you for having me.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now we referred to the terrorist bombing of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait City in the introduction, what were the origins and the affiliations of the perpetrator?

KYLIE BAXTER

So the attack in June 2015, as you mentioned, was on a Shia mosque in the centre of Kuwait City. Now the perpetrator of this suicide attack was, in fact, a Saudi national who was affiliated to an ISIS offshoot. He flew in - as far as the authorities were able to determine, flew into to Kuwait City on the morning of the attack and perpetrated a devastating suicide attack which killed 27 people and injured over 200. So this really struck at the heart of the Shia community in this Gulf state.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So it is obvious the mosque was targeted because the worshippers were Shia. Why is there such animosity from the more hard lines forms of Sunni Islam towards the Shia or other minority Islamic sects?

KYLIE BAXTER

This links clearly into both the civil conflict inside Syria and the creation of the ISIS organisation and the situation in the Gulf and Kuwait in particular. Kuwait is a standalone in terms of Gulf politics, it has a hybrid democratic system. So it is a showcase of political change and opportunity in the Gulf region. As you mentioned in your introduction 30 to 40 per cent of the citizens of Kuwait are in fact from the Shia community and coexistence has been the norm; they have been fully empowered citizens within the state of Kuwait and often quite active politically over the years.

This was a red flag to an organisation such as ISIS which has a virulent hyper-sectarian approach which looks to break down any forms of coexistence between Sunni and Shia communities. And that's linked specifically to the environment within Syria and Iraq where ISIS was established. In terms of why they would target Kuwait, as you pointed out, initially this was positioned as payback for Kuwait's involvement in the US led coalition undertaking bombing strikes against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. However, the underlying intent here was clearly to inflame sectarian issues in the gulf as a whole and in Kuwait in particular.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now immediately after the 2015 bombing of that mosque the Emir of Kuwait rushed to the scene to declare the nation's outrage at the atrocity and to show solidarity with the Shia community. This is quite unlike other Persian Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia where the Shia are actually discriminated against.

KYLIE BAXTER

Absolutely. The state response within hours of the bombing in June 2015 was an assertion of Kuwait's pluralistic nature. So there were statements made on behalf of the Royal Family by senior royals expressing not just outrage, but also solidarity with the Shia citizens of Kuwait. So quite clearly there was a political desire here to withstand the ISIS attack. In addition to this there was a very swift criminal investigation undertaken by the

security agencies in Kuwait, 29 people had been tried in relationship to this attack by September of 2015 and seven of them were condemned to death under Kuwaiti law. So this was taken very seriously by authorities in Kuwait.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And you have mentioned the percentage of Shia earlier on, what percentage is Sunni?

KYLIE BAXTER

The situation inside Kuwait from a demographic perspective is quite challenging. You look at a population of around four million people, the overwhelming majority of whom are not citizens. So the notion of citizenship in Kuwait is very tightly guarded because it is linked to so many material benefits, so many economic benefits. A Kuwaiti citizen is entitled to free education including university education, free healthcare, food subsidies and, as we've seen in recent months most powerfully gas subsidies. Of a population of over four million around two-thirds of residents of Kuwait are non-citizens, are either guest workers or individuals who have lived there for several generations but do not hold citizenship rights. So of the national community 30 to 40 per cent of that community are usually understood to be Shia.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

But the Sunni population, the actual percentage...

KYLIE BAXTER

In terms of the actual citizen population you'd be looking in terms of Kuwaiti citizens at about 800,000 people but a significant number of Arab expatriates for example would also be of Sunni origin. In terms of the politics of Kuwait obviously non-citizens are limited in their political inclusion in the state, in fact they're actively excluded. So I think one of the most interesting things when you look at Kuwait is, without question, there is a sectarian situation there where you have, particularly in this broader context at the moment, the potential for conflict or tension along this fault line but you have numerous other fault lines as well. The reality of such a significant proportion of the population, a majority being non-citizens, being guest workers, that's a clear cleavage in society as it is through the rest of the Gulf states as well.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And Kylie, what's interesting though is that the Shia community, a relatively small community there, is highly valued by the Royal Family there. Why is that the case?

KYLIE BAXTER

This is not the standard experience in the Gulf. If you look at the Shia population inside Saudi Arabia for example, the Saudi particular approach to Islam means that it's quite a puritanical and intolerant approach politically and minorities are actively excluded within that state structure. Kuwait, by virtue of its 1962 Constitution, enshrines within it democratic attributes as well. So as citizens, the Shia community inside Kuwait are Kuwaitis first. They are empowered in terms of the political process. Kuwait, like all Gulf states, formally bans political parties but Shia individuals have campaigned and been elected for public office and have always been empowered members of the state.

Indeed, historically speaking the Shia community in Kuwait have been quite loyal subjects of the Royal Family, often supporting the royals against challenges from, for example, the Sunni merchant class.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

and yet Kuwait's response to Syria and what was happening there has been uncompromisingly supportive of Sunnis. Now in April 2011, Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, sent tanks into Syria's restive cities to quell protests there about the torture and killing of students who had painted anti-government graffiti. We're recording this interview in March 2017 and Syria is still a land of bloodshed and turmoil. What was Kuwait's actual response to Assad's brutal crackdown on the protests in Syria?

KYLIE BAXTER

From the outset Kuwait took a very emboldened stance towards the Syrian conflict. Kuwait followed along with the GCC or the Gulf Cooperation Council's standard line, withdraw its ambassadors and it called for Assad to step down. As the Syrian conflict devolved into open war, which it did quite quickly, Kuwait led the way internationally in terms of humanitarian assistance, pledging in excess of \$800 million to the Syrian community, struggling as it was in this conflict.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Mainly Sunnis?

KYLIE BAXTER

Absolutely. So you have a sectarian challenge playing out there as Kuwait, both at a formal and increasingly informal level, strongly identified with the Sunni community inside Syria. Initially private fundraising began through the Syrian expatriate community, and there are strong community networks there. But that quickly turned into a broader issue where large sections of the Sunni community inside Kuwait were prepared to fund raise privately to send money to Syria to assist individuals in need. This took on a competitive edge in some ways through 2012, 2013 where Sunni communities inside Syria began to try to outdo each other in how much they could raise to support Syrian civilians. This led to, I guess, a bleed situation as we could term it, where support within a humanitarian framework often led to support from militia organisations. And you mentioned in your introduction this is where Kuwait really ran into trouble.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now like Saudi Arabia Kuwait is an ally of the United States. Yet in 2014, then Undersecretary of the US Treasury Department, David Cohen, declared that Kuwait was the - and I quote - epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria. How does a US ally who pledged to support the coalition to confront and ultimately destroy Daesh or ISIS become the epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups?

KYLIE BAXTER

In that question you are really bleeding together two issues. So the ISIS organisation - I think that's a bit of a turning point if we look at Kuwait's involvement with the declaration in 2014 of the Islamic state and the overtly intolerant environment that ISIS, or the ideology that ISIS represents, really begins to book end Kuwait's informal involvement. If we look at pre-2014, before the establishment of the Islamic state, you can definitely see that there was large money, hundreds of millions of dollars, flowing out of Kuwait into Syria under the auspices of charitable organisations. Now the US comment on this refers specifically to the fact that many of the other Gulf states had moved, at least officially, to criminalise support for some Islamic charities that had been affiliated with militia organisations.

Kuwait dragged its heels in this respect, largely because the population was so clearly inflamed behind this particular topic, there was broad based social support for Sunni civilians inside Syria. So this created an environment where funds were being directed into Syria through Kuwaiti individuals, not just from Kuwait but also from other places within the Gulf, Qatar for example, the UAE, where more restrictive government legislation had been passed to prevent the transfer of funds into Syria.

So from a Kuwaiti perspective, the support that was flowing into Syria was more often than not, framed by key preachers and key activists within the humanitarian and charitable framework. So it's after 2014 with the establishment of ISIS, the appetite for supporting sending funds into Syria dips in Kuwait and alongside a range of more restrictive legislation that was passed under immense amounts of US and UN pressure. The US went as far in 2014 of actually imposing individual sanctions on several Kuwaitis, especially designated global terrorists, and pointing out the fact that Kuwait needed to do a lot more to implement its own anti-terror financing laws.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You're listening to Ear to Asia brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne. Our guest on this episode of Ear to Asia is Dr Kylie Baxter, a specialist in Middle East and Islamic politics. Now tell me a little about the system of government in Kuwait and how people feel about that system of government.

KYLIE BAXTER

Well Kuwait is set up as a constitutional monarchy. So from the 1962 Constitution, as I mentioned before, the system has enshrined within its democratic attributes. You have a parliament that is directly elected and a cabinet that is appointed by the Royal Family. Even if we left it there we can see the potential for challenge in that particular form of governance. You have a constitutionally empowered parliament that technically could remove the Emir, and also must, by an absolute majority, approve the appointment of the Crown Prince. This parliament directly elected by the people, which is a completely uncommon situation inside the GCC countries, has significant constitutional power when you look at the relationship to the Royal Family.

This means that the cabinet, which is beholden to the factional tensions within the Royal Family where power has historically been shared between two lines, it puts the parliament

and the cabinet in a reciprocal relationship in a lot of ways. The parliament cannot suggest new legislation but it must approve legislation that comes down.

So you therefore have an environment where it's really a hybrid system. And in a way, parliament often opposes government policy because there is a difference in many examples - and we saw it most powerfully in the recent elections - where government policy is focused on one outcome, so for example, in the November 2016 elections, clearly the government was moving towards austerity packages, there were concerns over drops in state revenue where the parliament, on the other hand, is directly beholden to the people. As we mentioned before, Kuwaiti citizenship has significant material benefits and the people of Kuwait were very clear that they did not want those particular benefits to be restricted.

If you look at most of the consultation councils in the Gulf they are appointed by the establishment, so they are basically rubber stamping, in many cases, the Royal Family's policies. Here you have a more adversarial system. You have a parliament that is able to question ministers, is able to block legislation. So I think that if you look at the Kuwaiti example, it is a tightrope. It's a tightrope between a system that has some democratic attributes, yet realistically is still a very powerful monarchy where the establishment maintains absolute control. Political parties, as I mentioned before, are banned which means that there is not really an opportunity for activists or politicians inside the Kuwaiti environment to coalesce around ideological grounds and therefore there's a strong streak of populism in Kuwait. And that, more often than not - as is the case in most democratic circles - comes down to domestic issues.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

After the bombing of the mosque in 2015 the Kuwaiti Government introduced a raft of measures to try to prevent another terrorist attack which included keeping DNA records of all residents in Kuwait. What were some of the key policies there?

KYLIE BAXTER

The most infamous of the policies there was the so-called DNA law. So you see Kuwait reacting to a terrorist attack in a way that is absolutely common. If you look at the passing of the Patriot Act in the United States after 9/11 we know that nearly all states, unfortunately, will use security situations to push through legislation which external

observers, such as Human Rights Watch, will often question about the erosion of civil liberties.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

The DNA laws, what did that involve?

KYLIE BAXTER

So the DNA law was passed in July 2015 so very quickly, this is very clearly a kneejerk reaction to the bombing itself. The DNA law stipulated that all residents of Kuwait, so not just citizens but all residents of Kuwait needed to supply DNA material or face punitive measures on behalf of the state. So this was immediately criticised by activists, not just in Kuwait but Human Rights Watch and the UN as well. Obviously the concern here is the provision of DNA material in an environment where citizenship is such a fraught issue, is linking genetics potentially to citizenship. That was seen as a very concerning red line that was being crossed here.

So in the end, in October 2016, this particular law was watered down after, as I mentioned, international pressure, but also after a written request from the Emir himself that parliament reconsider this law. Now the law is on the books pertaining to criminal cases only.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

In addition to the DNA law there were others introduced, including the stripping of citizenship if the Royal Family was insulted. Now Human Rights Watch has expressed concern that these new laws were designed to suppress political dissent. What's your view?

KYLIE BAXTER

The perpetrator of the attack in 2015 was a Saudi national who flew in with the expressed purpose of undertaking a suicide attack. So there is no way that this particular law would have prevented that bombing occurring. So quite clearly what you're looking at here is a very securitised response to a political situation. You've referenced some of the other laws that were passed. The Kuwaiti Royals, through 2014 and into 2015, re-empowered or dusted off much earlier mid-twentieth century laws to enable them to strip citizenship from individuals that were perceived or charged with incitement against the Royal Family. Now this has been, in terms of the political fallout of this period, probably the more interesting

aspect largely because these laws have been utilised by the Kuwaiti Government, not necessarily as an instrument of sectarian division.

So they have been quite even handed in their use of the citizenship law to strip citizenship not just from Shia individuals but also Sunni Islamists opposition voices as well. So several key opposition figures have had their citizenship revoked and that has obviously trickle down effects to their families, if they have children in schools and they find themselves stateless literally. Human Rights Watch has also responded that this is of grave concern because effectively it is how the state is moving to stifle dissent in the public environment. It's not just the stripping of citizenships, there's been revoking of media licences of broadcasters that have been critical of the Royal Family. And in addition to this, Shia bloggers for example, have been gaoled for insulting the Saudi Arabian Royal Family as well.

So one of the most interesting aspects of this period, in the Arab uprising period, where we have seen really the abject failure of the United Nations to act as a multilateral body in relationship to this conflict. But what we have seen is the emergence of a much stronger GCC with a shared sense of purpose without the kind of vested interests that challenged the UN Security Council the Gulf Council has been able to really emerge as a quite uniform and effective player. The fact that you can actually go to gaol in Kuwait for insulting the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia is really quite an amazing situation.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Kylie, you have written that monarchies, particularly those that are part of the GCC, the Gulf Corporation Council, fared better than the republics in the Arab Uprising. What are the reasons then for those outcomes?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well if you look at the events of the Arab Uprisings and obviously such devastating human violence and chaos in places like Syria you see quite a different pattern emerging in the Gulf. Obviously we are looking at much smaller states and the Gulf is a much wealthier place than environments such as Egypt or Syria or indeed, most of the North African countries. In the Gulf in particular, there are political identity which scholars have always referred to as based on a sort of anti-revolutionary precedent as well and that brings in questions of the Islamic tradition as well. But it's bonds that are reinforced by custom, tribal alliances, and I think regional integration. As we've mentioned the GCC has

emerged as a major player here and it helps if there is a group of like minded states preserving their stability and their economic power, and defining themselves in contrast to the wanton violence that has eclipsed human security in so many parts of the Middle East.

So far, the small states of the Gulf have proven quite durable but I think it would be a mistake to believe that this is a permanently stable system. As I've mentioned you have a range of stresses in that society, not just sectarian questions but how durable is the welfare state model that the Gulf states rely on as part of the social contract. The Emir of Kuwait pointed out in late 2015 that big drops of revenue were likely, state revenue, were likely and that obviously has a flow on effect of how long can Kuwait continue to pay for all education and all healthcare and all food subsidies for its citizens. So the drop in that kind of material security may well have significant political challenges in Kuwait.

And that's before you get to, as we mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, the reality of huge non-national communities in each of these states who work, not just in jobs that citizens are disinclined to do, the labouring, the building, but also are more often than not middle management. So you have individuals who may, for generations, have lived in these Gulf states who have no political power and indeed, no security because they, at any moment, may find their work permit cancelled and themselves and their families kicked out of the country.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Is liberal democracy compatible with the Middle East?

KYLIE BAXTER

Human history demonstrates that people want popular participation. History, particularly after 2003 with the US led invasion of Iraq, suggests that the imposition of a particular system of governance of people anywhere in the world is an incredibly dangerous thing and inappropriate response. I think Kuwait is an interesting example of this because the system holds within it numerous tendencies. It has the monarchical system which has proven quite effective in the Gulf but unlike, for example, Saudi Arabia, there is an active popular participation in the system as well. And while that, as we have discussed today, does hold within it the potential for contestation and conflict it also means that the people of Kuwait have a much greater say in who their system functions than some of their neighbours in this region.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

There's so much there; there's so many layers and then you've got the sectarian aspects as well, the Sunnis, the Shias, I'm sure there have been some challenges along the way. When it comes to finding out more and enquiring into Middle East politics what have been some of the challenges?

KYLIE BAXTER

I think anyone who undertakes research in a society so markedly different from their own faces significant challenges. I was lucky enough during a period of employment in the private sector to gain access to a lot of GCC countries and North African countries and have the opportunity to see societies so markedly different from the Australian context in action. Anyone who researches, particularly in an environment such as this, faces challenges. These days so much of our research, by necessity, occurs online and obviously the internet, while having its own challenges has been an incredibly useful way and empowering way for people in any environment, if they have the opportunity, to learn more about other cultures.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Do you feel you're in, you've tapped in now, you get the groove?

KYLIE BAXTER

No, I don't think you ever get the groove. I think that you have to kind of limit your expectations of yourself and try and shed light on the areas that are particularly interesting to you while acknowledging the inherent limitations of time and space and context.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Dr Kylie Baxter, many, many thanks for your insights and thanks for joining us on Ear to Asia.

KYLIE BAXTER

Thank you for having me.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

We've been speaking with political scientist Dr Kylie Baxter, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Dr Baxter specialises in making sense of the complex, sometimes convoluted and often fraught, politics of the Middle East.

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I'm Clement Paligaru, thanks for your company. Bye for now.

END OF TRANSCRIPT