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Beyond the Rupture: The Palestinian Moment in Kuwait and its Implications

by

Eman AlOtair Abdulla

Under the Direction of Allen James Fromherz, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2024

## ABSTRACT

Even before its independence from Britain in 1961, Palestinians formed large, settled communities in the State of Kuwait and made major contributions to its socioeconomic and cultural development. Their experience in Kuwait spanned over five decades and ended abruptly with the First Gulf War in 1991. Details about the symbiotic relationship between Palestinians and Kuwait reflect developments in Kuwait and milestones in the trajectory of the Palestinian cause, identity, and formation of an effective diaspora there.

Kuwait's Palestinian community was one of the prime casualties of the First Gulf War. Over 300,000 Palestinians were expelled from Kuwait and had to start new lives in Jordan, Palestine, or elsewhere. Their psychosocial traumas outlived their financial woes. This thesis will relate their experience and the significant marks it left on the geopolitical map of the region and the psyche of the Palestinians impacted by this experience and its fateful conclusion.

**INDEX WORDS:** Palestinian Diaspora, Palestinian-Kuwaiti Relations, First Gulf War, Palestinian Identity.

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2024

Beyond the Rupture: The Palestinian Moment in Kuwait and its Implications

by

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Georgia State University

May 2024

## **DEDICATION**

To the memory of my parents Abdel Kader and Nimet who worked tirelessly and made great sacrifices to give me and my siblings a good life and education in Kuwait. The stories they told about life in Palestine and the beautiful culture they passed on to us persist. I also dedicate this work to my loving husband and beautiful daughters who were all born in the United States when one diasporic life in Kuwait changed into another in America.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my mentor Dr. Allen Fromherz for his remarkable support and valuable insights that helped to define and refine my ideas and writing. His receptive mentorship allowed me to explore my topic and express my thoughts freely knowing that he will provide me with honest and thoughtful feedback. I also wish to thank my committee members who are also my instructors Dr. Ghulam Nadri and Dr. Alex Cummings for showing me how historical writing can and should also speak for the marginalized and the common folk who have been largely ignored in the past. I am also grateful to all my instructors in the History department who opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the past through their marvelous book selections and stimulating discussions and for helping me explore my voice and place in the field of world history.

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## PREFACE

The story of the Palestinian community in Kuwait, how it formed, lived, and left illuminates several major questions in the modern history of the Middle East. The Palestinian ordeal in the Levant, which has been a central concern for major actors in the region, is further complicated by the diasporic life of Palestinian communities residing in other Arab countries including the Gulf states. Palestinians are frequently entangled in interregional relations and conflicts. The development of young Gulf countries after the 1930s was greatly assisted by foundational contributions of the Palestinian intelligentsia. The symbiotic relationship between Palestinians and Kuwait as a state and society is multifaceted and significant in its relative scale and duration. Its abrupt ending impacted the geopolitical map of the region, left deep marks on the psyche of Kuwait's Palestinians, and deepened the Palestinian collective trauma, precarity, and statelessness.

In writing this history, I draw from several sources that are familiar to me as a member of the Palestinian community that lived in Kuwait for decades. I was also pleasantly surprised to find a plethora of personal anecdotes, memoirs, blogs, and semi-fictional reflections on this deeply impactful and poignant experience. Palestinians who lived in Kuwait mark themselves as such and often feel connected to each other. The tragedy of the painful and sudden rupture of a thriving, settled community of Palestinians in Kuwait was deemed by some as not on par with the immense suffering of Palestinians in refugees in camps in Lebanon, the West Bank, or Gaza. After all, they were thought to be well-to-do Palestinians who managed to grow and thrive significantly compared to others in the Arab world. Nonetheless, Palestinians who lived diligently in Kuwait made important contributions to their host country and to extended families and hometowns. Their abrupt eviction from Kuwait inflicted undeserved suffering, loss,

confusion, and agony. Their plight includes all the elements of displacement, especially since many were actually born in Kuwait and knew no other geographic homeland. Palestinians experienced comparable episodes of persecution and displacement during the Nakba and the Naksa when they were evicted from their cities and villages. They also endured severe restrictions and varying degrees of persecution in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. However, the marks on the collective psyche of the Palestinian community that left Kuwait are peculiar in many respects. I try to highlight this peculiarity while also placing this episode of success followed by abrupt demise within the context of the larger Palestinian experience. Statelessness, loss of geography, and continuous displacement characterize this experience as it does numerous others in various diasporic Palestinian communities worldwide.

Related topics like the Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations are addressed here but not extensively. Other areas that were not focal to the study include the impact of the Palestinian moment on Kuwaiti society or the exploration of what went wrong and how the painful rupture could have been avoided. Other scholars like Shafeeq Ghabra, Mai Al-Nakib, and Farah Al-Nakib probed these issues more deeply.<sup>1</sup> Although this study touches upon some of these topics, the main focus of the study is on particular aspects and dimensions of the diasporic experience of Palestinians in Kuwait, its conclusion, and how this specific Palestinian diasporic episode led in some ways to fragmentation and in other ways to further unity with the Palestinian community as a whole.

The diasporic experience of Palestinians in Kuwait started as a result of the collective trauma of the Nakba, the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their hometowns in 1948. The

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<sup>1</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, "Palestinians and Kuwaitis: Conflict and Missed Opportunities," *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, no.24 (Autumn 1995), <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/35060>; Mai Al-Nakib, "'The People Are Missing': Palestinians in Kuwait," *Deleuze Studies* 8, no. 1 (2014): 23-44; Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait transformed: a history of oil and urban life* (California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

qualities of the first then second wave of Palestinian migrants to Kuwait and the socioeconomic milieu of the Gulf State after the 1940s shaped this particular experience. Over the five decades between the Nakba and the First Gulf War, the Palestinian community in Kuwait acquired unique memories of experiences and encounters that were colored by Kuwait's distinctive culture, geography, and circumstances. After the painful conclusion of the Palestinian moment in Kuwait, deep and powerful feelings set Kuwait's Palestinians apart from other Palestinian communities. Eventually, their experience of departure was integrated into the Palestinian narrative of displacement, statelessness, and precarity. It is common to hear an older Palestinian woman comment as she hears about the plight of Palestinians in any diaspora community, "that's how it is with us, Palestinians; wherever we go, we are downtrodden. We are even often let down by our own leaders."

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In an official ceremony honoring early Palestinian educators in Kuwait, the Minister of Education in 2010, Dr. Moudi Al Hamoud, said:” Our study relates how Kuwait requested Palestinian teachers from the Jerusalem Council and when they came in 1936, they were warmly welcomed by the Kuwaitis and started working in Al-Mubarakiya school... Two of them were entrusted with the Kuwaiti Educational Council until 1956... The three Palestinian sisters Rifqa, Wasifa, and Sukaina Issa Odeh pioneered girls’ education and worked in the first elementary girls’ school in Kuwait in 1937. We will never forget their valuable contributions to education in Kuwait. “<sup>2</sup> A controversial member of the Kuwaiti parliament, Safa Al Hashem, reminisced publicly on the solid education she received in the 1960s when her teachers were Palestinian. “Their qualities included firmness and skill. They did not just dictate and repeat, but they made sure we truly comprehended. What has happened to our educational system since then?”<sup>3</sup> In another space, a virtual community of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait titled” I was in Kuwait, and I have Memories there” attracted over 150,000 followers who share special memories and revisit an idealized past of a thriving Palestinian community in Kuwait in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.<sup>4</sup> These fond memories and shared longings for better days are remnants of a complicated past colored by shades of hope, friendship, cruelty, betrayal, and rupture.

The story of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait is nested in multiple fields of inquiry and has multiple dimensions. This study will place the lived experiences of the Palestinians who

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<sup>2</sup> Basem Abdel Rahman, “The Committee: Kuwaitis for Jerusalem honors Palestinian Teachers ( 1936-1956)”, *Al Rai*, 7/3/2010, <https://www.alraimedia.com/article/174197/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF->

<sup>3</sup> Al Hadath Al Falastini, “Kuwait: What the Parliamentarian Ms. Safa Al Hashem Said about the Palestinian Teacher,” 3/2/2017, <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/52342/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA->

<sup>4</sup> “I was in Kuwait and I have Memories there,” Facebook Group, March 20, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/810752075674170>

dwelled in Kuwait at the center of larger geopolitical events that framed their stories. It will also probe the possible implications of this unique moment on subsequent events and psychosocial constructs such as the Palestinian diasporic identity, Arab and state nationalism, and interregional relations.

The experience of Palestinian communities outside their historic homeland has been the subject of scholarly debates over the past few decades, in relation to their geopolitical situation and in terms of how they are depicted in different regions. While the initial exodus of Palestinians from their hometowns and villages in 1948 and again in 1967 marked them as refugees, their varied and complicated experiences challenge such a limited categorization. Palestinians also migrated from the Palestinian homelands to find better opportunities for their families; they left refugee camps and initial destinations to seek better and more stable settlements elsewhere. The first substantial wave of immigration to Kuwait was after the 1948 war, but those who migrated differed in terms of skills, education, and circumstances. By the time the next major exodus from the West Bank took place in 1967, support networks in Kuwait were already in place. Most Palestinian newcomers at that point were family members of those already in Kuwait. The new ways in which the term 'diaspora' has come to be used allow for a liberal and inclusive use of the term to describe a variety of Palestinian communities outside Palestine.

The multiple facets of the Palestinian diasporic dispersal are evident in the experience of Palestinian communities in Kuwait. They were initially recruited as experts in Kuwait in order to help build and modernize the infrastructure of the budding oil State in the 1930s. They came as immigrants in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba when they were evicted from their cities and villages. This first wave included highly educated groups whose skills were much needed.

Whereas refugees settled initially in adjacent areas like the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria, those who managed to go to Kuwait went through formal vetting and had to offer valuable skills and expertise to be admitted to Kuwait. Many also received help from compatriots already settled in Kuwait. Numerous Palestinian refugees left their camps in search of a better future and livelihood for their families. Villagers who had few other skills than farming were desperate enough to make dangerous journeys or deal with illegal smugglers to get into Kuwait and find work as laborers. Existing networks and Kuwaiti sympathizers helped them settle and acquire skills in various fields. By 1965, 48% of the public sector and 41.4% of the private sector in Kuwait were made up of Palestinians.<sup>5</sup> They maintained and developed their uniquely Palestinian identity while integrating and contributing to the Kuwaiti socioeconomic and cultural milieu.

Probing their diasporic experience in Kuwait that ended with their mass exodus in 1991 involves unpacking overlapping subjects and events to elucidate the numerous implications of this experience. In its general outlines, the lived Palestinian/Kuwaiti narrative reflects geopolitical complexities of interregional relations in Arab societies. It also adds another wrinkle in the thickening history of the Palestinian diasporic identity and transnational social formations. It adds to the expanding field of diaspora studies that investigates commonalities and particularities of different diasporic populations including Jewish, African, and Indian diasporas, each with its distinct historical, demographic, and sociocultural dynamics.

### **1.1 Aspects and Parameter of this Study**

Three main subjects intersect to inform this study of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait and its repercussions. The first is diaspora studies and specifically the Palestinian dispersal which

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<sup>5</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait* (Beirut: The Arab Center for Research and Political studies, 2018), 73, Kindle.

started with their forced expulsions from their historical homelands after the 1948 war and again after the 1967 Arab/Israeli war. The expert in diaspora studies Robin Cohen alludes to the post 1948 birth of a Palestinian victim diaspora while noting that "ironically and tragically, the midwife was the homecoming of the Jewish diaspora."<sup>6</sup> The estimated number of Palestinians worldwide in 2021 was 14,000,000; nearly one-half lives in the Palestinian territories and Israel while the other half lives in diaspora.

The second subject is the sociopolitical and economic development of Kuwait as the host country. An understanding of the young country's history, its political structure, the social makeup of its population, and its developing economy is crucial to provide a temporal and spatial context to the Palestinian experience in Kuwait. The oil country's changing immigration policies and internal dynamics are some of the major factors that shaped the Palestinian experience in Kuwait.

The third and most focal subject is the specific Palestinian experience in Kuwait starting from the first group of educators sent by the Palestinian Council in 1936 to the aftermath of the First Gulf War in the early 1990s. The relationship between Kuwait and the Palestinian diaspora was arguably rooted in Pan-Arab solidarity and practical needs of both parties. Kuwait needed educated and skilled labor to build its vital institutions and infrastructure as the oil wealth started to flow. Palestinians were increasingly in need of stable jobs and security that their troubled homeland could not provide. The experience and its traumatic conclusion had lasting implications on the psyche of the specific affected segment of Palestinians and on the collective Palestinian psyche. These implications will be further probed with reference to individual and community experiences after the war.

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the nation-state: from victims to challengers," *International affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 507-520, 513.



These three subjects correspond to specific sets of questions that probe the human dimension of the lived experiences of Palestinian individuals and communities who lived in Kuwait before its liberation in 1991. However, the timeframe of the narrative will be extended further to address significant long-term implications of this experience especially in relation to geopolitical events in the region, Palestinian identity, collective memory, and generational trauma.

The first question relates to the origins of Kuwait's diasporic Palestinian communities. Who were the Palestinians in this specific diaspora? How did they settle in Kuwait? What were their motivations? What drew the first waves of Palestinians to Kuwait? To answer these questions, this thesis will establish contextual factors related to conditions in the host country, its needs and developmental goals. Such factors also involve the migrant community itself, the circumstances that prompted its immigration, its socioeconomic makeup, and collective identity. The twentieth century notion of the modern refugee and the modern global issue of immigration that crystallized after the emergence of nation states and international institutions are at the heart of the Palestinian dispersal especially within the Middle East. The world in which this Palestinian moment in Kuwait started and ended is unlike the pre-WWI world in which movement within various regions and provinces within large empires was more fluid and less restrictive. This global transition into the modern world of nation states can also be gleaned through the history of Kuwait before and after its independence and the discovery of oil on its soil. The porous region sandwiched between Basra, the Hejaz, and Iran welcomed all and displayed a level of religious and ethnic diversity unmatched by its modern incarnation. The progressively restrictive policies of immigration and citizenship reflect the exclusive nature of modern nation states in general, and oil countries in particular.

The Palestinians who settled in Kuwait over five decades also reflect a new geopolitical reality of a stateless strandedness in a world defined by national and state affiliations. However, despite having roots in the same occupied homeland, Palestinian immigrants to Kuwait were considerably diverse in terms of their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and the geopolitical milestones that prompted their move. The various waves of Palestinian immigration to Kuwait reflect geopolitical and historical turning points in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Each calamitous event created immigration waves that had different demographic features. While the earlier Palestinian intelligentsia was recruited to help establish Kuwait's vital institutions, some of the later Palestinian immigrants came to Kuwait desperately seeking a livelihood for their families in whatever job they could find. The iconic Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani describes the desperation of Palestinian men in his novella *Men in the Sun*.<sup>7</sup> Three Palestinian men seeking work in Kuwait's oil fields were smuggled in a water tanker heading from an Iraqi refugee camp to Kuwait. They had to wait for what they thought to be a few minutes locked up in the closed tanker in the heat of the Arabian Desert until their driver finished the formal border-crossing procedures. Those minutes dragged on. When the driver finally went to check on them, they were all dead. The question that haunts the driver and remains unanswered is: why didn't they knock on the walls of the tanker to be saved? Despite its larger symbolism, this semi-fictional story becomes real through numerous anecdotes of Palestinian men who had to cross the desert from Basra, at times on foot, to reach the Kuwaiti borders. After conducting interviews with several Palestinian immigrants to Kuwait, Shafeeq Ghabra relates true stories of the perilous journeys of desperate Palestinians that took place between 1951 and 1956. In one instance, nine Palestinian farmers from Silwad lost their way en route to Kuwait from Basra. When their

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<sup>7</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hillary Kilpatrick (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 21-74.

families reported their loss to the Kuwaiti authorities, they found them all dead due to the heat, thirst, and harsh desert conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The second key question is this: what are the dimensions of the historical relationship between Palestinians as residents in Kuwait and members of a victimized fellow Arab nation on the one hand, and Kuwait as a government and a community on the other? This question will allow for establishing a more meaningful reading of the social, cultural, and political aspects of the Palestinian/Kuwaiti relationship before and after the First Gulf War. In the historiography, the Arab nationalist and Islamist tendencies of Kuwait's society and ruling family are often presented separately from the practical considerations prompting Kuwait to recruit Palestinian immigrants. This artificial divide limits the reading of the restrictive attitudes towards the Palestinian presence in Kuwait on the one hand, and unequivocal support for their political struggle on the other. Historical accounts such as the role of Sheikh Fahad Al Ahmad Al Sabah who fought alongside the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its 'fidaeen' or commandos from 1965 to 1972 highlight a profound solidarity between Kuwaitis and Palestinians and problematize any notion of a purely utilitarian relationship between the two.<sup>9</sup> Palestinians were also enmeshed in the early development of the Kuwaiti armed forces. The Palestinian Umar Zuatyr founded and headed Kuwait's artillery force. Khalil Shuhaiber, a Palestinian officer during the British mandate, founded and headed Kuwait's police force in 1951.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> Yusuf Abdel Rahman, Fahad Al Ahmad: The Living Martyr, *Al Anba*, n. 60872, 2/25/2011, Kuwait <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/174900/25-02-2011-%D9%81%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8A/>

<sup>10</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

The third set of questions is this: how do Palestinians who lived in Kuwait remember it after they moved on to other destinations? How did their experience impact the larger Palestinian community already victimized by statelessness and the absence of effective leadership and viable options? And how did this experience help shape new realities in the region? Selma Dabbagh's father is Palestinian, but her mom is British. She lived in several countries before moving to Kuwait with her family. Few cultural and social interactions managed to trigger her interest in her ancestral Palestinian identity, but when her father was trapped in Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion, she relates, "I was not the same...I dropped a law course to take one on the politics of the Middle East."<sup>11</sup> Dabbagh immersed herself in the Palestinian culture as a writer, lawyer, and activist as an aftereffect of witnessing how "almost every member of my father's family, together with 300,000 or more Palestinians, were expelled from Kuwait... This is an expulsion that is rarely mentioned."<sup>12</sup>

The secondary literature in English includes important works that address and contextualize the Palestinian presence in Kuwait, most notably Shafeeq Ghabra's *Palestinians in Kuwait* and *Al Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.<sup>13</sup> Few works, however, have examined how the rupture of the Palestinian presence in Kuwait impacted Kuwait's Palestinians and those who depended on their support. The Kuwaiti moment in Palestinian memories has not been formally studied or framed within its sociocultural or geopolitical contexts. The trauma of the uprooting of nearly 350,000 Palestinians from their homes in Kuwait lingers in memories and can be gleaned through memoirs, interviews, and

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<sup>11</sup> Selma Dabbagh, "A Road Taken," in *Being Palestinian*, edited by Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 119-121, 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait: The family and the politics of survival* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Shafeeq Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait* (Qatar: The Arab Institute for research and Political Studies, 2018), Kindle.

nostalgic works of fiction attempting to describe rich and diverse experiences in Kuwait and articulate complex and multilayered emotions.

Preliminary assumptions suggest that occupation, eviction, and statelessness were prime motivators for Palestinians to attain education and professional skills to enable them to be competitive applicants to the various fields of employment. This diligent pursuit of education could not protect Kuwait's Palestinians from the chaos unleashed by Saddam's invasion and his conflation of his personal agenda with the Arabist cause of the Palestinian struggle for statehood, especially when he tied his withdrawal from Kuwait to Israel's withdrawal from Palestinian territories. On a geopolitical level, the Palestinian mass exodus from Kuwait, loss of funding, and political isolation of Palestinians after the First Gulf War may have compelled hasty steps leading up to the Oslo peace agreement with Israel. This course of events is indicated by close associates of the PLO's leader Yasser Arafat and by other observers.<sup>14</sup> On another level, the First Gulf War may have led numerous Palestinians to seek permanent migrations outside the Arab world to places where they can obtain citizenship and attain some stability. Nostalgic reminiscing on an idealized past and a practical pursuit for well-proven competencies may have driven Kuwait's efforts to recruit Palestinian teachers again. Pan-Arab nationalist ambitions that gave the rhetoric of Saddam Hussein resonance among Palestinians, especially those residing in the Occupied Territories and Jordan, took a severe blow after the First Gulf War. A deep realization of the autonomy of nation states sank in gradually as Palestinians along with Iraqis and Kuwaitis grappled with the aftereffects of the First Gulf War.

Despite sharing a long, eventful life in Kuwait, the impressions and reflections of Palestinians who left after the First Gulf War are dissimilar. Some reminisce fondly on a

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Abdul Rahman, *I Lived during the Time of Arafat* (RamAllah: Dar AlHurriyah Publishing, 2014); Jamil M Hilal, "The PLO: Crisis in legitimacy," *Race & Class* 37, no. 2 (1995): 1-18.

prosperous life in the oil State where they enjoyed active networks of family, sociable neighborhoods, and enduring friendships. A virtual community of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait reveals a shared “longing for a land that witnessed our childhood stumbles and a sky that watched over our blossoming into youth, longing for beautiful times.”<sup>15</sup> Others remember their life in Kuwait with bitterness and a sense of betrayal. They view their years in Kuwait as dehumanizing as they recall being constantly threatened by deportation and increasingly restricted in their activities and educational pursuits. Some also remember with bitterness the vengeful Kuwaiti militias that indiscriminately killed and tortured hundreds of Palestinians in the weeks after the liberation.<sup>16</sup> Many Palestinians resettled after leaving Kuwait in different parts of the world including Jordan, the Palestinian territories, the United States, Europe, South America, and other Gulf States. For many who lived this experience, the memory of life in Kuwait remains a sore spot triggering feelings of nostalgia, desolation, and poignancy. It is also a marker that sets them apart from the general Palestinian population.

On a geopolitical level, Kuwait supported the Palestinians throughout their consecutive calamities. Kuwaitis oversaw the founding of Fatah movement and participated in the inception of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). It also supported the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza politically and financially, directly or through systemic cuts to the salaries of Palestinians that would go towards the PLO fund. Even after the First Gulf War, Kuwait soon resumed its political and financial support for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza despite a ban on any official representation of Palestine or the PLO on its soil that lasted for decades. As soon as 1993, Kuwait pledged 25 million dollars to the development of the Palestinian territories

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<sup>15</sup> Rami Mahdawi, *The Memories of Palestinians evicted from Kuwait in 1991*, *Raseef*, June , 2017, <https://raseef22.net/article/28453-palestinian-memories-about-kuwait>

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Khairi Lubada, *That's how they Tortured us in Kuwait: The Testimony of a Doctor Fleeing from Hell* ((Nablus: University Press, 1992).

during a meeting at a specialized committee in the European headquarter of the World Bank. This solid and consistent support for the Palestinian cause can be attributed to the deep-rooted Islamist sentiments in Kuwait that regard Palestine as a central cause for all Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

The crisis in the Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations after 1991 had several reasons; some were justified grievances, others based on unchecked impressions and generalizations. The direct cause was the stance of the PLO leader Yasser Arafat that seemed to excuse or at least downplay the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.<sup>18</sup> Another was the perception that Palestinians in Kuwait under the Iraqi occupation collaborated and gave legitimacy to the Iraqi occupation by complying with their orders to open businesses and schools. This sweeping accusation of the stance and behavior of Palestinian leadership and constituents in Kuwait has been countered and problematized by writers who witnessed the ordeal including Shafeeq Ghabra, Khairi Abuljebain and others.<sup>19</sup> While most Palestinians in Kuwait were either spending the summer outside or left during the invasion, others helped Kuwaitis or tried to keep a low profile. The Baathist Palestinians who accompanied Iraqi troops and the inflammatory media coverage tainted Kuwaiti perceptions of the stance of ordinary Palestinians living in Kuwait. Arafat's pro-Iraqi stance and his visit to the Iraqi leader certainly did not help. Years later, the Kuwaiti sense of betrayal has not fully subsided even after the new PLO leader Mahmud Abbas formally apologized in 2004.<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Nasser, "Kuwait has been one of the biggest donors to the Palestinians for over 60 years", *Al Anba*, June 4, 2010, 117212, <https://alanba.com.kw/117212/>; Falah Al Mudairis, *The Development of the Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations and the Effect of the Iraqi Invasion* (Kuwait: Dar Kirtas for Publishing, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Excerpts from Interview with Arafat Tying Palestinian Cause with Gulf Crisis, *Institute for Palestine Studies* 3/2/1991, <https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB%20%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%20%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8>

; Excerpts from Speeches given by Arab Leaders, *Institute for Palestine Studies*, May 28, 1990,

<sup>19</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora*; Khairi Abuljebain, *My Life in Palestine and Kuwait*..

<sup>20</sup> Kuwait News Agency KUNA, Abbas Apologizes for PNA's Stance from Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, 12/12/2004, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?language=en&id=1498619>

apology was followed years later by opening a Palestinian embassy in 2012.<sup>21</sup> Kuwait also started to request new cadres of Palestinian educators in 2016 in a bid to improve the educational system in Kuwait, especially in science and math.<sup>22</sup>

The reconciliatory moves are very modest and will probably remain at that level, but the memory of the vibrant community and its enriching and meaningful presence in Kuwait lingers with both Kuwaitis and Palestinians. The Palestinian experience in Kuwait also has a complicating effect on the dynamic formation of the Palestinian identity for it adds another layer of complexity. Divergent notions of both agency and victimhood can be linked to feelings of hope, achievement, failure, and betrayal at different stages of this experience. The formation of identity and what it means to be a Palestinian in an increasingly diasporic existence that can be as close to home as Jordan is to Palestine or as far as Australia and the US is an active field of study that probes the multitude of Palestinian experiences in diaspora.

Approaching answers to these lines of inquiry can broaden and contextualize the Palestinian experience in Kuwait. The study will visit the particulars of a rich multifaceted moment in Palestinian-Kuwaiti history that lasted for more than fifty years and examine the impact and implications it imparted on the collective memory, identity, ethos, and social formations in the after years. The unfolding of the Palestinian identity continues to be shaped by global and interregional events and dynamics in which they are sometimes key players and sometimes victims finding ways to persevere. The topic at hand can also elucidate aspects of the fields in which it is nested including Palestinian studies, diaspora studies, transnational history in an increasingly globalized world, and postcolonial and Middle East studies.

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<sup>21</sup> Kuwait News Agency KUNA, Kuwaiti Decision to Reopen Palestine's Embassy in Kuwait Extolled, 18/12/2012, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?language=en&id=1498619>

<sup>22</sup> Palestine News and Info Agency Wafa, Palestinian Teachers from Gaza arrive for Work in Kuwait, 3/Nov/2018, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/96145>



## 1.2 Historiography

There are numerous issues pertaining to the Palestinian experience in Kuwait and its implications that are addressed in the historiography from various prisms and points of view. Issues that include the displacement of Palestinians, their diasporic identity and psychosocial formations, Kuwait's society and demography, and interregional geopolitics can contribute to our understanding of larger historical questions and debates. Rosemary Sayigh points out the problematic nature of a Palestinian identity that was marked by erasure after the Nakba of 1948 that displaced and de-territorialized hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and left the rest grappling with disenfranchisement in a geography that is no longer theirs.<sup>23</sup> After the second Arab defeat or the Naksa of 1967, another displacement and dispossession marked another erasure and a peculiar relationship with a homeland that is geographically close yet inaccessible. According to Sayigh, the onset of the Palestinian resistance and representation as a separate entity from the Arab front that failed to defend the Palestinian homeland transformed the Palestinian identity through reclaiming agency. Rashid Khalidi provides a thoroughly detailed analysis of the development of a Palestinian identity and national consciousness; he emphasizes the geopolitical aspects of a Palestinian nationalism while downplaying the particular nature of different Palestinian communities in and out of their historical homeland.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, Sayigh acknowledges the significance of specific experiences and relationships in host countries as well as the types of mobility that variably characterize the Palestinian presence outside the historic homeland.

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<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Sayigh, and Roger Heacock, "Palestinians: from Peasants to Revolutionaries a Quarter of a Century on Unexplored Problems of Palestinian Identity," *Temps et Espaces en Palestine: Flux et Resistances Identitaires of Times and Spaces in Palestine: the Flows and Resistances* (2008): 247.

<sup>24</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

This nebulous characterization of mobility in the Palestinian experience enlivens debates about the definition of diaspora. The overlapping designations of Palestinian communities outside their historical homeland create a multidimensional approach, showing that the diaspora means several things according to differing contexts. As Julie Peteet examines the distribution of Palestinian communities around the world, she identifies factors such as the refugee status, the close temporal and spatial proximity of their dislocation, and their insistence on the right to return as problematic to a diasporic status. She emphasizes the need to particularize types of mobility and displacement in order to better study and analyze each group.<sup>25</sup> Osten Wahlbeck argues that the study of refugees could benefit from diasporic studies as an analytical tool especially in relation to the social organization of the displaced community and its relationship to both host country and place of origin.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1990s, the term 'diaspora' became increasingly used as an umbrella term to refer to a host of mobilities in an increasingly globalized world. Robin Cohen includes victim as well as voluntary migration as categories of diaspora while also emphasizing the temporal depth of displacement as a requirement for this designation.<sup>27</sup> William Safran attaches certain conditions to using the term 'diaspora'. Such conditions practically apply to Palestinian communities in Kuwait. They include dispersal from a homeland, a collective memory of homeland, lack of integration in host countries, a myth of return, and persistent ties with the homeland.<sup>28</sup> This thesis will utilize this inclusive use of the term to refer to the Palestinian communities in Kuwait with further specifications provided for the different waves of immigration to Kuwait. It is worth

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<sup>25</sup> Julie Peteet, "Problematizing a Palestinian Diaspora," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 4 (2007): 627–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30069491>

<sup>26</sup> Osten Wahlbeck, "The Concept of Diaspora as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Refugee Communities," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 221–238.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An introduction* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99. [doi:10.1353/dsp.1991.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004).

noting here that Palestinians refer to their type of mobility as ‘Al Shatat’ often translated as ‘the dispersal’, but the term ‘diaspora’ could be another possible translation with rich implications and useful connections to existing literature.

The Palestinian presence in Kuwait can be best understood through the different phases and waves of newcomers that coincided with consecutive geopolitical events and involved different socioeconomic aspects of the Palestinian migrants. The beginning can be traced to the first educational mission of 1936 consisting of four educators sought by Kuwait, commissioned by the Palestinian council of Jerusalem with British approval. In a 1983 interview with Kuwait’s popular daily newspaper *Al Qabas*, Ahmad Shihab Al Din, the first Palestinian headmaster who led this initial group of educators, gave a detailed account of the group’s journey, work, and living conditions in Kuwait in the late 1930s.<sup>29</sup> British Archives also describe and commend the contributions of this early group of Palestinian teachers.<sup>30</sup>

From then on, Palestinians were recruited to the fledgling Gulf state and came in waves that tentatively corresponded to episodes in the Palestinian /Israeli conflict and the economic development in Kuwait until their mass exodus in the aftermath of the 1991 First Gulf War. In his book *Palestinians in Kuwait*, Shafeeq Ghabra illuminates different aspects of the history, contributions, and adaptation strategies of Kuwait’s Palestinian community until 1988 while placing special emphasis on family and social dynamics.<sup>31</sup> Other works depict this initial phase of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait but also focus on their situation during the Iraqi

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<sup>29</sup> Yusuf Al Shihab, The First Arab Teacher tells his Story, *Al Qabas*, 4149, Kuwait, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983, 7, <https://d1wnoexxju51ec.cloudfront.net/storage/pdfs/1983/4149-1983-12-01.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> ‘File 53/89 I (D 154) Kuwait Education’, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/545, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100000000193.0x000206](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x000206)> [accessed 7 September 2023]

<sup>31</sup> Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait: The Family and the Politics of Survival*.

occupation and the immediate aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait. Some of these works are written by A. Lesch, V. Mason, D. Perez, and S. Rosen.<sup>32</sup>

Farah Al Nakib uses the historical lens to demonstrate profound transformations in Kuwaiti society after the First Gulf War.<sup>33</sup> She traces the early formations of Kuwait as a porous maritime port city in the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the Sabah family and describes a rarely mentioned vibrant community of various races and traditions. This fascinating view of the pre-oil Kuwaiti society is elucidated in the letters of early travelers like Freya Stark and depicted in archived correspondence between British officials presiding over Kuwait at the time.<sup>34</sup> Farah Al Nakib contrasts the early inclusive Kuwaiti society with the increasingly exclusive post-oil Kuwait. She provides a contextualized analysis of Kuwait's changing immigration and citizenship regulations that affected social and cultural changes in Kuwait's society.

The post liberation urban development, according to Nakib, reflects a growing dividedness within Kuwait between different classes and nationalities. In her article "The People are Missing," Mai Al Nakib postulates that the forced absence of the Palestinian communities of Kuwait contributed to a growing sense of apathy, classism, and dividedness within the Kuwaiti society.<sup>35</sup> Nadia Eldemerdash broadens Nakib's postulation to argue that the depiction of stateless residents as a security threat is used as an excuse to enact extreme measures to tighten

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<sup>32</sup> Ann Lesch, "Palestinians in Kuwait," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 42–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537434>; Victoria Mason, "Revenge and terror: The destruction of the Palestinian community in Kuwait, in *Contemporary State Terrorism* (Routledge, 2009): 138-154. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203868355-15/revenge-terror-destruction-palestinian-community-kuwait-victoria-mason> ; Don Peretz, "The Palestinians since the Gulf War," *Current History* 92, no. 570 (1993): 32–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45316756>; Steven Rosen, "Kuwait expels thousands of Palestinians," *Middle East Quarterly* (2012).

<sup>33</sup> Farah Al Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*.

<sup>34</sup> Abdulla Y. Al Ghunaim, *Freya Stark in Kuwait 1932 and 1937*(Kuwait: Dar Al Buhuth Al Kuwaitia, 2010); File 4/1 General Information regarding Kuwait and Hinterland', British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/5/179, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100000000831.0x0000a6](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000000831.0x0000a6)> [accessed 25 August 2023]

<sup>35</sup> Al-Nakib, "'The People Are Missing': Palestinians in Kuwait."

immigration policies and further exclude nearly 70% of Kuwait's population, including expatriates and stateless residents, from citizenship and other privileges.<sup>36</sup>

Several studies discuss the details of the First Gulf War in general and the situation of the Palestinian communities in particular from different angles. Some scholars and analysts refer to the First Gulf War as the 'Gulf Crisis' for two reasons. The term 'crisis' incorporates the Iraqi invasion, occupation of Kuwait, the military operation, and the liberation. Some books and articles were written after the invasion but before the war. Some writers may have chosen to use the term 'Gulf Crisis' to highlight the diplomatic interregional relations rather than the military operation. As Palestinian-Kuwaiti eyewitnesses, Shafeeq Ghabra and Taghreed Alqudsi-Ghabra, provide two personal accounts of the situation in Kuwait as it unfolded during the first few months of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait.<sup>37</sup> R. Khalidi and A. Lesch shed light on the nuances of the political situation that triggered the hostile response to the Palestinian presence in Kuwait.<sup>38</sup> Some works probe the implications of the Palestinian exodus to new destinations, mainly Jordan, in terms of its impact on the economy and social dynamics in the new host country. They elucidate the initial shock felt by Palestinian/Jordanian returnees, their support systems, and their adjustment strategies. Writers that address this latter phase of the Palestinian-Kuwaiti experience include Le Troquer and Al-Oudat, N. Van Hear, and N. Colton.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nadia Eldemerdash, "Being and belonging in Kuwait: Expatriates, stateless peoples and the politics of citizenship," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 10, no. 2 (2015): 83-100.

<sup>37</sup> <sup>28</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, "The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait: An eyewitness account," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1991): 112-125; Tagreed Alqudsi-Ghabra, "Two Months under Iraqi Occupation: A Personal Account," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 29-39.

<sup>38</sup> Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," *Current History* 90, no. 552 (1991); A. Lesch, "Contrasting Reactions to the Persian Gulf Crisis: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians," *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 1 (1991): 30-50.

<sup>39</sup> Yann Le Troquer, and Rozenn Hommery al-Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan: The Palestinians' Third Exodus," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538306>; Nicholas Van Hear, "The impact of the involuntary mass 'return' to Jordan in the wake of the Gulf crisis," *International Migration Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 352-374; Nora Ann Colton, "Between 'Supply Shocked' Markets: The Case of Jordanian and Palestinian Returnees," *Structural Flaws in the Middle East Peace Process: Historical Contexts* (2002): 67-85.

Sara Jarrar probes memories of personal experiences through interviews to gauge the place of Kuwait in the collective remembrance and outlook of Palestinians who lived there.<sup>40</sup>

More recent works offer reflections on the experience as a whole from various perspectives. For example, I. Zelkowitz builds his article “A Paradise Lost?” on the nostalgic reminiscing of Palestinians who left Kuwait with reference to the vibrant community and opportunities they had there.<sup>41</sup> S. Ghabra links his personal biography with the growth and decline of the Palestinian presence in Kuwait while contextualizing it within the Palestinian resistance and diasporic existence since the initial exodus in 1948.<sup>42</sup> J. Abu-Lughod and E. Said reflect on the Palestinian experience in Kuwait and place it within a history of displacements and ruptures to settlement and community.<sup>43</sup> Said also explores the geopolitical crisis and isolation of the PLO that may have prompted and shaped the OSLO agreement. He also probes episodes of what he describes as a paradoxical Arab-Palestinian relationship. Mai Al-Nakib highlights the void created by the loss of the long-lived Palestinian community in Kuwait and by the silence of Kuwaitis who acknowledge and experience such loss.<sup>44</sup> The ambivalent attitudes of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait and of Kuwaitis towards Palestinians who once lived among them comprise an important part of the narrative that awaits further exploration. This convergence of memories and lived experiences with the events making up the outline of this story will be the focal point of this study.

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<sup>40</sup> Sara Jarrar, "The Second Exodus: The Impact of Kuwait on the Palestinian People," *Johns Hopkins University* 1, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>41</sup> Ido Zelkowitz, "A Paradise lost? The Rise and fall of the Palestinian Community in Kuwait," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 1 (2014): 86-99.

<sup>42</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>43</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The displacement of the Palestinians," *The Cambridge survey of world migration* (1995): 410; Edward Said, "Reflections on Twenty Years of Palestinian History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 5-22.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Nakib, "The People Are Missing," 2014.

While studies of the Palestinian diaspora offer a broad perspective of the processes and contexts of identity formation and social structures, studies that address the Palestinian experience in Kuwait focus narrowly on the details of the experience itself and its immediate aftermath. Building on these lines of inquiry, this study will probe further into the enduring implications of this unique moment in Palestinian history in order to particularize and contextualize this experience in the Palestinian diasporic collective. It will fill in the stranded memories and lived experiences of Kuwait's Palestinians within the geopolitical outline of interregional events and their consequences. One of its aims is to explore the lingering sociocultural and emotional impact expressed in narratives and recollections scattered in virtual social media communities, personal blogs, written and audiovisual interviews and anecdotes, and published autobiographies and semi-fictional memoirs.

### **1.3 Primary Sources**

Primary sources on the Palestinians in Kuwait come in several categories. First there are memoirs and accounts written by authors who lived through the experience themselves or interviewed individuals who lived through it. Prominent among such works are publications and interviews belonging to Shafeeq Ghabra who relates his own experience in Kuwait and links it to the situation of Kuwait's Palestinian communities in general. He also offers important testimonies to the events and nuanced sociopolitical and economic situation in Kuwait before, during, and immediately after the First Gulf War of 1991. Ghabra's memoirs, testimonies, and analysis of the numerous waves of Palestinian arrivals in Kuwait and their contributions in education, military, finance, hospitality, medicine, and construction are valuable resources for my research. His father Nazim Al Ghabra left Haifa after 1948 and worked in Iraq and Saudi Arabia before coming to Kuwait in 1952 as one of the earliest physicians to practice in Kuwait.

He treated emirs and formed valuable friendships with members of the royal family. Nazim Al Ghabra received Kuwaiti citizenship in appreciation of his services. Shafeeq Al Ghabra's dual status as a witness and an expert underscores the importance of his work on the subject. His post-Gulf War reflections can be gleaned through numerous articles and interviews, but most significantly through his book *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.<sup>45</sup> His autobiography titled *Unsafe Life* relates the various stages in his life that document his participation in the Palestinian resistance in the 1970s. It documents Palestinian experiences in different Arab countries but focuses on his personal life, career, and activism in Kuwait before and after the First Gulf War.<sup>46</sup>

Ghabra and his wife, Taghreed AlQudsi-Ghabra, presented separate eyewitness accounts of the Iraqi invasion that bolstered the Kuwaiti case for a strong international intervention to liberate Kuwait. The various episodes in S. Ghabra's life as a Palestinian-Kuwaiti are also articulated in a 16-episode-series of interviews on al Qabas, a Kuwaiti channel, where he engages with the presenter Ammar Taqqi, a Kuwaiti Anchor, in a dynamic interview revealing many of the accusations Kuwaitis make against the Palestinian residents and political leadership during the Iraqi occupation.<sup>47</sup> T.A. Ghabra published her own memoirs titled *When Mind is a Burden* in 2021.<sup>48</sup> She narrates important episodes in her life in Beirut and Kuwait and focuses on the social life and activism of Palestinian women in Kuwait.

Other autobiographies that pertain to this study include the autobiography of the educator and journalist from Jaffa Khairi Abuljebain, recollections of the first Palestinian headmaster

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<sup>45</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>46</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, *Unsafe Life* (Beirut: Dar Assaqi, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Shafeeq Ghabra, "The Black Box," Amer Taqi, April 19, 2020. Interview, 1:05.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfaB2n9wapw&list=PLL95OS4M68S\\_xtWS\\_kscqJ8Lpf99LbEt3&index=12](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfaB2n9wapw&list=PLL95OS4M68S_xtWS_kscqJ8Lpf99LbEt3&index=12)

<sup>48</sup> Taghreed AlQudsi-Ghabra, *When the Mind is a Burden* (Beirut: The Arab Agency for Studies and Publication, 2021).



Shihab Al Din, the account of Ahmad Abdul Rahman regarding his relationship with Yasser Arafat during and after the First Gulf War, and the creative memoirs of Nawal Halawa and Usaid Al-Hutary on life in Kuwait as Palestinians.<sup>49</sup> The reflections of a hundred Palestinians in the English-speaking diaspora are compiled in Yasir Suleiman's *Being Palestinian*.<sup>50</sup> In such reflections, the processes of identity formation, retrieval, and positioning within other identities can be gleaned. The place within memory of the various spaces and experiences of the Palestinian dispersal including the Palestinian moment in Kuwait is explored and articulated by those who lived through, engaged with, and interpreted such experiences.

Second, there are official governmental and diplomatic documents. Documents issued by the United Nations (UN) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will be used as primary sources to shed light on aspects of the broader events and statistics pertaining to the Palestinian residency and exodus from Kuwait. Early travelogues about Kuwait composed by prominent world travelers like Freya Stark, correspondence by residing British officials, and other archival material will be helpful to shed light on the changing Kuwaiti landscape, institutions, and demography. Diplomatic correspondence involving Palestinian and Kuwaiti officials reveals the concerns over the safety of Palestinians remaining in Kuwait in the immediate aftermath of its liberation.

Next, there are social media and internet sources. Numerous Palestinian families and individuals sought to document their individual or family experiences in Kuwait through video interviews that are available on YouTube. Two social media groups are of particular interest as

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<sup>49</sup> Khairi Abuljebain, *My Life in Palestine and Kuwait* (Amman: Dar Al Shurook, 2002); Yusuf Al Shihab, "The First Arab Teacher tells his Story", *Al Qabas*, 4149, Kuwait, Dec. 1, 1983, 7, <https://d1wnoevxju5lec.cloudfront.net/storage/pdfs/1983/4149-1983-12-01.pdf>; Ahmad Abdul Rahman, *I Lived during the Time of Arafat* (RamAllah: Dar AlHurriyah Publishing, 2014); Nawal Halawa, *AlAnkuraiziyah* (UAE: Midād lil-nashr wa-al-tawzī', 2017); Usaid Al-Hutary, Kuwait, *Baghdad, Amman* (Amman: Al Aan Publishing, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Yasir Suleiman ed., *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

they present diametrically opposed responses to the Palestinian experience in Kuwait. The bigger group which was established in Palestine in 2015 and has over one hundred and twenty thousand followers is titled "I was in Kuwait and I have Memories there."<sup>51</sup> The other is a much smaller page with only six hundred followers that is titled "How they tortured us in Kuwait."<sup>52</sup>

Experiences and reflections on the Palestinian experience in Kuwait are also recorded in blogs such as "I tell you what's in my pocket" by Jamil Abboud, a math teacher who lived in a refugee camp in Syria before settling in Kuwait and then resettling in Amman, Jordan.<sup>53</sup> Most primary sources are in Arabic and will be my own translation unless otherwise noted.

#### 1.4 Method and Theory

This thesis uses several theories to help answer its main questions. It uses elements of social and cultural history while relying on narratives that probe memories and emotions. The field of Diaspora Studies provides a basic framework for the study that helps to address aspects of the Palestinians experience in Kuwait such as identity development, relationship with host and homeland, deepening of collective memory, and reformation of social networks. The thesis is clearly related to transnational history that transcends national boundaries "by directing attention to the circuits and flows of social forces and discourses that span nations and cultures."<sup>54</sup> It also intersects with postcolonial history as the mass mobility, fragmented identity, and shifting geographies are tightly linked to colonial power-play and framed within an unstable geopolitical climate in the Middle East. It can be conceived as an intersection of diaspora studies with a

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<sup>51</sup> "I was in Kuwait and I have Memories there," Facebook Groups, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/810752075674170> March 20, 20023.

<sup>52</sup> "How they Tortured us in Kuwait," Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064343605803>

<sup>53</sup> Jamil Abboud, "I Tell you what's in my Pocket," blog, <https://jamilabboud.com/%d9%85%d8%b4%d8%a7%d9%87%d8%af-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ae%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%ac-%d8%a8%d8%b9%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9/> March 20, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Mae Ngai, "Promises and Perils of Transnational History," *Perspectives on history* 50, no. 9 (2012): 52-54, 53.

social and cultural history from below that explores transformations of culture and identity in response to layers of geopolitical turmoil affecting people of Palestinian origin. Ahn Hua argues in *Diaspora and Cultural Memory* that,

Diaspora theorizing opens up the discursive or symbiotic space for a discussion of many ideas, identification and affiliation, harming, desire, and homeland, nostalgia, exile and displacement, the invention of cultural traditions in the new world order, and the construction of hybrid identities, as well as cultural and linguistic practices, the building of communities and community boundaries, cultural memory and trauma, the politics of return, and the possibility of imagining geographical and cultural belonging beyond and within the nation state formation.<sup>55</sup>

While one of the main goals of this study is to present a master narrative of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait that includes events, memories, and interactions typical of what it was like to be a Palestinian in Kuwait before and during the First Gulf War, it is important to investigate the specific memories and emotions evoked by reflecting on this experience. Events and statistics gleaned from governmental and news sources will be coupled with individual reflections and lived experiences conveyed in memoirs and interviews. It is important in the process to find specific as well as shared strategies and responses to how the impact of the experience and the eventual rupture reshaped identity and relations, tinted memories, and rearranged attachments and loyalties. In trying to tap different memories of a shared moment in a shared space, various perspectives on the history of that moment will hopefully be elucidated in relation to eventual paths and destinations. Additional emotions of victimhood, precarity, and failure stemming from this experience may be offset by instances of success and recognition within new host communities, but such emotions also reconnect disillusioned Palestinians to their identity and their homeland.

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<sup>55</sup> Ahn Hua, "Diaspora and cultural memory," *Diaspora, memory, and identity: A search for home* (2005): 191-208, 191.

## 1.5 Study Outline

The thesis will be divided into five chapters. The introduction will include the main goals and arguments of the study and a historiography of its pertinent themes. This will introduce the three main questions of the thesis: the creation of Kuwait's Palestinian diaspora, the lived Palestinian experience in Kuwait, and the geopolitical and psycho-social implications of this experience. Primary sources and methodological aspects of the study will also be included.

The second chapter will address the first question in depth, situating the Palestinian presence in Kuwait, with its multiple phases, waves, and constituents within a general Palestinian diaspora, and particularize the type of mobility that characterize most, if not all, Palestinians who lived in Kuwait until the First Gulf War. The circumstances that brought Palestinians to Kuwait will be explored with reference to geopolitical and socioeconomic contexts in both Kuwait and the Palestinian homeland.

In the third chapter, an overview of the nature and dynamics of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait will be related with reference to facts and numbers and through probing the memories of individuals and communities that lived there. The focus will be on their particular experiences in Kuwait, how they remember it, and how they remember their life there. Lived experiences preserved in autobiographies, memoirs, and interviews with Palestinians in Kuwait will provide the key narratives of this chapter.

The fourth chapter will be an exploration of the impact of the Palestinian exodus on the levels of geopolitics, resettlement, emotions, memories, identity, and national consciousness as gleaned from memoirs, interviews, and narratives. The events that unfolded in the aftermath of the First Gulf War can provide a context for the experiences of the Palestinian individuals and families that had to relocate and start over. Exploring virtual communities of Palestinians who

lived in Kuwait will provide multilayered expressions of mixed feelings and memories regarding a shared Kuwaiti moment. Possible long-term impacts on identity formation and the trajectory of Palestinian geopolitics can be explored here with reference to available anecdotes and relevant events. Probing Kuwaiti attitudes towards Palestinians, especially those who lived with them in the past, offers a complicating but cautiously hopeful bend in the troubled relationship between the two Arab nations.

The last chapter will incorporate a recap of the study's main themes in relation to the initial questions. General implications will be provided regarding the development of identity, social formations, and cultural transformations within the collective memory of the Palestinians in general, and those who once lived in Kuwait in particular.

## 2 CHAPTER 2

Upon arriving at the Baghdad airport from Beirut, Khairi Abuljebain, a teacher from Jaffa, his two siblings, and his friend Hani Qaddomi, whom he met in Beirut, headed to the train station to travel to Basra. To his surprise, Khairi who lived in Egypt after the Nakba bumped into his cousin Yusuf, a skilled mechanic who was coming from Jordan with his friend Saadi. Both parties took the train to Basra on their way to Kuwait. From Basra, Khairi and his party took a small passenger plane with three other teachers and arrived in Kuwait on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1948.<sup>56</sup> There, he joined a growing number of Palestinians who served the budding Gulf State in different capacities and established a vibrant and thriving community in Kuwait that flourished during the next four decades.

This chapter will address the first set of questions pertaining to the particular features of Kuwait's Palestinian diaspora, how and why they settled in Kuwait, and what drew the different waves of Palestinian immigrants to the young Gulf State. Tackling these questions also entails situating the Palestinian presence in Kuwait, with its multiple phases, waves, and constituents within a general Palestinian diaspora, and particularizing the type of mobility that characterize Palestinian groups who lived in Kuwait until the First Gulf War. The circumstances that brought Palestinians to Kuwait will be explored with reference to geopolitical and socioeconomic contexts in both Kuwait and the Palestinian homeland.

### 2.1 Initial Encounters

The beginning of the Palestinian presence in Kuwait predates the official recruitment of the first group of teachers in 1936. Friendly relations that are based on similar religious and nationalist sympathies were in place as early as 1923 when a Palestinian delegate headed by the Mufti of Jerusalem and the head of the High Islamic Council of Palestine Hajj Amine Al

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<sup>56</sup> Khairi Abuljebain, *My life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

Husseini visited Kuwait presumably to solidify Muslim brotherhood and Arab unity between the two nations and to collect donations to maintain Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> They were welcomed by Kuwait's Emir at the time Sheikh Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah. The Palestinian delegate managed to collect more than 1362 Egyptian pounds from Kuwaiti merchants and notables even before the discovery of oil in Kuwait. Prominent Kuwaitis such as Sheikh Abdel Aziz Al Rashid visited and studied in Palestine as early as 1930.<sup>58</sup>

When the head of the Education Council in Kuwait Sheikh Abdulla Al Jaber Al Sabah decided to develop Kuwait's educational system, he contacted Jerusalem's Mufti to request Palestinian teachers. A group of four teachers arrived in Kuwait in 1936. The group was headed by Ahmad Shihab Al Din, a talented teacher from Jaffa. He gave an account of his trip to Kuwait with his three colleagues in an interview with *Al Qabas*, a daily Kuwaiti newspaper in 1983.<sup>59</sup> Before coming to Kuwait, Shihab Al Din was a teacher in Iraq, but decided to join the team assigned to Kuwait after he was recommended by the Islamic Council of Palestine. He left his hometown in Jaffa through Haifa to Syria where he met the other group members who then traveled by bus to Baghdad, then by train to Basra, and finally arrived in Kuwait. They were welcomed by Sheikh Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah who headed Kuwait's Education Council and stayed as guests for a month in his palace. Then, they moved to a dorm room connected to their school Al Mubarakiya where Shihab Al Din became the headmaster and the other three taught various subjects. Al Mubarakiya was established by three Kuwaiti notables in 1911 in what is today the center of Kuwait City in response to the growing needs for more formal education of

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<sup>57</sup>Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

<sup>58</sup> Hanan FarajAllah, "The Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations (1990-2014)," (MA Thesis, Gaza: Al Aqsa University, 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Yusuf Al Shihab, "The First Arab Teacher tells his Story," *Al Qabas*, 4149, Kuwait, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983, 7, <https://d1wnoevxju5lec.cloudfront.net/storage/pdfs/1983/4149-1983-12-01.pdf>

Kuwaiti youth. It remained open as a high school until it was transformed into Kuwait's Central Library in 1985.<sup>60</sup>

As the headmaster, Shihab Al Din gathered the six hundred students in the school, assessed and assigned them to their grades which stopped at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level and started moving up to the next level each year thereafter. The curriculum was adopted from Iraq because of geographic and cultural proximity. Shihab Al Din brought books from Beirut on his way back from his summer stay in Palestine. He brought in a chair from Basra as a model to be reproduced locally for students to use. He stayed in Kuwait for six years until 1943. Afterwards, he went back to Palestine, but he came back in 1953 and worked in the Ministry of Interior Affairs until his retirement. His colleague Mohammad Al Maghribi, who came from Jerusalem, started the Physical Education program and the Kuwaiti Boy Scouts.<sup>61</sup>

After visiting Al Mubarakiya School in 1939, the British resident described the educational system in Kuwait to the British agent, Major Galloway, and commented on the role of the Palestinian pioneers:

I think the government has been wise to engage Palestinian teachers, rather than Egyptians, Syrians, or Iraqis, and in my opinion great credit is due to the Palestinian Headmaster for the improvements that he has effected in Education in Kuwait during the past three years. Most of the assistant headmasters seemed to be competent men, and I was particularly impressed by the efficiency and enthusiasm of the young Palestinian master who is in charge of the Boy Scouts.<sup>62</sup>

Before delving further into this initial wave of Palestinian experts that comprised the first block of Kuwait's Palestinian diaspora, it is important to provide a description of the geopolitical and economic situation in both Palestine and Kuwait in the late 1930s and 1940s. Both countries

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<sup>60</sup>Shawq Al Thuwaini, KUNA, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3018423>

<sup>61</sup>Yusuf Al Rifa', *Interview with the son of Muhammad Al Maghribi*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBIRrm5R-UE>

<sup>62</sup>'File 53/89 I (D 154) Kuwait Education' [67r] (148/470), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/545, in Qatar Digital Library <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023602412.0x000095](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023602412.0x000095)> [accessed 12 September 2023]



were still under the British Mandate, but their geopolitical situation was drastically different. Whereas Palestine's British Mandate at the time was the result of the post-WWI colonial reshuffling of Ottoman territories, Kuwait's ruling Emir Mubarak Al Sabah signed a protection agreement with Britain in 1899 to uphold the sheikhdom's autonomy in relation to its neighbors, curb the influence of the Ottoman Empire, and secure his position and the position of the ruling family.<sup>63</sup>

## 2.2 History of Kuwait

Since its emergence as an urban settlement in 1716, Kuwait, which was known then as Grane, witnessed numerous economic and demographic transformations.<sup>64</sup> Its strategic location as a seaport that was also spacious supported vibrant maritime activities. Its oil reserves, discovered later, turned it into one of the major oil-producing countries in the world. The first settlers in Kuwait migrated to the Northern part of the Arabian Peninsula from Najd looking for relief from drought and famine. The Utub clan set up their new settlement with the permission of the larger Bani Khalid Najdi Tribe facing their small fort or 'Kut' from which the name Kuwait was derived. Signaling of the birth of a new viable and autonomous sheikhdom, the first Al-Sabah rulers built a wall around their coastal settlement in 1760.<sup>65</sup>

The city wall was demolished and rebuilt several times afterwards as the settlement continued its expansion to include nearby territory and the economy and population of Kuwait steadily grew. In 1920, Sheikh Salem Al Sabah, the son of Mubarak I, ordered the rebuilding of Kuwait's wall, not only as a reflection of expanding territories, but also as a form of protection

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<sup>63</sup>Salim Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Oakland: California University Press, 2017); Abdel Aziz Al Rasheed, *Kuwait History* (Dar Al Haya: Beirut, 1978).

<sup>64</sup> Embassy of the State of Kuwait, "Name", [https://www.kuwait-embassy.or.jp/E\\_outline\\_04.html#:~:text=Kuwait%2C%20or%20officially%20the%20State,and%20Kout%20is%20a%20fortress](https://www.kuwait-embassy.or.jp/E_outline_04.html#:~:text=Kuwait%2C%20or%20officially%20the%20State,and%20Kout%20is%20a%20fortress).

<sup>65</sup> 'Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf. Vol. II. Geographical and Statistical. J G Lorimer. 1908' [1919] (2046/2084), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/C91/4, in Qatar Digital Library <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023515721.0x00002f](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023515721.0x00002f)> [accessed 23 October 2023]

on the heels of an armed conflict between the Sheikh and Ibn Saud's militant Ikhwan fighters in Jahra.<sup>66</sup> Sheikh Mubarak I or Mubarak the Great had many enemies driven by greed but also by revenge since he assassinated his two brothers before ascending to the sheikhdom of Kuwait in 1896. His nephews and those close to his deceased siblings left Kuwait and plotted attacks against Mubarak I with help from the Ottomans who wanted to fully annex Kuwait to the Basra province. After several encounters with Yusuf Al Ibrahim and Ibn Rasheed, Mubarak I sought British protection and secretly signed the treaty of 1899.<sup>67</sup>

Despite British protection, Kuwaitis fought Najd's Al Ikhwan forces in the city of Jahra in 1920 and faced persistent threats of annexation from Iraq and the Ottomans. Kuwait remained a British protectorate until its independence under the rule of Sheikh Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah in 1961 which brought an end to the 1899 treaty. Close relations with Britain and the US lingered. The Kuwait oil company KOC was a joint Anglo-American alliance until Kuwait's oil rights were nationalized in 1975. British troops which were quickly replaced by Arab League forces helped ward off Iraqi incursions in 1961 that started as soon as the protection treaty ended.<sup>68</sup> Palestinians in Kuwait volunteered to carry arms to defend Kuwait with their Kuwaiti peers against the Iraqi infringements. Ahmad Suqairy who represented Palestine at the Arab League helped Kuwait overcome the Soviet Veto to block its membership in the UN after independence. Upon the request of Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah, Kuwait's Prime Minister at the time, Shuqairy assured the Soviets that Kuwait is unaffiliated with the British anymore.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*.

<sup>67</sup> Al Rasheed, *Kuwait History*.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*.

<sup>69</sup> Jihad Sha'ban Salim Al Battash, "Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations 1961-1987", *Al Tareekhia Al Falastinia* no. 2, 2011, 85-127, retrieved <https://search.mandumah.com/Record/981471>; Abuljebain, *My Life in Palestine and Kuwait*.

However, the shift in the Soviet position only materialized after the fall of its Iraqi ally Abdel Karim Al Qasim in 1963.<sup>70</sup>

New settlers came from Najd, Zubara, Iran, Zubair, and other areas in Arabia in the 1890s and contributed to enhancing economic prospects as they worked in fishing, pearling, ship-making, and trade. A general increase in trade was due to the introduction of British steamships by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the suppression of piracy in the Gulf, and opening trade agencies for Kuwaiti merchants in India and other commercial centers in the Indian Ocean.<sup>71</sup> Kuwait's skilled local ship-making industry and a boom in pearling due to increased demands for this luxury item and its plentiful availability in the Gulf also helped boost Kuwait's maritime economy and create wealth among its merchants and notables. Kuwait's trade destination was India for the most part but also East Africa and the Levant.<sup>72</sup>

Kuwaiti society included urban merchants, Bedouins who occupied seasonal or steady jobs in pearling or fishing, and workers, artisans, and entrepreneurs who resettled from neighboring towns. Pearling was the major driver of prosperity in Kuwait until cultured pearling dampened its appeal and contributed to Kuwait's economic crisis in the 1930s.<sup>73</sup> The British traveler Freya Stark noted in her first visit to Kuwait in 1932 that the prices of pearls were extremely low because of concern over cultured pearls and that those with money should buy now. She also expressed her admiration of the local ships especially the elegant *dhow*, the larger *bum*, and the bold but simple *sambuq*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Hiba Al Sabe'ee, The Position of the Soviet Union towards the Independence of Kuwait 1961-1963, *College of Arts in Port Said University Journal* no. 21 (July 2022), Part I.

[https://jfpsu.journals.ekb.eg/article\\_244759\\_820cc5fa3d535a30c26116f1707a617e.pdf](https://jfpsu.journals.ekb.eg/article_244759_820cc5fa3d535a30c26116f1707a617e.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> Al Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Al Rasheed, *Kuwait History*.

<sup>74</sup> Malise Ruthven, *Freya Stark in Iraq and Kuwait* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1994).

A form of pluralism existed in pre-oil Kuwait in which various groups maintained their customs and beliefs while being effective members of Kuwait's society thus creating a distinctly vibrant "social life and cultural milieu of Kuwait as a port town."<sup>75</sup> While most residents were Sunni Muslims, some of the richest mercantile families were Shiite, and some were Jewish. A few Armenian and Assyrian Christians settled in Kuwait from Anatolia to escape Ottoman persecution. Large numbers of Persians and Africans were part of the population. Slavery was coming to an end in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Freya Stark notes in her second visit to Kuwait in 1937 that slave trade was completely stopped, and existing slaves were set free.<sup>76</sup> Newcomers would be absorbed in existing social networks such as the neighborhood or firij, or aboard fishing or trade ships that spent months at sea. Even before independence, Kuwaitis sought popular political representation in 1938 with the Majlis movement that became the seed for Kuwait's parliament or 'Majlis Al Umma'.<sup>77</sup> This movement was led by notable Sunni urbanite merchants expressing growing dissent towards the ruler, Sheikh Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, regarding perceived unjust distribution of resources, corruption, and lack of investment in the development of infrastructure. It demanded access to the decision-making process and evolved over time.<sup>78</sup>

In the pre-oil Kuwait, the rule of Al-Sabah family was relatively symbolic. A class of merchants did most of the micro-management of interior affairs. Taxes that were extracted from merchants funded a Municipality in 1930 and an Education Council in 1936. City notables also established Al Mubarakiya, Kuwait's first formal school in 1911. It initially served 254

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> Ruthven, *Freya Stark in Iraq and Kuwait*, 94.

<sup>77</sup> Michael S. Casey, *The History of Kuwait* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> File 45/23 I (D 140) Kuwait Reforms', British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/468, in *Qatar Digital*

Library <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100000000193.0x0001b9](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x0001b9)> [accessed 21 October 2023]

students.<sup>79</sup> This initial school followed the same rudimentary system of Katatib which involved repetitive teaching of Arabic and recitation of the Quran that existed in mosques before. Some math skills needed for commercial calculations were added. Another school, Al Ahmadiyah, was established in 1921 due to resistance in Al Mubarakiyah school board to the inclusion of English and modern sciences in the program. The two schools were locally funded and teaching was not systematized. The British agent comments in a note in 1933 on the state of education in Kuwait at the time:

Except for the school conducted by the American Mission, there were for many years no educational facilities beyond those offered in the ordinary Mullas schools, which here, as in other places, only teach a sufficiency of Arabic to enable the pupils to read the Quran the best of these is the Madrasat-al-Mubarakiyah, but even it does not pretend to give a general education. In 1921, however, a subscription was raised to endow a secondary Muslim school, and a sum of 8 s.10, 000 a year was subscribed. In September of that year the Madrasat-al-Ahmadiyah was accordingly opened. Owing to lack of funds, however, it has not been able to provide very efficient masters, but it is undoubtedly a step in the right direction.<sup>80</sup>

The Emir and city notables grappled with the issue of education and decided to establish the Education Council in 1936 and sought the assistance of the Palestine Council to send Palestinian teachers to assist in that regard.

### **2.3 History of Palestine**

Meanwhile, Palestinians were grappling with their own geopolitical challenges as a massive strike swept Palestinian territories in response to British policies and bloody confrontations with local Palestinians. As the southern part of the Great Syria and an Ottoman province, Palestine as delineated by the Ottomans in WWI with the exception of the Sidon

<sup>79</sup> Shawq Al Thuwaini, KUNA, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3018423>

<sup>80</sup> 'File 4/1 General Information regarding Kuwait and Hinterland' [21r] (41/474), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/5/179, in Qatar Digital Library <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100040050673.0x00002a](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100040050673.0x00002a)> [accessed 23 September 2023]

province was assigned by the League of Nations to Great Britain under the Mandates system.<sup>81</sup>

“In principle, the Mandate was meant to be in the nature of a transitory phase until Palestine attained the status of a fully independent nation, a status provisionally recognized in the League’s Covenant, but in fact the Mandate’s historical evolution did not result in the emergence of Palestine as an independent nation.”<sup>82</sup> Britain had promised in the Balfour Declaration of 1918 to help the Zionist Organization establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. Growing conflicts, revolts, and confrontations between local Palestinians and British troops and Jewish groups between 1920 and 1947 drove Britain to concede that its commitments towards Palestinians and Jews are irreconcilable and ceded the matter to the newly formed United Nations. After pondering the issue, the UN forwarded a Partition plan in Resolution 181 in 1947 pushing to establish two states. Israel declared its independence in May, 1948 and acquired through war 77% of Mandatory Palestine. More than half of the Palestinian population fled the war or were expelled.<sup>83</sup> This unfolding situation was the background of the Palestinian immigration to Kuwait after 1948.

In his memoir, the educator and early Palestinian immigrant to Kuwaiti Khairi Abuljebain describes his childhood in Jaffa during the tumult 1930s and the consecutive revolts of the Palestinian locals against the coercive policies of the British and the mass migration and land acquisition of Europe’s Jewry in Palestine.<sup>84</sup> He reminisces on his family’s thriving orange export business in Jaffa and the six-month-long strike that started there in April, 1936 and spread throughout Palestinian cities and villages until it was halted based on the recommendation of the High Arab council to allow negotiations with the British. Then, he relates consecutive

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<sup>81</sup> Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine*.

<sup>82</sup> “The Question of Palestine”, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/unispal/history2/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-i-1917-1947/>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

waves of confrontations and military retaliation that included the demolition of the old city of Jaffa in June of 1936. Abuljebain recalls increased British crackdowns, restrictions, arrests, and executions. He also points out political rivalries in local municipal elections between the two most politically prominent families then, Al Husseini and Al Nashashibi; the latter was deemed an oppositional movement.

Abuljebain relates life in Palestine during WWII and the economic hardship and state of emergency in Jaffa and Palestine in general. He also relates how Jaffa was attacked after the UN Partition of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs and was eventually taken by the Jewish forces in April, 1948. Most of Jaffa's Arab residents fled by sea through the Jaffa port due to the heavy bombardment of the city and its suburbs. Those who stayed were gathered in one neighborhood, Al Ajami, under heavy restrictions. Abuljebain's family, like many others, ended up in Egypt where they were held in camps and then were issued Egyptian travel documents that did not allow them to work locally. Many young Palestinians including Khairi Abuljebain sought and obtained work contracts in Kuwait, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia. Once they left Egypt, their travel documents did not permit them to come back.

In addition to becoming refugees in the West Bank or neighboring countries, Palestinians from the areas that became Israel lost their properties, businesses, and the norms and hierarchies that organized their social life. As the Palestinians were faced with the harsh new reality of loss and displacement, they responded in different ways.<sup>85</sup> Palestinian refugees from the 1948 areas flooded the West Bank, which was under Jordanian jurisdiction, and added an estimated number of 363,689 refugees to its population of 400,000 people, many of whom lost their jobs in the fallen cities.<sup>86</sup> The West Bank population also lost access to the coastal Mediterranean ports in

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<sup>85</sup>Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*. .

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

Haifa and Jaffa which used to be economic hubs and provided jobs and export points to Palestinian crops and products. The Rhodes Treaty with Jordan expanded the lands acquired by Israel in 1949 which led to the Palestinians' loss of numerous fertile land and valleys that used to belong to West Bank towns and villages.<sup>87</sup> In addition, rough weather led to failed crops between 1949 and 1951. Those years were termed 'the years of the dates' because Iraq used to send dates as sustenance to villagers in the West Bank. Refugees repeatedly tried to return to their towns and villages until Israel banned them from returning and used bombardment of camps and military force to stop such attempts.<sup>88</sup>

Instead of relying on existing family trade and assets, young Palestinians realized that they had to become self-reliant and chart new pathways. They shouldered the financial burdens of their families through work and migration. Ghabra roughly describes two immigration destinations that were taken by young educated Palestinians. People from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah tended to migrate to the US while Palestinians from Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilia, and Tulkarm went to the Gulf.<sup>89</sup>

#### **2.4 The First Wave of Palestinian Immigrants to Kuwait**

Before oil was discovered in commercial quantities or deemed one of Kuwait's major financial resources, Kuwaiti merchants and notables took the lead to build and improve Kuwait's infrastructure especially in terms of education and services. During the 1930s, Kuwait went through an economic crisis that was partially an extension of the global economic depression at the time. It was also an aftereffect of the growing popularity of Japan's cultured pearls which dampened local pearling, one of Kuwait's major pre-oil resources. None the less, the taxes

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<sup>87</sup>UN Peace Maker, 1949

[https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20JO\\_490403\\_Hashemite%20Jordan%20Kingdom-Israel%20General%20Armistice%20Agreement.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20JO_490403_Hashemite%20Jordan%20Kingdom-Israel%20General%20Armistice%20Agreement.pdf)

<sup>88</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 106-108.



extracted from wealthy merchants whose businesses were still thriving due to active export and import transactions funded efforts to establish the local Municipality in 1930 and the Education Council in 1936.

Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem led efforts to recruit a group of Palestinian teachers nominated by the High Arab Council in Jerusalem. Palestinian teachers were known in the region, especially in Iraq, for their competency.<sup>90</sup> The Palestinian educator and writer Darwish Meqdadi worked with the Arab Nationalist intellectual Sati Al Husri in the 1920s. He later came to Kuwait and headed its Education Council from 1950 to 1952. The first group of Palestinian educators that arrived in 1936 was headed by Ahmad Shihab Al Din from Jaffa who received his training and worked in Iraq a year earlier. His scholarship to Iraq to receive his higher education was prompted by King Faisal’s recommendation reflecting the Hashemite King’s Arab nationalist tendencies. The other three members represented two teachers from Jerusalem and one from Haifa.<sup>91</sup> Khamees Najm taught Social Studies; Mohammad Jaber Al Hadidi taught English; and Mohammad Al Maghribi taught Physical Education and started Kuwait’s first Boy Scouts. Their assignment to Kuwait ended in 1942.

Ahmad Shihab Al Din relates the circumstances in which he and his colleagues came to Kuwait and the work and projects they carried out during their stay in Kuwait.<sup>92</sup> He notes that his salary as the head of the mission, headmaster of Al Mubarakiya School, and manager of the Education Council was 160 Rupees; the other teachers were given 120 Rupees, whereas the average salary of Arab teachers was 60 Rupees and Kuwaitis were given 13 Rupees. This reflects

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<sup>90</sup> Khalid Abu Qaddoom, Al Zuwair and the Pursuit of the Palestinian Pioneering Educators, *Turathuna*, June 16, 2019, <http://www.torathona.org/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b2%d9%88%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%ad%>

<sup>91</sup> “Pages from Kuwait’s History,” Al Roumi Family Chanel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTMmGSloj2U&t=1901s>.

<sup>92</sup> Yusuf Al Shehab, “The First Arab Teacher tells his Story.”

their status as experts with huge responsibilities at this early stage in the development of Kuwait's educational establishment.

Shihab Al Din relates some of his responsibilities that included systematizing the rudimentary educational system in Al Mubarakdiyya and Al Ahmadiyya schools and introducing more scientific subjects and social studies with special focus on math and commerce in response to family demands. Most Kuwaitis saw the future of their children in business and trade. For this, the Education Council adopted the Iraqi curriculum. Shihab Al Din brought the books from Beirut, made improvements to the school buildings, brought in chairs, hired teachers, conducted training of Kuwaiti teachers, helped found new schools in other parts of Kuwait, and supervised traditional style 'Madrasas' or 'Katatib' that taught local students Arabic, religion, and rudimentary math. He also contacted two female Palestinian teachers Waseefa and Rifqa Oudeh who arrived with their brother, a PE teacher, to start the first girls' school, Al Sharqia, in Kuwait in 1937.<sup>93</sup>

Other Palestinian educators joined in and worked in Kuwait's budding school system. Another Palestinian educational mission was sent by the Palestinian High Council in 1938.<sup>94</sup> Individual recruits joined in and some stayed even after the original assignment ended in 1942 and Syrian, Lebanese, and Egyptian educators and administrators took over. Due to disputes with Kuwait's government at the time, the Egyptian mission leading the Education Council was terminated in 1950 and from then on, Palestinians were recruited once more to lead the education reform and development. Darwish Meqdadi, an experienced Arab nationalist from Tulkarm, lead

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<sup>93</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of Palestinian Diaspora*.

<sup>94</sup> Kuwait's Ministry of Education, *The History of Education in Kuwait*, 2015, <https://moe.edu.kw/about/Pages/History.aspx>

the Council for two years; he, then, assisted the Kuwaiti head Abdel Aziz Hussein until Meqdadi died in 1961.<sup>95</sup>

This active recruitment of Palestinian teachers and administrators coincided with the Nakba that forced Palestinians from the 1948 regions to resettle in Gaza and the West Bank, or become refugees in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, or Lebanon. As Hilary Kalisman notes in her book *Teachers as State Builders in the Middle East*, educators in the region were members of an elite group with a nationalist project and aspiration and a strong influence on the Arab social and political milieu before the advent of mass education.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, the early Palestinian immigrants in this elite group brought with them their personal tragedies, political opinions, and nationalist aspirations. Their influence went beyond basic education to convey and build Arab nationalist identities for their students and host societies as a whole.<sup>97</sup> Darwish Meqdadi was a well-known nationalist activist and author in Iraq then Kuwait. Several teachers in this group helped found the Palestinian movement in Kuwait. Khairi Abuljebain, who is an experienced teacher from Jaffa, was among this group of early founders of the Palestinian political movement in Kuwait.

The Abuljebain family, who were orange growers, teachers, and business owners, became refugees in Egypt.<sup>98</sup> There, Khairi Abuljebain managed to escape the restricted refugee camp, Al Qunaitra, where Palestinian refugees were held. He also helped Mohammad Najm, a former teacher in Kuwait who went back to Palestine when his commission ended in 1942, escape the Egyptian refugee camp. He worked with the House of Kuwait in Cairo, an early version of an embassy, to secure Najm's return as a teacher to Kuwait. Khairi followed up with

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<sup>95</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

<sup>96</sup> Hilary Falb Kalisman, *Teachers as State Builders: Education and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>97</sup> Talat Al Rushood, "Modern Education and Arab Nationalism in Kuwait" (PhD diss., University of London, 2016) [https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24384/1/Al-Rashoud\\_4381.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24384/1/Al-Rashoud_4381.pdf)

<sup>98</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

the formal procedures and escorted him to the plane leaving to Beirut then Kuwait. He mentions helping two other former teachers travel to Kuwait from Egypt's refugee camp. In turn, Najm helped Khairi, his wife, and sister get teaching positions in Kuwait in 1948.

Abuljebain relates his journey to Kuwait with his sister and younger brother through Beirut, Baghdad, and then Basra. His hometown friend, Yusuf Sa'di Abu Zhuhair, accompanied the group on his way to Kuwait to work as an accountant. In Beirut, Abuljebain met another prominent Palestinian figure, Hani Qaddomi who worked in the Passport Department in Jaffa under the British mandate and was newly assigned a position as the head of the new Kuwaiti Passport and Immigration Department based on the recommendation of a Lebanese counselor to Kuwait's Emir who frequented the Passport Department in Jaffa. Qaddomi and Abuljebain were high school classmates in Jerusalem. In Baghdad's train station, Khairi Abuljebain also met his cousin Yusuf, who had a car repair shop in Jaffa and was headed to Kuwait to manage Al Ghanem Car Repairs, one of the biggest in Kuwait at the time. In Basra, he met seven other Palestinian teachers also headed to Kuwait.<sup>99</sup> This group of thirteen young Palestinians starting a new chapter in their lives in Kuwait was one of many that set a foundation for a vibrant and effective Palestinian community in Kuwait over the next forty years.

The age group that made the journey to Kuwait at that point was primarily made up of young adults; most were in their mid twenties. Ghabra argues that this young segment of the Palestinian population became the main providers for their parents and siblings who were either refugees or suffering economic hardships in the remaining the Palestinian territories. Ghabra cites a marked increase in the mortality rate of those over 45 in the years between 1948 -1953. This may be attributed to their desperation, chronic illnesses, and depression as most lost their livelihoods and communities and were facing an unknown future. Another trait of this segment

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<sup>99</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

of Palestinian leaving to Kuwait was their educational and skill levels. Khairi Abuljebain notes that most work visas offered to Palestinians at the time were for teaching positions. Not many other jobs were available to Palestinian immigrants since Kuwait was still small and relatively underdeveloped. However, there were numerous Palestinian pioneers in key fields other than education including medicine, engineering, armed services, and various administrative fields.<sup>100</sup>

In the medical field, the Palestinian Sami Beshara, also from Jaffa, was one of the early doctors to work in Kuwait before 1948. After the Nakba, numerous doctors came to work in Kuwait's Amiri Hospital, the first national Kuwaiti hospital founded in 1942. Two of these early physicians were Nazim Al Ghabra from Haifa and Ali Atawna from Beer Shiva who came to Kuwait in 1952. The two worked in the various clinics in and out of the Amiri Hospital until they were sent by Kuwait's government to study and receive training in Britain. They were later assigned important positions in the Amiri Hospital. Al Atawna became the head surgeon while Al Ghabra became the head of Cardiology. While they pursued further specialization, they remained key medical personnel and served in leading positions within the Kuwaiti Health Ministry. They also formed personal relations with the Emirs of Kuwait, first Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah and then Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah. Another Palestinian medical administrator from Acre was Adel Jarrah who served as the general inspector in Al Amiri Hospital between 1953 and 1962 before pursuing higher positions in the diplomatic corp. Most nurses at the time were Palestinian Christian young women who graduated from missionary schools in Palestine.<sup>101</sup>

Palestinian women were also early participants in the development of education in Kuwait. As mentioned earlier, the three sisters who came to Kuwait after they were recruited by

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<sup>100</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

<sup>101</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 79-80.

the Palestinian headmaster Shihab Al Din jumpstarted girls' education in Kuwait.<sup>102</sup> They were joined in 1942 by the pioneering Kuwaiti teacher and educator, Maryam Al Saleh. Palestinian, female teachers worked in several schools from then on. Two significant examples are Rabiha AlDajani Al Meqdadi and Salwa Abu Khadra.

Rabiha Al Dajani came to Kuwait with her husband in 1950 to work as a teacher and administrator in all Sharqiya girls' school.<sup>103</sup> She introduced several improvements to the school including adding a small garden and a yard for the students to have their morning assembly. She later founded another school in the island of Failaka.<sup>104</sup> Her education in Jerusalem enabled her to obtain a diploma from the British Institute and was appointed as a teacher and a radio broadcaster by the British Mandate government at the time. She was the first Arab anchor in the radio station 'Hona Al Quds'. When appointed by the British mandate government in 1943, she had to drive a car to work which was also a first in Jerusalem at the time. After the Nakba, she traveled with her first husband to several Arab cities. She was recruited with her second husband, the prominent nationalist and educator Darwish Meqdadi to work in Kuwait in 1951. In addition to teaching in the first girls' schools in Kuwait, she initiated a literacy program for adults and started one of the first private schools in Kuwait, Al Jeel Al Jadeed in 1964. She paid special attention to language arts, particularly theater and radio broadcasting. She also worked in Kuwait's radio station and left a significant imprint on Kuwaiti media.

She proudly recalls in her memoir *My journey through Time* her friendship with Sheikh Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah, who is hailed as the father of Kuwait's independence and founder

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<sup>102</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>103</sup> Yusuf Al Saree', Interview with Rabiha Al Dajani, 2021,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG140WBTc1A&t=1250s>

<sup>104</sup> Yacob Yusuf Al Haji, Eulogy for Rabiha Al Meqdadi, Al Qabas, April 8, 2020.

<https://alqabas.com/article/5766862-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9>

of the modern State of Kuwait.<sup>105</sup> In one encounter with the Sheikh, she sought his approval to persuade the girls in her school to remove the abaya, the black robe that Kuwaiti women traditionally wore, during a reception of the Algerian freedom fighter Jamila Abu Hraid. This was a big step in Kuwait's conservative society, but he approved it, and told her to approach the issue tactfully so as not to stir any objections. Indeed, the ladies in the reception of the Algerian figure wore modest dresses and head scarves, but with no abayas. This was a big step at the time and no objections were registered by the girls or their families. Her relationship with the homeland was strong and she recalls being asked to sell a lot of land she had in Hebron. Instead, she donated it for the locals to build a girls' school that was named after her. This is one example of the connection between Palestinian immigrants who succeeded in Kuwait and their homeland, a connection that was strong and steadfast. In some cases, this relationship with the homeland was a lifelong goal and obsession. The life and career of Salwa Abu Khadra illustrate this high level of commitment to the homeland.

Born in Jaffa in 1929, Salwa Abu Khadra lived with her parents until the confrontations with the British became overly dangerous in the 1940s. At that point her father sent his wife and daughter to Syria; he stayed with his son and together they actively participated in the Palestinian resistance to British troops at the time until the Nakba in 1948. At that point, the two had to leave to Syria. She posits that her father died in his forties due to grief. After both parents passed away, she decided to join her grandmother and her aunt in Gaza, which was under Egyptian administration, so she and her young brother went on a fishing boat from Syria to Gaza. She expressed her sorrow as they passed by the coast of Jaffa.<sup>106</sup> She arrived to Gaza with her young

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<sup>105</sup> Rabiha Al Dajani Al Meqdadi, *My Journey through Time* (Beirut, 2000).

<sup>106</sup> Yusuf Abdulla Mahmoud, "My Meeting with her: the Activist Salwa Abu Khadra", Rai Al Youm, April 11, 2023. <https://www.raialyoum.com/%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%>

brother in 1954 and worked as a head teacher in the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). Two years after she got married in 1955, she and her husband headed to Kuwait. After three years of staying at home, she worked briefly in the health ministry then decided to start a preschool and a daycare. She spent a whole year preparing for this project and studying educational and administrative material before she launched her small daycare that was the first of its kind in Kuwait.<sup>107</sup> Her daycare, Dar Al Hanan, significantly expanded in the following years to become a full-fledged, reputable private school.

Her relationship with the homeland was a prime driver for much of her activism before and after arriving to Kuwait. She was a cofounder of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) in 1967 and a member of the Fatah movement in Kuwait.<sup>108</sup> She advocated and helped with girls' education in Palestine, represented Palestine in international conferences that addressed education, child welfare, and women's issues. She was also one of the first women to enter Palestine after the Oslo agreement in 1993 with a group from the UNESCO to assess and aid the educational system under the fledgling Palestinian authority.<sup>109</sup>

This first wave of Palestinian immigrants that made key contributions to the early development of the young Gulf State as it was transitioning from a modest maritime economy to a rich oil state experienced the extreme hardship along with the opportunity and promise. Many in this group of Palestinian pioneers were granted Kuwaiti passports and continued to live and work there with their families. This is especially the case for the Palestinian first comers who helped found vital Kuwaiti institutions such as Khalil Shuhaiber, the Christian Gazan, who

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<sup>107</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 77-78.

<sup>108</sup>“Salwa Abu Khadra”, Yasser Arafat Foundation. <https://yaf.ps/page-370-ar.html>

<sup>109</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.



founded Kuwait's police force, Wajih Madani, and Omar Zua'ter who founded key units in Kuwait's armed forces.<sup>110</sup>

It was also the Palestinian Jerusalem-born Haidar Al Shahabi who cofounded the precursor to the finance ministry in 1949. He relates how he came to Kuwait with 50 others in 1948 in a trailer through Damascus, then Baghdad, and finally Basra where they took a plane to Dasma Airport. His education in Jerusalem's Rashidia School and Beirut's American University earned him a position in Kuwait's budding Finance Circle with a handful of Kuwaiti notables until 1969. As an expert, he helped Kuwait in 1970 to transition from the Indian rupee to its own currency, the Kuwaiti dinar, and matched it to other currencies, thus helping launch Kuwait's economy as a sovereign independent nation with an autonomous financial system.<sup>111</sup>

Another prominent figure in the field of banking is Ibrahim Al Dabdoob, born in Bethlehem in 1939. He started his career as a young banker in Kuwait's national bank in 1961 and became its executive manager in 1983. He retired in 2013 after he managed to help Kuwait's economy survive two major crises; the first was the stock market crisis or Al Manakh Crisis in 1982, the second was the Iraqi invasion. During the Iraqi occupation, he kept the bank open and functioning by relocating it to London and smuggling Bank documents. This was considered an outstanding achievement for a bank under extraordinary circumstances.<sup>112</sup> Unlike several Palestinian pioneers, Al Dabdoob was not granted the Kuwaiti citizenship despite being the executive director of Kuwait's national bank for 53 years and drastically increasing its profits; this may be partly due to general restrictions on Kuwaiti citizenship and partly because of his Christian faith. This had some Kuwaitis wondering about the fairness and logic of the citizenship

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Basim Al Logani, Eulogy of Haidar Al Shahabi who played a role in replacing the Rupee with Dinar, Al Jareeda, Jan.3, 2014 <https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1462358206741036600>

<sup>112</sup> KUNA, Dec.18, 2013, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2351122&Language=ar>

system in Kuwait especially since other Palestinian Christian pioneers like the Shuhaiber brothers were granted Kuwaiti citizenship in the past.<sup>113</sup>

## 2.5 The Second Wave of Palestinian Immigrants to Kuwait

The second wave of Palestinian immigrants to Kuwait arrived around the same time in the late 1940s and 1950s. They came from similar locations in Palestine although most Palestinians in the second wave came from villages rather than cities or had little education. What distinguished them from the Palestinians of the first wave were the conditions under which they entered Kuwait and the types of work they initially carried out. After the Nakba of 1948, the difficult situation in what became the West Bank after annexation with Transjordan drove hundreds of young Palestinians to seek jobs and opportunities elsewhere. Their movement out of Palestine and neighboring countries that took them as refugees with dismal future prospects was marked by desperation and the weight of responsibility towards their families.<sup>114</sup> As noted earlier in Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun*, Palestinian men in this second wave were desperate enough to risk dying while waiting in their smuggler's tanker.<sup>115</sup> This semi-fictional account was too real for many Palestinians in this wave as they share their stories of danger and desperation.

Interviews with family elders and personal memoirs convey similarities and differences in the stories of numerous early Palestinian immigrants to Kuwait who were eager to share their memories and experiences. Many of these stories involve dangerous routes the young Palestinian men had to take. The danger was not only due to the long rough terrain, but also due to the risk

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<sup>113</sup> Mohammad Hassan, The Kuwaiti Ibrahim Al Dabdoob, <https://www.albayan.ae/opinions/articles/2013-12-26-1.2027980>

<sup>114</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora* in Kuwait.

<sup>115</sup> Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*.

of being arrested, imprisoned, and deported by Kuwaiti forces or forces from Arab countries that they had to cross sometimes on foot, sometimes on camel-back, and sometimes by boat.

This second group of what developed into Kuwait's Palestinian community included refugees from villages around cities lost in 1948 like Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, and Lod as well as farmers from the villages and cities in the West Bank itself such as Tulkarm, Nablus, and Qalqilia. Many of these poorer and less educated young men were exclusively farmers until 1948. They sought ways to alleviate the suffering of their families that lost their lands and assets or simply could not make ends meet under the difficult conditions of the occupation. To do so, they had to find new opportunities that were not available in neighboring countries like Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon. Those countries were actually very suspicious of Palestinian refugees and imposed extreme restrictions on their movement and activities. Pioneers from each region in Palestine who ventured into Kuwait earlier as teachers, administrators, or technicians spread the word of a promising window of opportunity in a small Gulf State with big prospects and a need for workers of almost every kind.<sup>116</sup>

In the absence of work permits and proper travel documents and the persistence of travel restrictions on Palestinians, immigrants had to take serious risks and travel along difficult routes to get to Kuwait. As depicted in Kanafani's novella, many sadly died on the way due to loss, harsh weather conditions, and the deceptive tactics of smugglers.<sup>117</sup> Some perished in the hot desert between Basra and Kuwait; many were deceived or abandoned by their smugglers; many also drowned at sea thinking they were almost there. This old yet persistent story of hope and desperation marks the paths of refugees and immigrants as they risk it all to find safety and opportunity.

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<sup>116</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>117</sup> Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*.

Those who made it started their careers in Kuwait as laborer of various kinds or low ranking employees in Kuwait's emerging institutions. They, nonetheless, managed to support their families, obtain skills, education, or experience to move on to better positions, and become vital contacts for other Palestinians that decided to join them in Kuwait. Family and hometown groups played a key role in providing information about the trip to Kuwait, the connections and the stops on the way, the necessary expenses, and even the names of people who could help them avoid security forces in Syria or Iraq before reaching the desert of Kuwait. Other contacts waited for them when they arrived to Kuwait.<sup>118</sup>

Between 1951 and 1957, thousands of villagers were smuggled to North Syria then headed to the village of Tal Kojak by the Syrian-Iraqi borders where sympathetic farmers would help them cross the border. They would walk through agricultural land in North West Iraq for 15 to 20 hours before reaching a village or a Bedouin habitat where they could ask for help. Days later they would hide during the day and walk at night until they arrived to Mosul in northern Iraq from there they would go to Baghdad then to Basra by train. Once they got to Basra, they had to find a person who could transport them through the desert to Kuwait. Those smugglers or guides could be found in Basra's hotels or inns where hundreds of Palestinians would be housed in tiny rooms. Along with their guide, they would cross the desert of 120 km on foot from Basra to Jahra. Meanwhile, they had to avoid Kuwaiti and Iraqi patrols, so they took longer routes to get to Kuwait.<sup>119</sup>

Many Palestinian men died in the desert. In many cases the guide would abandon or deceive the group by telling them that they were a few kilometers away from their destination on land or at sea. They discovered later that they were still far. Alone in the desert or in deep waters,

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<sup>118</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinians Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

many Palestinian migrants died or drowned. These dangerous journeys continued until 1958. Afterwards there was no need for visas or permits to travel between Kuwait and Jordan. Even after the visa system came back, smuggling was no longer used. This group of villagers (Fellaheen) and impoverished townspeople who arrived in Kuwait through smuggling or lawfully in the 1950s lived alone or with other single men until 1967 when the Six Day War with Israel or what is termed Al Naksa led to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This, in turn, drove most Palestinian families to join their working parent or relative in Kuwait. Families and dependents comprised about 60% of the Palestinian community in Kuwait. By 1975, the number of Palestinians in Kuwait was 204 thousand which count for 29.7% of non-Kuwaiti residents.<sup>120</sup>

Mohammed Sayed Mansour from the village of Bella'a of Tulkarm served in Kuwait's army for 20 years; he relates the dangerous smuggling routes he travelled to come to Kuwait in the early 1950s.<sup>121</sup> He couldn't go to Iraq directly from Jordan, so he had to travel with a group through Syria. Many Palestinians were arrested on the Iraqi-Syrian borders in 1953, but he got through with the help of some locals. On the way to Mosul, they were stopped by the Iraqi police, imprisoned, deported to a Syrian prison, and then released. He repeated the attempt through Jordan, which had direct routes to Iraq after the mid-1950s. When he discovered that he was blacklisted, he requested to go to Baghdad to clean his record. He went on from Baghdad to Basra and then tried to find smugglers to take him to Kuwait from Basra. Meanwhile, he stayed in a small hotel with other Palestinians also headed to Kuwait. Within months, they found a guide to help them cross to Kuwait, but halfway, the guide left them for days with no food or

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<sup>120</sup> Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, "Kuwait's Palestinians after a Quarter Century of the Iraqi Invasion," *Al Zaituna Center for Studies and Consultations*, September 21, 2015, <https://www.alzaytouna.net/2015/09/21/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7>

<sup>121</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

drink. He eventually reappeared and led them along with 40 other people to the shores of Salmiya, nine kilometers south of the city of Kuwait.<sup>122</sup>

It was imperative for this less experienced segment of the Palestinian population to become self-reliant and adaptable after losing land titles, properties, and livelihood in the homeland. They had to adopt various strategies in order to survive and thrive in their new environment in the State of Kuwait. Demanding longer shifts and diligence were among those strategies. Business owners reported that Palestinian workers requested long shifts in order to be able to support their families and improve their condition. This notion of self-improvement included pursuing further education or enhancing professional skills. Such strategies also involved entrepreneurship whenever possible. Before 1967, most Palestinian immigrants were men who lived together in small houses, rooms, or dorms. Young Palestinian men usually lived with male relatives or other men from the same hometown in tiny apartments. Some of their residences were well-known in the area of Mirgab. Many gathered in stops in the center of Kuwait city to be picked up by contractors in the early morning.<sup>123</sup>

Key factors that helped Palestinian newcomers include the favorable attitude of Kuwaiti officials and Kuwaiti investors in the private sector towards Palestinians and their sympathy towards their cause. In the late 1950s, the country was preparing to transition into an independent state and to end the protection treaty with the British. The Kuwaitis at that point felt the need to emphasize their Arab identity and sought the assistance of fellow Arab communities to build the country and support its development efforts.<sup>124</sup>

In addition, Palestinians of the first wave who were in leadership positions supported and accommodated their newly arrived compatriots. Hani Qaddomi, a Palestinian pioneer from Jaffa,

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>123</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

headed the Passport Department in 1949. Through his position, he helped the Palestinian immigrants despite the limited role he could play since the documents issued by the department had to be approved by the British Consulate.<sup>125</sup> Palestinians who owned or managed businesses employed the newcomers. Yusuf Abuljebain recalls in an interview how tens of Palestinian young men would come to him seeking jobs. When employed, he observed how attentive and quick to learn they were. When the Ministry of Public Works demanded more mechanics in 1953 to handle the growing number of cars, trucks, and tractors, Abuljebain reassured supervisors that the problem would be solved within months. The next day, he hired hundreds of Palestinian laborers waiting to get jobs as assistant mechanics. Within two months of training, he had an army of mechanics.<sup>126</sup>

The development projects taking place in Kuwait in the 1960s provided work opportunities for thousands of Palestinian laborers and clerks. Human Resource committees were formed and headed mainly by Palestinians who interviewed and assigned newcomers to jobs that matched their qualifications. The criteria for consideration included level of education and special skills. These new jobs became stepping stones by providing novices with educational and vocational experiences that enabled men as young as 15 or 16 to become skilled laborers and technicians within months.<sup>127</sup>

Like Yusuf Abuljebain and his army of Palestinian mechanics, the Palestinian pioneer, Yahiya Ghannam, who graduated from Tulkarm's Agricultural School, recruited Palestinian farmers to help his agricultural development projects. Ghannam came to Kuwait in 1954. Owing to his education and expertise in farming and agriculture, he assumed a leading position in Kuwait's Ministry of Social and Public Affairs. In the course of his endeavor to bring farming

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<sup>125</sup>Yusuf Al Shehab, *Men in the History of Kuwait* (Kuwait: Al Qabas Publishing, 1984).

<sup>126</sup>Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 118.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

and domestic animals to Kuwait's desert environment, he hired numerous young Palestinian villagers. He was impressed with their diligence and commitment to their work. He noted that Kuwait was known to be a country of hard work, and those who came to it knew that they had to be competitive and work tirelessly in order to survive and make enough wages to support their families. In addition to pursuing further education themselves, many young Palestinians took special care to support the education of their siblings back home. Education for Palestinians became the way to persist without the advantages afforded by citizenship.<sup>128</sup>

Numerous young Palestinians were also hired by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC); others started their own businesses. For example, Ahmad Musameh from the village of Shuweikeh near Tulkarm came to Kuwait through smuggling in 1954. He worked in a mill or grindery (a shop that roasts, grinds, and sells spices, coffee, herbs, and nuts) as a simple employee. After learning the tricks of the trade and building enough connections, he started his own grindery. His International Mill became one of the most successful grinders in Kuwait. It has over fifteen stores in Kuwait and it developed its own brand of products sold in grocery stores. With his new fortune, Musameh helped build a school in his home village.<sup>129</sup> Another mill owner, Ahmad Al Khaleel, had a different trajectory. He started his grindery Samra' Aden in Tulkarm in 1920 and moved his already successful business to Kuwait in 1958.<sup>130</sup>

Like other ambitious Palestinians, Bakri Al Siddique, a foreman in a construction company, became an independent contractor and started his own company while also studying to get his engineering degree.<sup>131</sup> By the mid 1960s, even the Palestinian elites or the Intelligentsia who had prominent leadership positions in the public sector started to transition to the private

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 120

<sup>130</sup> Jasem Abbas, Interview with Omar Ahmad Al Khalil, "We Brought the Gifts of Balqees to Kuwait", *History of Kuwait Forum*, Sep, 2008 <https://www.kuwait-history.net/vb/showthread.php?t=2268>

<sup>131</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.



sector. They realized that Kuwaitis who were becoming more qualified were bound to take over those leadership positions although many of those pioneers were granted Kuwaiti nationalities. However, Palestinian presence remained significant in both public and private sectors until the Iraqi invasion in 1990.

Both waves of Palestinian immigrants came to Kuwait to start a new chapter shouldering their responsibilities towards their parents, siblings, and their nuclear families. The educated and highly-qualified immigrants of the first wave were specifically recruited for their skills and expertise in order to help build the growing Gulf country. Kuwait had much to offer despite its small size and rudimentary infrastructure at the time. It had ample opportunities for hard-working people who wanted to make a living and chart a successful future without giving up their connection to their homeland. Palestinians of the second wave made their way to Kuwait looking for opportunities as well, but their insufficient education and limited skills forced them to walk a more dangerous path and to start their careers from the bottom up making their way to the middle class. In some cases they moved up to become wealthy entrepreneurs in various fields.

## **2.6 The Dynamics between Palestinians of the Two Waves**

The relationship between members of those two waves was one of support and codependence despite a level of class tension that often appeared in social interaction such as arranged marriages. The strong relationship between Palestinian elites or Intelligentsia and high-ranking Kuwaitis enabled them to offer much needed support to members of the second wave. However, the differences between Palestinian immigrants from the first and the second wave were not always clear-cut. There were, for example, villagers who migrated in the late 50s to Kuwait after getting their college degrees and served as teachers or employees in government institutions. There were also those who were entrepreneurs to begin with in Palestine and

brought their businesses to Kuwait. Nonetheless, many Palestinians took advantage of opportunities available in the new environment to improve their skill sets and their education. They eventually moved up the socio-economic ladder. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Palestinians occupied mid-to-high-level jobs in both public and private sectors. After the 1967 war, most families joined Palestinian men in Kuwait. This sudden increase in the number of dependents strained the resources and educational services in Kuwait, thus triggering increased restrictions on non-Kuwaitis in general, and Palestinians in particular.

### 3 CHAPTER 3

Jamil Abboud, a Palestinian math teacher who worked in Kuwait from 1973 to 1991, recalls how Kuwait's Ministry of Education shifted its stance towards Palestinian teachers in the 1980s. Kuwaiti Educational advisors were hired to supervise the educational process. They began to cut down the benefits of Palestinian teachers. One Advisor suggested that teacher-appreciation ceremonies should be limited to first generation teachers (Al Raael Al Awwal) who came to Kuwait before 1956. He posited that those who came afterwards were only looking for financial gains. Then, Abboud relates how he encountered one of his Kuwaiti students at a bookstore in the area of Al Salmiya. He told Abboud that he came back from the Ministry of Education after pleading with them on behalf of his Palestinian teacher, a 60-year-old first-wave teacher that received a notice from the Ministry terminating his job contract and, therefore, his residency in Kuwait. His contract was ended because of his age. Luckily, the Kuwaiti student managed to help his Palestinian teacher and keep him in Kuwait for the time being.<sup>132</sup>

Such incidents reveal a general shift in the Kuwaiti attitude towards Palestinians in the 1980s. Palestinians were no longer viewed as assets but liabilities. Kuwaitis began to see them as opportunists whose only goal was to grab a piece of the Kuwaiti oil-pie. It was not only teachers who felt less appreciated but Palestinian expats in general as they began to experience increasing restrictions on residency visas and job contracts. Excessive powers were given to Kuwaiti sponsors and limitations were placed on the access of non-Kuwaitis to general and higher education. Such restrictions applied to all non-Kuwaitis, but they particularly affected Palestinians since they were the largest and most settled expat community; their alternatives were also quite limited. Nevertheless, Palestinians were content for the most part to work and live in Kuwait due to their attachment to and familiarity with Kuwait as a country and society.

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<sup>132</sup>Abboud, "I Tell you what's in my Pocket."

They valued the opportunity afforded to them in Kuwait to move up the socioeconomic ladder, pursue self-development, and build better futures for their children.

This chapter includes a depiction of the nature and dynamics of the Palestinian community formations and experiences in Kuwait. In addition to relevant facts and statistics, the memories and reflections of numerous Palestinians who lived in Kuwait help provide a close and more personal view of Palestinian life there. A key question that will be addressed here is how the relationship between Palestinians as immigrants and bearers of an Arab Nationalist liberation cause and Kuwait as a government and community evolved during the four decades between the 1950s and 1980s. This question will allow for establishing a more meaningful reading of the social, cultural, and political aspects of the Palestinian/Kuwaiti relationship before and after the First Gulf War of 1991. Important aspects of this relationship can be gleaned through the particular experiences of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait. Lived experiences disseminated in autobiographies and memoirs, such as Abuljebain's memoir and Ghabra's autobiography and the numerous interviews he documented with Palestinians in Kuwait, will provide the key narratives of this chapter.<sup>133</sup> The Kuwaiti stance towards Palestinians as immigrants and carriers of a Palestinian cause will be presented as they are recorded in official documents, media articles, recollections of Kuwaiti notables, and political and historical publications.

### **3.1 Palestinian Life and Settlement in Kuwait until 1990**

In the 10 years after the Nakba of 1948, the Palestinian diaspora started to emerge in countries that have common borders with historical Palestine such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. It also started to emerge in countries that are geographically further but offer better opportunities for young adults and families such as the Gulf States and overseas destinations like

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<sup>133</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*; Ghabra, *Unsafe Life*; Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

the USA, Europe, and South America. Kuwait provided great opportunities as it was starting to build its infrastructure and develop a modern bureaucratic and institutional apparatus encompassing vital sectors like education, health, security forces, transportation, and finance. The first wave of Palestinians to come to Kuwait included experts in various fields who provided invaluable assistance in building the different sectors of Kuwait's economy, service sectors, and infrastructure. Some of the earlier experts stayed in Kuwait, while some left after the end of their assignment. This first wave built close connections with Kuwaiti notables from the ruling family such as Sheikh Ahmed Al Sabah and Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah. They dominated certain areas in the public sector and earned the trust of their Kuwaiti employers for their competence and reliability. The Kuwaiti sympathy towards the Palestinian cause and admiration of the Palestinian people paved the way for the second wave of immigrants who were not as highly skilled or educated but hardworking and motivated nonetheless.<sup>134</sup>

### ***3.1.1 Work, Relations, and Family Life***

As Kuwait gained its independence from the British protection treaty in June of 1961, it managed to fend off Iraq's attempt at annexation and ultimately joined both the Arab League and the United Nations as a fully independent, sovereign State. At this point, Kuwait allowed Palestinians to enter its territories without visas. This step may have been in recognition of their support to Kuwait during its post-independence crisis with Iraq and a reciprocation of Jordan's admission of Gulf nationals including Kuwaitis without visas. Most Palestinians entered Kuwait through Jordan. Most importantly, this open admission of Palestinians to Kuwait marked the end of the perilous illegal immigration routes that took the lives of many Palestinians in earlier years.

When Kuwait gained its independence in 1961, the Palestinian population according to the official Kuwait census was 37,327 people. They constituted 11.61% of the total population

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<sup>134</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

and 30.5% of the non-Kuwaiti population. They were the largest Arab segment of the population at 44.30% followed by Iraqis, Egyptians, Syrians, and Lebanese expatriate populations respectively. Four years later, the number of Palestinians grew 108% to become 77,712 people and so did their proportional presence in comparison to other nationalities. They comprised 70.49% of non-Kuwaiti Arabs in 1965. Another huge increase was measured eight years after the Naksa in 1975. The Palestinian population in Kuwait grew to 204,178 in 1975 and to 300,000 in 1978.<sup>135</sup> A few years prior to the Iraqi invasion, the Palestinian population in Kuwait was 400,000 people who were thoroughly and deeply enmeshed in the various sectors and fields of Kuwait's institutions and society.

Towards the end of the 1960s, the Palestinian presence in Kuwait transitioned from mainly single men working in various jobs and sending remittance back to their families in the Occupied Territories to families living together. This shift meant that more services such as education and healthcare were needed. It also meant that the expenditure of acquired income became more localized, thus contributing to Kuwait's economy. In the aftermath of the 1967 war labeled by Arabs as the *Naksa* or the 'setback', thousands of Palestinians, mostly women and children, joined their relatives already working in Kuwait and started to live there together as families in bigger homes and more family-oriented neighborhoods. Children needed to join local schools though public education was becoming progressively unavailable to all.<sup>136</sup>

Starting from the year 1967 when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, a significant influx of Palestinian immigrants came to Kuwait. Those who were already outside the Occupied Territories were not allowed to return and the families of those working outside had to join the head of the family in host countries. This sudden increase of dependents requiring education and

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<sup>135</sup> Bilal Al Hasan, "Palestinians in Kuwait: a Statistical Study," *Palestinian Studies*, 97 (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1974), 19.

<sup>136</sup> FarajAllah, "The Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations (1990-2014)."

other services was coupled with new monetary commitments dictated by the Arab League to provide 120 million dollars to frontline countries like Egypt and Syria in order to support their war efforts. Kuwait's policy-makers became increasingly wary of the growing Palestinian presence and prospects of their permanent settlement in Kuwait.<sup>137</sup>

One of the main challenges that faced the fledgling Palestinian community in Kuwait was education. As previously discussed, Palestinians consider education a high priority and a means of survival in the absence of homeland family assets, properties, or citizenship rights. Non-Kuwaiti students comprised about 25% of total admissions in Kuwait's public school system in 1965. After 1967, the admission rate was lowered to 10% of general public school admissions. This constraining reality prompted Palestinian families to send their kids to private schools despite the added expenditure for tuition, books, and transportation. Some of the public schools allowed use of their facilities afterhours which led to a limited two-shift schooling system supervised by the PLO office in Kuwait. Other Palestinian civic groups such as the Palestinian Women's Union offered help by providing school supplies and other forms of assistance to Palestinian students.<sup>138</sup>

College education became increasingly difficult for Palestinian high school graduates in Kuwait. Arab universities provided easy access to Palestinian students in the 1960s and 70s, but such Universities became increasingly unable or unwilling to serve non-citizen students in the 1980s. At that point, Kuwait University, which was formed in 1966, allocated less than 10% of its seats to non-Kuwaiti, non-Gulf residents. This percentage, however, continued to decrease. The estimated four thousand Palestinian high school students graduating each year struggled to join suitable colleges, although most of them were high achievers. Almost one thousand of them

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<sup>137</sup> FarajAllah, "The Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations."

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

ended up going to the United States to pursue their higher education. This placed an extraordinary financial burden on their families who usually sent more than one child to study abroad.<sup>139</sup> Families had to downsize and cut down their expenses significantly. Some parents had to work second jobs to provide enough funds to support their kids' education. Families that came to Kuwait after 1961 were barred from benefiting from public education which became increasingly exclusive to Kuwaiti citizens. In the absence of an official social security system or rights to own properties in Kuwait, the added expenses constituted heavy financial burdens for the estimated one third of Palestinians in Kuwait with limited or low income. Palestinians in Kuwait dealt with their financial and logistic challenges through family and community connections. Such communal support started out as sporadic and informal in the 1950s and 60s, but became more systematized in the mid 1970s as more family and hometown funds managed to provide some security and relief to struggling Palestinians in Kuwait.

Unlike numerous other expat communities, Palestinians lived in Kuwait as families with no alternative plans for the future. They received services but also contributed significantly to Kuwait's economy instead of sending most of their income as remittance to family overseas. This fact, however, did not preclude financial assistance to extended family members or hometown compatriots. This financial solidarity within families and hometown communities became more systematized in the form of regular monthly contributions that enable a family or a hometown fund to support those in need inside and outside of Kuwait.

Family and hometown networks were among the most important strategies for survival and adaptation of Palestinians in Kuwait and other diasporic destinations. Ghabra examines several extended Palestinian families that maintained strong connections despite their dispersal in many parts of the world. Nonetheless, geographic proximity clearly fortifies family relations

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<sup>139</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.



and provides a measure of social support enhanced by frequent interaction with extended family members. For example, Raja Sumreen came to Kuwait from the village of Qalonia and decided that living in the same neighborhood as his brother and two in-laws was important in order for him and his family to find support and comfort with close relatives.<sup>140</sup> Although the patriarchal family dwellings that were common in Palestinian cities and villages gave way in diaspora to nuclear-family living units, Palestinian families sought to find residence near other family members. Once settled in a neighborhood, they would help other family members to find nearby apartments.<sup>141</sup> Most Palestinians in Kuwait lived in neighborhoods in Hawali, Al Nugra, Al Salmiya, Kheitan, and Al Farwania. Some lived in coastal cities like Fahahil or Al Sabahiya.<sup>142</sup>

The neighborhoods and buildings that Palestinians occupied had other non-Kuwaiti families of expats; neighborly relationships grew between various expat communities. As a Palestinian/Jordanian born in Kuwait, I had numerous friends, colleagues, and neighbors from Egyptian, Lebanese, Indo-Pakistani, Syrian, and Iraqi backgrounds. In addition to living next door to families of different national origins, non-Kuwaitis went to school and worked together and had similar day-to-day concerns. While the Palestinian expat community was the largest and comprised more than 50% of non-Kuwaiti Arab residents, deep and meaningful cross-cultural relationships and affinities took hold between them and other Arab and non-Arab expat communities.

The arrival of entire families after 1967 changed the social life of Palestinians in Kuwait. For example, instead of traveling to the West Bank, Gaza, or Jordan to get married, Palestinian men working in Kuwait could find potential brides in Kuwait from the Palestinian community settled in the country. Basim Sarhan surveyed Palestinians in Kuwait to gauge shifts in their

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<sup>140</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 141.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

family traditions and found that family approval was still needed to make important decisions such as marriage and divorce.<sup>143</sup> Marriage was still viewed as the joining of two families. The criteria for acceptance included common familial connections and comparable socioeconomic backgrounds. There was a marked shift in criteria, however, from placing stress on class, hometown, and socioeconomics to a stress on educational and professional levels.

Palestinian weddings are often occasions for extended family members and hometown compatriots who reside in different parts of the world to meet, rejoice, maintain or rekindle old ties and memories, and keep up with what is happening to kinsfolk and old acquaintances. Palestinian families held weddings for their children in Kuwait. It is customary for the family of the groom to plan and pay for their son's wedding while in consultation with the family of the bride. Relatives of the couple from other parts of the world would be invited and many would come to Kuwait through limited visitors' visas to attend the wedding. This occasion was usually an opportunity for younger generations to meet relatives who lived elsewhere in places like the West Bank, Gaza, Amman, the US, or Europe. Weddings were also occasions to practice and pass on traditional dances like the *Dabke*, folk songs, Palestinian fashion, cuisine, and traditions such as the 'Henna' night in which the bride and her female relatives and friends celebrate and dye their hands with henna before the wedding.

Other occasions brought family and relatives together and helped build an informal support network that provided emotional, social, and financial support to Palestinian families and individuals living in Kuwait in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. While there were several Christian Palestinian families in Kuwait such as the Suhaiber family from Gaza or Al Dabdoob from Bethlehem, most Palestinian families in Kuwait were Sunni Muslims. Religious holidays such as

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<sup>143</sup> Basim Sarhan, *Family and Kinship for Palestinians in Kuwait: Preliminary Results of a Social Research* (Kuwait: The Arab Institute for Social and Economic Planning, 1977).

Eid Al Adha or *Eid Al Fitr* brought family members together in celebration and exchange of monetary or symbolic gifts. During the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset, families meet more frequently and plan communal sunset meals (Iftars) together.

Funerals also brought Palestinians together to mourn a loved one and to support the bereaved family especially when the deceased was the main provider. For Palestinians living in Kuwait, no formal social security system guaranteed financial support after retirement or death.<sup>144</sup>

Family centers were established in Jordan exclusively, but Palestinians in diaspora would congregate there especially in the summer. In the family center of the Ghousheh family in Amman, members of this Jerusalem family would come together for different social occasions. They provided aid to students or relatives in need anywhere in the world, organized events, shared information about relatives in diaspora, and discussed current events. Many marriages were organized through these family centers between Palestinians who were related by blood but separated by geography. Some of the Palestinians living in Kuwait pursued marriage or business partnerships through these family centers.<sup>145</sup>

Due to their settlement as families in Kuwait in the 1970s and 80s, Palestinians were most vulnerable to shifts in immigration and work policies that increasingly tightened opportunities and limited services to curb the number of Palestinian residents. The educational challenges facing the Palestinian community were the most difficult. They were gradually losing local access to public schooling and higher education. By enrolling their kids in private schools and Western universities, the financial resources of most Palestinian families in Kuwait became considerably strained. A few families could afford the increasing expenses of education while most were left struggling. This financial hardship facing lots of Palestinian families in Kuwait

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<sup>144</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.; Sarhan, *Family and Kinship for Palestinians in Kuwait*.

prompted the Palestinian community to form family funds to help struggling members cope with the mounting financial strains of living in the diaspora.<sup>146</sup>

Regular contributions to family funds were made to support those facing hardships such as the death of the family's breadwinner, retirement, sickness, educational needs, and housing. Other contributions provided aid to struggling members in the homeland or to the development of business ventures there. In a personal interview with Imad Taha, Ghabra relates some of the activities of the Taha family fund in Kuwait that included 36 families from the village of Badiya in the West Bank. The goals of the fund included providing support to family members in need especially those struggling to afford education and cope with care for the sick or disabled. The aid would be extended to relatives in Kuwait and back home. For example, in 1981 the Taha family fund provided help to a relative in the home village of Badiya who needed a costly surgery.<sup>147</sup>

The Abuljebain family fund is another example of elaborate financial support networking within extended Palestinian families in Kuwait. In an interview with Shafeeq Ghabra, Khairi Abuljebain relates how he and his cousin Yusuf who came to Kuwait in 1948 formed a family fund in the late 1960s. Each of the 30 family-providers within Abuljebain family in Kuwait contributed 10 Kuwaiti Dinars (KD) monthly for three months. Afterwards, one would collect the entire sum as a loan. Within two years, the fund provided interest free loans up to 10,000 KD to help with marriage, education, and other situations. The fund managers invested in 1982 in the stock market and provided profits for each of the members. Another family fund was later set up

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<sup>146</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

for the younger generation of the extended Abuljebain family that encompassed both male and female working members of 70 nuclear families.<sup>148</sup>

Building on this idea of communal support, Khairi Abuljebain relates in his memoir how he introduced a communal life-insurance system benefitting non-Kuwaiti employees in the Ministry of Electricity where he worked in the late 1950s and 60s. This system was funded by willing employees who pledged to pay certain sums to bereaved families in the case of the death of one of their colleagues. These sums were compatible with the salaries and rankings of employees within the Ministry. The system was so successful that it was emulated in other branches of the government and other ministries. It provided a measure of security to non-Kuwaiti employees in the absence of official financial job securities.<sup>149</sup>

The unofficial communal support system that emanated from extended family units in Kuwait was often extended further to form hometown societies that provided social and financial support to hometown compatriots. The Palestinians of Hebron had an especially tight-knit community whose members were mostly artisans and businessmen. Their community in Kuwait owned several import/export companies. The informal cooperation within the community of Hebron in Kuwait gave birth in 1976 to organized societies such as the Hebron Charitable Fund and the Association of College Graduates in the Hebron District. Like family funds, these hometown societies provided support to compatriots and their families to be used for education, aid for widows and orphans, care for members with disability, and medical care. Other hometown societies such as the Jerusalem Fund founded in 1980 and the Nablus Fund established in 1982 followed the Hebron model although they were less organized. Hometown funds provided assistance to both hometown compatriots in Kuwait and to Palestinians in the

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<sup>148</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>149</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

hometown itself. Some communities, however, retained strong social support networks with the hometown community in Kuwait despite the absence of formal societies or hometown funds. For example, the Gazans in Kuwait, who were typically highly educated professionals, formed a tightly knit community that managed to provide strong support and maintain outstanding solidarity despite the absence of any formal organizational body.<sup>150</sup>

### ***3.1.2 Activism and Political Representation***

After the Nakba of 1948, Palestinian diplomatic representation suffered a huge setback as the High Arab Council of Palestine was dismantled and its leader exiled to Egypt then Lebanon. A short-lived Palestinian government was declared in Gaza, but it was opposed and thwarted by Jordan that later assumed control over the West Bank. After the Jericho Conference of December 1948, the West Bank was annexed to the East Bank of Jordan under the Hashemite rule until the war of 1967. A representative delegate of Palestine's High Arab Council presented the Palestinian side at UN meetings where Arab countries managed to obtain the UN resolution 194 that gives Palestinian refugees the right to return to their cities and villages if they choose to, offers appropriate compensations for damaged properties, and compensates those who choose not to return.<sup>151</sup> The total number of Palestinian refugees in 1948 was nearly 805,000 registered refugees. The number has grown since then to more than 6,400,000 registered refugees in 2020.<sup>152</sup>

Several Arab Nationalist movements were formed in the 1950s that advocated for the Palestinian cause, but one movement in particular stood out. It began in Kuwait in 1957 and gave birth to one of the most influential factions in the history of the Palestinian liberation movement.

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<sup>150</sup> Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait: The Family and the Politics of Survival*; Sarhan, *Family and Kin Relations*.

<sup>151</sup> UN Resolution 194, UNRWA, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>

<sup>152</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*; Ola Awad, "On the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Commemoration of the Palestinian Nakba, Number of Palestinians Worldwide Doubled about 10 Times," Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4506>

The FATAH movement started with a series of secret meetings between a Palestinian engineer working in Kuwait's Ministry of Public Works whose name is Yasser Arafat and a few other Palestinian activists such as Salah Khalaf and Khalil Al Wazeer who were both teachers in Kuwait's Ministry of Education. Their meetings in the Kuwaiti suburb Al Suleibekhat led to the establishment of the FATAH liberation movement in 1959. The movement received financial assistance from influential Palestinian figures in Kuwait such as Khalid Al Hasan and Abdel Muhsin Qattan.<sup>153</sup> The newly formed movement encompassed several smaller groups and was supported logistically by Kuwait's government.<sup>154</sup> However, the problem of representation lingered due to the secretive nature and limited influence of the FATAH movement at the time.

The first Arab Summit of 1964 in Cairo headed by the Arab Nationalist leader Jamal Abdel Nasser recommended the establishment of a representative Palestinian body. The leaders urged Palestine's representative at the Arab League and United Nations Ahmad Al Shuqairy to pursue a Palestinian consensus to form an organized Palestinian structure that can represent Palestinians politically and organize their affairs. To do so, Shuqairy met with notable Palestinians in different countries including Kuwait. Palestinians in Kuwait were very excited to meet with Shuqairy and contribute to the birth of a Palestinian political body. They held several meetings to select a coordinating committee to oversee the equitable representation of all Palestinian voices in Kuwait.<sup>155</sup> Leading figures in this committee included the selected president Khairi Abuljebain, who was working with the Ministry of Electricity at the time, and several

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<sup>153</sup> Al Mudairis, *The Development of the Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations and the Effect of the Iraqi Invasion*.

<sup>154</sup> FarajAllah, *The Palestinian Kuwaiti relations*; Kamal Odwan, *FATAH: The Birth and the Journey* (Beirut: PLO Media Center, 1974).

<sup>155</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

others including Yahiya Ghannam from the Ministry of Public Works and Zainab Saq Allah from the Ministry of Education who presided over several of these meetings.<sup>156</sup>

The committee held elections in the different public and private institutions to select delegates that were comprised of one representative for every fifty of the 31,000 working Palestinians living in Kuwait in 1964.<sup>157</sup> Further elections produced 22 representatives that eventually comprised the High Committee of Palestinians in Kuwait. Khairi Abuljebain was selected as the head of the committee and president of the General Conference of Palestinians in Kuwait that was held on March 12<sup>th</sup> 1964. In this conference, which was held in the Kuwaiti suburb of Al Shuwaikh under heavy security, the different delegates who had divergent political affiliations and points of view engaged in heated debates as to how the prospective Palestinian body was to be structured and what priorities and guidelines should be included in its foundational documents. Abuljebain relates how he managed to oversee the conference to the end despite intense conflicts and mounting tensions. Another conference was held the following week to convey the final recommendations to Ahmad Al Shuqairy who was keenly welcomed by both Palestinians and Kuwaitis.

Despite running into difficult political and diplomatic hurdles, Shuqairy finally managed to secure the support of Jordan and the consent of most Palestinian political factions and representatives around the Arab world. The first Palestinian National Conference (PNC) was finally held in Jerusalem under the patronage of the Jordanian King Hussein on May 28, 1964. The Palestinian delegate from Kuwait included elected members like Abuljebain, Ghannam, and Saq Allah, but it also included members of political factions like the FATAH movement such as Yasser Arafat and Khalid Al Hassan who were not elected. This first Palestinian National

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<sup>156</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*



Conference instated the basis of the PNC and the PLO. Abuljebain was part of a small group that developed the Palestinian National Charter; he also worked with three other Palestinians from Jordan, Gaza, and Qatar to develop the founding statement for the PLO.<sup>158</sup>

After the inception and recognition of the PLO as a representative of the political will of the Palestinian people, Shuqairy selected the heads of the PLO offices in the Arab capitals. Khairi Abuljebain was selected based on the recommendation of several notable Palestinians in the PNC in Kuwait. He was unaffiliated with any political faction or ideology such as FATAH or the Arab Nationalists of Palestine, but he was extremely popular and well connected due to his extensive experience as an educator, administrator, and secretary of the Kuwaiti Sports' Union. He used the headquarters of the Kuwaiti Sports' Union in Al Shuwaikh as the main office of the PLO in Kuwait. After gaining diplomatic immunity, he was loaned to the PLO as a fulltime president of the organization while maintaining his salary. From then on, Abuljebain advocated for the Palestinian cause on several fronts including taking steps to ensure the implementation of a 5% liberation tax to be extracted from all Palestinians working in the various public and private sectors in Kuwait.

He accomplished several organizational goals to serve the Palestinian population in Kuwait as well as the Palestinian political cause in general. For example, he managed to establish Palestinian professional unions such as the Palestinian teachers' union, engineers' union, etc. After successfully establishing these unions and overseeing the election of their representatives, another election was held to select Palestinian women that can represent Kuwait at the General Union for Palestinian Women that had its first meeting in March 1965. Salwa Al Jayusi, Fawzia Kharma, and Ghada Hijawi were sent to represent Kuwait's Palestinian women at the first conference of the General Union of Palestinian Women in Jerusalem. In addition, the

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<sup>158</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

PLO office in Kuwait headed by Abuljebain started a parallel school system run by the PLO for the thousands of children who joined their families in Kuwait after 1967. The PLO school system operated after regular schooldays ended in the afternoon by using existing school facilities.

Restrictions on new non-Kuwaiti students and the large number of incoming Palestinian students who could not afford private schooling made this move all the more important. Kuwaiti officials allowed and supported this school system by enabling the use of facilities and existing administrative apparatus until the system was halted in 1976 when Abuljebain handed over control of the PLO office to FATAH representatives who had other priorities.<sup>159</sup>

### **3.2 Kuwait's Relationship with the Palestinians**

Tracing the historical trajectory of Kuwait's policies towards Palestine and the Palestinians uncovers a dichotomy between Kuwait's stance towards the Palestinian cause and struggle for liberation and its policies regarding the Palestinian population on its soil. Initially however, Kuwait's welcoming and accommodating attitude that allowed the Palestinian community in Kuwait to emerge and thrive was most likely motivated by both its practical need for their expertise and skills and idealistic sympathy and support for their cause. This attitude towards Palestinian residents in Kuwait began to shift gradually until the late 1980s when policies were purposefully introduced to curb their population growth and encourage them to leave. Meanwhile, support for the Palestinian cause remained steadfast.

#### ***3.2.1 Support for the Palestinian Cause***

Kuwait's political and social climate that was greatly supportive of the Palestinian cause can be credited with some of the most significant formative milestones culminating in the establishment of the PLO and the FATAH movement. Kuwait's government and many of its notables have been unhindered in their staunch support for the cause of Palestinian liberation and

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

self-determination even before the 1948 Nakba and after the 1991 fallout with the Palestinians and the PLO. Kuwait's government consistently offered diplomatic and financial support. More importantly, it allowed and encouraged the development and organization of Palestinian political bodies and allowed for some of the early training camps for FATAH and other PLO factions. The establishment of the PLO and the PNC was a response to Arab recommendations expressed in the Summit of 1964 to make the will and the voice of the Palestinians unified and known, especially in terms of how their cause is handled diplomatically, politically, and otherwise.

As far back as 1936, notable Kuwaiti merchants such as Yusuf Eisa Al Gna'ee, Abdel Rahman Al Bahar, and Mohammad Thniyan Al Ganem formed what was termed the October Committee to raise funds and show support for Palestinians during the 1936 uprising in Palestine. Another committee was formed in 1937 and sent letters to British officials and to the League of Nations to protest possible partition plans, push for the withdrawal of British troops, and advocate for the independence of Palestine.<sup>160</sup>

The Arab nationalist sentiment of Kuwaitis grew as the Kuwaiti students in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo came home after the 1948 Nakba. Many of these Kuwaiti students were members of the Arab Nationalist Movement or the Socialist Arab Baath Party. For example, the Kuwaiti physician Ahmad Al Khatib, who graduated from Beirut's American University, founded Kuwait's Arab Nationalist Movement and Democratic Forum. Cultural clubs and advocacy committees were formed in Kuwait to support the Palestinian struggle for independence within a framework of Pan-Arab nationalism. Palestinian intellectuals and artists such as the caricaturist Naji Al Ali and the writer Ghassan Kanafani lived and worked in Kuwait for some time. Publications such as *Sawt Al Tali'a* (Voice of the Vanguard) and various other expressions of solidarity with Palestine were clearly prevalent in Kuwait's cultural and political

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<sup>160</sup> Al Mudairis, *The Development of the Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations*.

milieu. Kuwait's policies and actions emphasized its commitment to the Palestinian cause and to the implementation of the resolutions of the Arab League regarding financial support to the PLO and care for Palestinian residents and new immigrants. Journalism and media expressions grew due to cooperative and synchronized efforts by Palestinian pioneers like Muhammad Ghusain and Zuhair Al Karmi and Kuwaiti activists and supporters. Even under the British Protectorate, Kuwaitis refused the use of Kuwait's ports to launch attacks during the 1956 tripartite attack against Egypt, which was carried out by Britain, France, and Israel.<sup>161</sup>

The Kuwaiti support for the Palestinian cause stepped up after Kuwait's independence from the British in June 1961. It was one of the first countries to honor the recommendations of the Arab Summit of 1964 that led to the establishment of the PLO. Kuwait provided two million pounds in funding and helped Palestinians to organize and conduct free elections to select representatives at different key stages in the development of the Palestinian organization. It sent a small brigade, 'The Flag of Yarmouk,' to Egypt in order to assist Arab armies in the 1967 war against Israel that ended with the defeat of the Arab armies or the *Naksa*. It also provided 55 million pounds to the frontline Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. The Kuwaiti government interceded on behalf of Yasser Arafat and the PLO when Jordan's King Hussein proceeded to eradicate the activities and infrastructure of the Palestinian resistance in Jordan in 1970. Kuwait halted financial aid to Jordan and diverted it to the benefit of the Palestinian resistance. It also interceded financially and diplomatically on behalf of the PLO when violence erupted against it in Lebanon in 1973.<sup>162</sup>

The commitment of Kuwait to the 1973 oil embargo, that was intended to protest the role of the USA and the West in assisting Israel, preceded the OPEC decision. The embargo was also

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Al Mudairis, *The Development of the Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations*.

supported by Kuwait's labor unions. Kuwait offered two military units stationed in Egypt and Syria to assist frontline armies. It gave 150 million dollars to support Egypt's war effort. Years later, Kuwaitis offered different forms of support to Palestinians during the first Intifada of 1987. In addition to the financial support provided by Kuwait's government, popular campaigns raised funds through non-governmental societies and organizations. Kuwait's media outlets were overflowing with expressions of solidarity, calls for mobilization, and passionate concern over the fate of the Palestinians and their cause. Individual Kuwaitis also expressed solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement. For example, Fawzi Al Majadi, a 28 yrs old Kuwaiti, joined the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 and made the ultimate sacrifice.<sup>163</sup> Another Kuwaiti philanthropist, Muhammad Abdel Rahman Al Bahar, left a will granting nearly 20 million dollars to benefit the six Palestinian Universities in 1989.<sup>164</sup>

Despite the fallout with the Palestinians and the PLO after the First Gulf War of 1991, Kuwait quickly resumed its support for the Palestinian cause financially and diplomatically. Although the PLO office was closed and its representatives evicted, Kuwait contributed to the building of the infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza after the Oslo Peace Accords signed between Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO's Yasser Arafat in 1993. Parts of the West Bank and Gaza came under the limited control of the Palestinian authority in 1996. Kuwait also continued to support Palestinians in Gaza during and after the consecutive episodes of bombardment in 2008, 2012, and 2014. This unwavering support for the Palestinian cause

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<sup>163</sup> Nasser Faraj, "Son of Kuwait, hero, and brave Arab knight Fawzi Al Majadi," Al Anba', July 21, 2008, <https://alanba.com.kw/31139/>; FarajAllah, "Kuwaiti- Palestinian Relations".

<sup>164</sup> Tawfiq Abu Bakr, *Palestinians in the Kuwait and the Gulf Crisis* (Amman: Jenin Center for Strategic Studies, 2000), 24.

despite lingering resentments towards Palestinians can be attributed to strong Islamist sentiments that emphasize the centrality of the Palestinian issue within the Muslim worldview.<sup>165</sup>

### 3.2.2 *Benefits and Restrictions*

Unlike the initial years of the Palestinian-Kuwaiti encounter that involved experts and nation builders from among the intelligentsia of the Palestinian society, the late sixties witnessed influxes of entire families that required basic services like education and health care, sought long term residence, and planned a form of settlement in Kuwait. This demographic shift alarmed a Kuwaiti government and society that was also beginning to receive Kuwaiti graduates of higher education who felt threatened by the pervasive presence of Palestinians in the different sectors of Kuwait's public and private institutions. In addition, the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 generated an extra financial burden on the Kuwaiti budget as the Arab League requested that the Gulf's oil-producing-States contribute \$120 million to the frontline countries and their war efforts. Still, the welfare system that Kuwaiti nationals enjoyed offered numerous financial advantages. Some of the basic social rights granted to citizens include:

[E]ntirely free education (from primary school to university studies, including studies abroad), entirely free health care, and practically free housing. Until the late 1980s, all Kuwaiti adults were guaranteed a job in the public sector, and full retirement pension after 20 years for men and 15 years for women of active work in the public sector. There are many other minor social benefits, such as the state contribution to the bride price for male citizens (KD 2,000 or ca. US\$ 8,000), generous subsidies for water, electricity, and basic foodstuff, and the complex system through which the State helps its citizens to earn money in the private sector (by granting them legal rights over the non-Kuwaitis, by giving them business priorities and exclusive right to contracts, etc.).<sup>166</sup>

In this sense, limiting the naturalization process of non-Kuwaitis in general serves as a means to increase the benefits of citizen welfare and maintain an uneven system of social rights that gives privileges to Kuwaiti citizens over non-Kuwaitis. Thomas Marshall posits that such

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<sup>165</sup> FarajAllah, *Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations*

<sup>166</sup> Anh Nga Longva, "Citizenship, Identity and the Question of Supreme Loyalty: The Case of Kuwait", *Forum for Development Studies*, 22:2, 1995, 197-219, 203 DOI: [10.1080/08039410.1995.9666004](https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.1995.9666004)

privileges and advantages over non-citizens can also be a compensation for the limited political rights available to citizens.<sup>167</sup> This interpretation has merit in this case. Although Kuwait has been one of the few Gulf countries with a significant history of dissent and parliamentary movements, Kuwaiti political activism often clashes with the ultimate authority of the ruling Emir and the ruling family.

Kuwait introduced policies and regulations to curb the growth of the Palestinian population in their midst. Conferring Kuwaiti citizenship to Palestinians was a rare occurrence, especially after 1959 when the citizenship system became more restrictive and excluded both birth in Kuwait and length of stay as factors leading to naturalization.<sup>168</sup> A total number of 100 to 150 Palestinians who made significant contributions to the naissance and early development of the Kuwaiti State received Kuwaiti citizenship. Some prominent Kuwaiti-Palestinian figures include Hani Qaddomi, Abdel Muhsin Qattan, Nazim Al Ghabra, and Akram Zuaiter. Khairi Abuljebain and his wife, who is also an educator, received Kuwaiti citizenship later in 1984. He mentions in his memoir that the rate of granting citizenship to Palestinians was considerably low in comparison with other Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.<sup>169</sup>

State policies were introduced in the late 1960s to govern and control the entry and residency of non-Kuwaitis. One of the most controversial policies was the system of Al Kafala or sponsorship which gave Kuwaiti employers or business partners control over the legal status of a non-Kuwaiti employee or partner.<sup>170</sup> The Kafael or sponsor could strip the non-Kuwaiti employee of their visa as soon as the contract ends and restrict the mobility of non-Kuwaitis in terms of job transfers or the reporting of abusive work practices. Access to education was also limited to only

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<sup>167</sup> Thomas Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, Vol. 11 (New York, NY: Cambridge, 1950).

<sup>168</sup> Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*.

<sup>169</sup> Abuljebain, *My Life Story in Palestine and Kuwait*.

<sup>170</sup> J. Sater, "Citizenship and migration in Arab Gulf monarchies", *Citizenship Studies*, 18:3-4, 2014, 292-302, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2013.820394](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2013.820394)

10% of the total acceptance rate to public education, and the rate kept on getting smaller as years went by. Non-Kuwaitis were also barred from ownership. They could not own houses or properties. Instead, they rented their residences and were subject to customary increases in rent. Starting one's business had to go through a Kuwaiti sponsor who should own at least 51% of total shares in the business enterprise regardless of his actual contribution to cost or management. Most Palestinians and non-Kuwaitis were released from their work as soon as a Kuwaiti replacement became available to take over their positions.<sup>171</sup>

Matters got worse after the 1973 war and the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord as fears of a permanent settlement of Palestinians in Kuwait grew, especially since the Palestinian constituents became almost %20 of Kuwait's population altogether.<sup>172</sup> The policies and procedures taken to deter and reduce the number of Palestinians in Kuwait became more intrusive in the 1980s. By 1988, Kuwait introduced laws to prevent employees from bringing any family to Kuwait unless their salary was more than 600 KD, which was exceptionally high. Another policy prevented the male children of non-Kuwaiti residents from staying in Kuwait after the age of 21 unless employed or enrolled in Kuwait University. New employment of Palestinians, Jordanians, Iraqis, or Syrians became virtually impossible as the office of the Minister of Public Works had to personally approve it. Employees in the government sector who were transferring to the private sector were ordered to leave the country and re-enter based on their new contract in the private sector. In addition, obtaining drivers' licenses was becoming increasingly difficult, especially for younger people; most of them were born in Kuwait and knew no other home.

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<sup>171</sup> FarajAllah, "The Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations."

<sup>172</sup> Ann M. Lesch, "Palestinians in Kuwait," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 42-54.



These restrictions led many Palestinians in Kuwait to feel alienated and psychologically detached; their original homeland in Palestine remained largely in their imagination as the ultimate object of their nostalgia. They dreamed of being citizens in their homeland, rather than second class residents, refugees, or immigrants even in a country like Kuwait, which was initially hospitable, and remained staunchly supportive of their cause. However, their emotional attachment to Kuwait lingered even after their expulsion in the aftermath of the First Gulf War. After reflecting on the many firsts he experienced in Kuwait, the author and blogger Hussein Younis writes, "In Kuwait, our family home welcomed relatives from both sides of my family. In Kuwait, my uncles are buried. In Kuwait, I saw a homeland and chanted every morning, 'Oh Kuwait, may you remain glorious.' In Kuwait, my dreams were born. What beautiful days we had in Kuwait? Why must one be forced out of his homeland twice: once from Palestine and then from Kuwait?"<sup>173</sup> Hussein later reflects on how the experience of Palestinians in Kuwait taught them to invest their time, effort, and expertise in countries that can offer them citizenship.<sup>174</sup>

### 3.3 The Iraqi Invasion

The blissfully oblivious people of Kuwait woke up in the early hours of the morning of August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990 to news about an Iraqi incursion that swallowed up the entirety of Kuwait by the end of the day. The Emir Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah quickly left to neighboring Saudi Arabia. Conversely, his brother, Sheikh Fahad Al Ahmad, drove his car to the Emiri Palace in Dasman bent on protecting this symbol of Kuwait's sovereignty. He got a shot in the back of his head fired by a nearby Iraqi sniper.<sup>175</sup> The lives of over two million people were on the verge of a

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<sup>173</sup> Hussein Younis, "In Kuwait," personal blog, Feb. 25, 2012, <https://husseinyounes.com/%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%83%d9%88%d9%8a%d8%aa/#more-2027>

<sup>174</sup> Hussein Younis, "Lessons from the Gulf War," personal bog, May, 2020, <https://husseinyounes.com/%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%b3-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a8->

<sup>175</sup> Ibrahim Bahnahani, "The Story of the Martyrdom of Sheikh Fahad", Interview with Muhammad Al Mulla, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR55hjeoYR8>

monumental life-changing chain of events.<sup>176</sup> The Arab world as a whole was also on the verge of a series of cataclysmic transformations.

### ***3.3.1 The Geopolitical Context***

The Iraq-Iran war that lasted from 1980 to 1988 drove both countries to the brink of bankruptcy, exhausted their resources, and exacted a heavy human toll. In the end, Iraq came out with a modest victory and Saddam Hussein was viewed as the savior of the Sunni world in the Arab Gulf region. Paramilitary attacks against Kuwait were carried out in the 1980s by groups affiliated with the Iranian regime. For instance, the Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah survived an assassination attempt in 1985 purportedly plotted by Iran's agent in Iraq at the time Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis who also played a role in several other paramilitary attacks on Kuwait including the hijacking of the Kuwaiti plane Kathema in 1983.<sup>177</sup> Iraq emerged from the war with huge debts to several countries. Some dropped their debts in acknowledgment of the Iraqi protection from the Iranian ambitions in the region. Kuwait, however, refused to write off Iraq's debts, a demand that Saddam Hussein felt entitled to.<sup>178</sup>

There were other contentious issues related to Iraq's struggling postwar economy and perceptions of foul play. Saddam demanded a compensation for his defense of Arab interests and for the losses Iraq incurred because both Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates jacked up their production of oil above their OPEC quota, which in turn led to a significant reduction in oil prices. Another thorny issue was Iraq's accusation that Kuwait illegally benefited from the oil fields at Al Rumaila which is situated on the borderlines between the two countries. Iraq also

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<sup>176</sup> Kuwait Government Online, The Population of Kuwait, <https://e.gov.kw/sites/kgenglish/Pages/Visitors/AboutKuwait/KuwaitAtaGlancePopulation.aspx>

<sup>177</sup> "Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis Partook in the Assassination attempt of Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmad in 1985," Al Qabas International, Jan.2, 2020, <https://www.alqabas.com/article/5739795->

<sup>178</sup> Fred Halliday, "The Gulf War and its aftermath: first reflections," *International Affairs* 67, no. 2 (1991): 223-234.

wanted to rent two Kuwaiti islands to facilitate oil exports from its only sea port, Um Qasr. The dispute between the two countries reached a dead-end during a meeting arranged by Arab leaders that was attended by Kuwait's Crown Prince Sheikh Sa'd Al Abdulla Al Sabah and Izzat Ibrahim, the Vice President of Iraq, on July 31<sup>st</sup> of 1990.<sup>179</sup> Iraq's historical claims to the region of Kuwait seemed to also resurface from time to time and were used in August of 1990 as a pre-text to justify belligerent action against Kuwait.<sup>180</sup>

In August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces went in and captured most cities and areas in Kuwait declaring that Kuwait was the 19<sup>th</sup> district of Iraq and that it was an extension of the province of Al-Basra. Needless to say, this invasion not only shocked the Kuwaitis, but also the entire Gulf region which holds some of the most prolific producers of oil and natural gas on the planet. Led by the United States, the world quickly took action. The UN Security Council issued 12 resolutions on different aspects of the situation culminating in the 1990 resolution 678 giving Iraq a deadline of January 15, 1991 to withdraw completely from Kuwait; otherwise, member states will act upon the request of the legitimate government of Kuwait and use all necessary means to expel Iraqi forces and restore peace and security.<sup>181</sup> Several Arab countries, most notably Egypt, Syria, and the Gulf States, demanded the prompt unconditional withdrawal of Saddam's forces from Kuwait and threatened an all-out war with help from the United States.

During the emergency Summit of the Arab League held on August 10<sup>th</sup> 1990 to address the Iraqi invasion and find strategies to ensure Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, several solutions were suggested. However, a draft presented by the UAE defined a specific plan of action which

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<sup>179</sup> Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990-91: A failed or impossible task?" *International Security* 17, no. 2 (1992): 147-179.

<sup>180</sup> Halliday, "The Gulf War and its aftermath: first reflections," *International Affairs*, 226.

<sup>181</sup> United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission Background, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unikom/background.html#:~:text=On%2020August%201990%2C%20Iraq%20had%20occupied%20the%20previous%20day>

involved the license to call upon the USA and Western allies to lead military action against Iraq based on UN resolution 678 that was issued a few days earlier.<sup>182</sup> Other options were clearly not going to come through as there was a massive international pressure to liberate Kuwait quickly with no concessions and to punish Saddam Hussein and his regime for taking that fatal step. The Arab countries seemed united in condemning the invasion of Kuwait and demanding the withdrawal of Iraqi forces to the pre-August 2<sup>nd</sup> boundaries. They were, nevertheless, divided regarding the approval of international and US involvement in war efforts against Iraq. Major Arab countries like Egypt and Syria were completely in favor of forming the international coalition to liberate Kuwait.

Other countries were reluctant or in outright opposition. Jordan's King Hussein voiced his reservation regarding the suggested resolution and so did Yasser Arafat of the PLO. Leaders of Yemen, Sudan, and Mauritania abstained while Iraq and Libya were against the resolution 195. The Libyan president Moammar Qathafi addressed the UAE Emir scoldingly and asked: "why resort to the USA for protection rather than asking Israel directly?"<sup>183</sup> Those who had reservations were preliminary concerned about the US intervention since it was known to be the staunchest ally of Israel, the biggest threat to Arab countries in general, and Palestinians in particular. The USA was also perceived to be an imperialist power whose military presence could lead to further meddling in the region. Both the PLO and Jordan along with other Arab countries like Algeria, Yemen, and Morocco were in favor of an Arab solution.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Saeed Al Shahatt, One Day, The Seventh Day, August 10, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/8/10/%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8->

<sup>184</sup> Al Mohtawa, "A video recording of Arab presidents' voting in Cairo Summit August 1990." Nov, 29, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8qc6VXGtCE>

The ambivalent position of Arafat became further distanced from the Kuwaiti position and more aligned with the Iraqi stance when he visited Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. His shortsighted position could have been an attempt to seek a strictly Arab resolution to the conflict but also as an attempt to secure some political gains in the absence of any certain outcomes in the early stages of the crisis. In an interview with Arafat's close counselor and PLO secretary Yasser Abed Rabbo, he highlights the dilemma facing Arafat at the time. His relationship with Iraq became critical after the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982 and the souring relations with Syria. He also relied on Saddam to diffuse tensions with Tunisia after the PLO office moved there. Saddam also offered significant financial and political support to the PLO. Nevertheless, Abed Rabbo emphasizes that Arafat persistently tried to discourage Saddam from war with the coalition and told him that there was no need to tie Iraqi interests with Palestine. Saddam, on the other hand, reportedly told Arafat that he saw the nightlights of Jerusalem as vividly as he saw the nightlights of Baghdad. Arafat was hesitant to object, but he was fairly confident that the war will be averted in the last minute.<sup>185</sup>

While intellectuals and politicians such as Noam Chomsky and Rashid Khalidi raised questions and doubts about the hasty nonnegotiable stance of the US-led coalition that left little room for diplomatic Arab-led resolutions, Palestinian intellectuals such as the historian Walid Khalidi accused Arafat of committing the gravest strategic mistake in his career.<sup>186</sup> By foregoing the ethical grounds that support the Palestinian liberation cause and taking sides in an inter-regional Arab conflict, he risked losing the support of Arab countries, especially those that stood with the Palestinian struggle politically and financially for over 25 years. Khalidi originally

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<sup>185</sup> Ghassan Sharbal, Interview with Yasser Abed Rabbo, Elaph, Nov 27<sup>th</sup> 2008, <https://elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2008/11/386332.htm>

<sup>186</sup> Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," *Current History* 90, no. 552 (1991): 18-20; Naom Chomsky, "The Gulf Crisis," *Z Magazine* (1991): 199102-02.

wrote his article prior to the onset of Operation Desert Storm.<sup>187</sup> George Abed, founder and director of the Palestine Welfare Association stationed in Geneva, also called on the PLO to take a decisive stance against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in order to preserve its integrity. He called for the PLO to avoid being entangled in any way with this interregional conflict.<sup>188</sup>

The confusion was further exacerbated when Saddam Hussein started to conflate his local agenda with revolutionary rhetoric about liberating Palestine as his next step and presenting himself as the savior of Pan-Arab unity.<sup>189</sup> He tied his withdrawal from Kuwait to Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories and to Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. This appeal to the Pan-Arab Nationalist sentiment and the Palestinian hope of liberation resonated with many Palestinians and Arabs who lived outside Kuwait. The call for American military forces to be deployed to the region strengthened pro-Iraqi sentiments in the region. For some intellectuals, a powerful Arab regime with military capabilities was needed as a deterring force that restores the regional balance of powers and fills the void created by Egypt's isolated peace treaty with Israel in 1978.<sup>190</sup> While some still view Saddam Hussein as a great supporter of the Palestinian cause due to his financial support and resounding rhetoric, others purport that he used the cause to gain status in the Arab world and garner the support and adulation of the Palestinians. Muhammad Al Mashatt, the former Iraqi Ambassador to Washington, casts serious doubts on Hussein's apparent advocacy for the Palestinian cause and provides counter points to demonstrate his abuse of the Palestinian cause. For example, he argues that starting a new Palestinian faction in Iraq further divided the PLO; Saddam's commitment to a meaningless war

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<sup>187</sup> Walid Khalidi, "The Gulf Crisis: Origins and Consequences." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1991): 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537195>.

<sup>188</sup> George T. Abed, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1991): 29–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537196>.

<sup>189</sup> Shak Bernard Hanish, *The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait: a realist interpretation*, Northern Arizona University, 1998.

<sup>190</sup> Khalidi, "The Gulf Crisis: Origins and Consequences."

with Iran for 8 years wasted Iraq's valuable resources. He argues that Saddam never instructed his representatives to bring up Palestinian interests with US or Western diplomats. According to Mashatt, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait undermined Arab unity and gravely hurt Palestinian interests.<sup>191</sup>

### ***3.3.2 Response of Kuwait's Palestinians to the Invasion***

While Saddam's Pan-Arab Nationalist propaganda can be seen as opportunistic in hindsight, his rhetoric resonated with Arab populations at the time. Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Jordan were drawn to Saddam's promises. This attitude was arguably motivated by two major factors. First, Palestinians were desperately looking for a strong ally who could advocate for the liberation of Palestinian territories after decades of occupation and international neglect of their plight. This strong Arab leader would also compensate for the power vacuum in the region, especially after the neutralization of Egypt following its peace treaty with Israel in 1978. Secondly, they viewed the US intervention as an imperial venture meant to undermine Arab sovereignty, particularly since the US is deemed as the strongest protector and ally of Israel; therefore, it is viewed as complicit in the affliction of the Palestinians. This view could be anticipated when viewing the post-Cold War mood in the region as US hegemony was feared and American hostility towards Palestinians and the PLO was significantly felt."By the end of June 1990 following the suspension of the US-PLO dialogue; even Kuwaiti newspapers were calling on the Arabs to take serious stands against the US as it continued to display hostility

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<sup>191</sup> Muhammad Mashatt, "The Truth about Saddam Hussein's Stance towards the Palestinian Cause, Elaf, June 2004, <https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/1086443052030327000.htm>

towards Arab causes.”<sup>192</sup>Hosni Mubarak also warned that the biased stand of the US may force Arabs to resort to military options.<sup>193</sup>

The Palestinians who lived in Kuwait, however, were not easily swayed by the rhetoric of Saddam Hussein. Ghabra and Al Mudairis postulate that the Palestinians in Kuwait can be divided into three groups.<sup>194</sup>The first group, which most likely comprised one third of Kuwait’s Palestinians, was strongly opposed to the Iraqi invasion. This group progressively increased as the Iraqi military became more and more destructive and intrusive. They generally supported Kuwaitis due to the long history of personal and professional relations with Kuwaitis that go back to the 1930s and 40s. They recognized the exceptional and consistent Kuwaiti support to their liberation movement. While some vocally expressed doubts in Iraq’s intentions, some actively participated in the resistance movement against the Iraqi forces.<sup>195</sup>Almost 5,000 Palestinians were imprisoned by Iraqi forces.<sup>196</sup>A spontaneous pro- Kuwaiti demonstration reportedly took place in the area of Hawali, which is heavily populated by Palestinians as early as August 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>197</sup>Leading PLO figures that opposed the Iraqi occupation and called upon Palestinians in Kuwait to reject any dealing with the Iraqi forces include Rafiq Qablawi (Abu Ziyad) who was promptly assassinated by the Iraqi intelligence forces in Kuwait. Saleem Zaanoun (Abu Al Adib) was another opposing PLO figure that escaped assassination attempts in

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<sup>192</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Arab public opinion and the Gulf War," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): 437-452,443.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*; Al Mudairis, *The Development of Kuwaiti-Palestinian Relations*.

<sup>195</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>196</sup> Lesch, *Palestinians in Kuwait*.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.; Abboud, "I tell you what's in my pocket."



Kuwait only to be killed alongside his colleague Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) in Tunisia in January 1991.<sup>198</sup>

The second group adopted a neutral stance and feared the uncertain repercussions of any action they take. This was probably the largest of the three groups. Their neutrality, however, seemed to lean more towards opposition as they became more and more aware of the Iraqi practices that were contrary to the declared goals and promises of the Iraqi leader.

However, there was a third arguably smaller group that held various degrees of sympathy towards the Iraqi side. This stance could have been motivated by personal grievances against Kuwaitis, genuine conviction of Saddam's Pan-Arab vision for the region, or belief in the Iraqi narrative justifying their invasion of Kuwait. This group, though, was not the largest of the three and some of its adherents gradually changed their opinion after witnessing the aggressive and reckless nature of the Iraqi occupation.<sup>199</sup> A large number of Palestinian families decided to leave Kuwait until matters get resolved. Almost 200,000 out of almost 380,000 Palestinians were either already outside Kuwait in their summer break or left Kuwait after the invasion. But many could not leave and had to deal with the rising challenges of life under the Iraqi occupation. Palestinians in Kuwait became a part of Iraq's propaganda machine as they were used to polish the regime's image in the Arab world.

Despite the nuanced and largely anti-invasion position of Palestinians in Kuwait, there was a prevalent perception by Kuwaitis of their complicity with the Iraqi occupiers. This perception was likely due to several external factors. In addition to the controversial position of Arafat, Iraq recruited Palestinians from various factions stationed in Iraq and loyal to Saddam Hussein to man checkpoints, search, provoke, and harass Kuwaitis. Media footage of

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<sup>198</sup>“From the archives of the Iraqi Intelligence System”, Iraq Today, Aug.22, 2017, <https://iraqtoday.com/news/13297/1991>

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

Palestinians in Jordan and elsewhere chanting for Saddam Hussein enraged Kuwaitis. While Palestinians in Kuwait tried to keep a low profile and distance themselves from the occupation forces, the new Iraqi interim government led by Saddam's cousin Hassan Al Majid ordered Palestinians to reopen schools for the new school year at the risk of losing their jobs and their compensations. Three thousand Palestinian teachers reported to work; and schools reopened with limited numbers of students. This move angered many Kuwaitis who boycotted schools and businesses under the illegitimate Iraqi occupation. Kuwaiti resistance cells attacked schools, which resulted in the death of numerous Palestinian teachers and students. Some of the Palestinians that reported to work in vital institutions ensured the non-disruption of much needed services like water and energy.<sup>200</sup> Some also smuggled important documents from colleges and banks to ensure that they do not fall in the hands of the Iraqi forces.<sup>201</sup>

Despite the absence of effective leadership of Palestinians in Kuwait, Ghabra brings attention to the Palestinian PLO figure entrusted with caring for the Palestinian population in Kuwait during the crisis, Ali Al Hassan (Abu Ayman). His approach was largely reconciliatory as he actively sought to diffuse tensions between Kuwaitis and Palestinians. He downplayed Kuwaiti attacks on schools. Instead, he accused Iraqis of stirring up hostilities. He organized civic service projects involving both Palestinians and Kuwaitis. Some of his followers cooperated with Kuwaiti civil protests against Iraq and were almost executed were it not for the direct intervention of Arafat.<sup>202</sup> Although most Palestinians in Kuwait were apprehensive of the Iraqi occupation and anxiously awaiting its exit from Kuwait, the general impression gleaned by Kuwaitis was that they betrayed Kuwait by siding with the Iraqi occupation. When the military operations ended in February of 1991, more than 200,000 Palestinians were already outside

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<sup>200</sup> Lesch, *Palestinians in Kuwait*.

<sup>201</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid

Kuwait; another 180,000 Palestinians were still in Kuwait, but their moment there was about to come to a traumatic end.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The first generation of Palestinian immigrants established deep connections with Kuwaitis and contributed profusely to the establishment and development of Kuwait's vital institutions and infrastructure. They experienced the consecutive stages of Kuwait's development. Some arrived to Kuwait before the commercial production of oil when Kuwait was still a scorching desert with ample prospects but very few amenities. Mutual support and cooperation marked the relationship between the early generation of Palestinian intelligentsia and Kuwaiti notables, but the situation started to get progressively difficult for those who arrived to Kuwait after 1967. At that point the arrival of hundreds of families changed the nature of Palestinian life in Kuwait and shifted the perception of the Kuwaiti government and society towards Palestinians. On the one hand, family life in Kuwait gave rise to Palestinian support networks and a rich cultural life; on the other hand, it evoked Kuwaiti fears of a demographic shift favoring Palestinians over the Kuwaiti population. These fears led to increasing restrictions and limitations to public services in a bid to curb or cut down the Palestinian presence in Kuwait. The mounting restrictions on citizenship, employment, job security, and intact family life became much more tangible in the 1980s.

The new and progressively more restrictive regulations led to a rising sense of insecurity and alienation that was felt more deeply by younger generations who were born in Kuwait. Being Kuwaiti-born myself, I can attest to an invisible barrier between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis in the 1980s. Despite the natural affinity I felt for Kuwait as my birthplace and locale of childhood memories, an invisible barrier disturbed this affinity. Discriminatory and restrictive policies and

practices were tangible in everyday life. These policies and practices constantly reminded Palestinians of the temporary and contrived nature of their relationship with Kuwait. This unease was shared in different ways between Kuwaitis and Palestinians despite Kuwait's unshakable support of the Palestinian struggle for liberation that enabled the PLO and the FATAH movement to emerge and develop in the midst of its cities and suburbs.

Despite the tension that was steadily developing between Palestinians and Kuwaitis in the 1980s, the symbiotic relationship between the two peoples could have continued for a long time after 1990 had it not been for the Palestinian entanglement in the shocking Iraqi occupation of Kuwait which purportedly used Palestinians to garner support and polish the image of Saddam as the hero of the Palestinians and the leader of the Pan-Arab unity. While some of the well-connected Palestinians of the earlier wave were relatively less affected, average Palestinian employees, workers, and entrepreneurs experienced immense difficulties in coping with the situation in Kuwait during the occupation and in the aftermath of Kuwait's liberation.

#### 4 CHAPTER 4

Jamil Abboud looked through his seat window as he was flying out of Kuwait after 18 years working there as a math teacher. “It was all for nothing, all in vain,” he thought to himself as he compared the cheerful hopefulness of his arrival with his bitter and humiliating departure in August of 1991 after hearing so many insults at passport checkpoints.<sup>203</sup> Two decades later, my sister Hadil, a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian physician attending a medical conference in Kuwait, could not hold back her tears when her plane landed in Kuwait’s airport and she heard the announcement, “we are now in Kuwait.” The termination of her life in Kuwait happened while she was on vacation abroad. She felt that her brief visit to Kuwait in 2010 gave her a much needed closure of a lingering and deep trauma. Despite the diversity of experiences and impressions of Palestinians who left Kuwait after the First Gulf War, they all have one thing in common and that is the traumatic scar of a severed life in Kuwait.

The First Gulf War generated deep and lasting effects that reshaped lives and shook the already volatile geopolitics of the Middle East environment to the core. This chapter will include a close look at some of these major effects, especially those connected with the post-Gulf War experiences of Palestinians. The First Gulf War profoundly changed the lives of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait. It also reshaped the lives of Palestinians at large and the trajectory of their cause. The geopolitics of the postwar environment reconfigured loyalties and priorities, and placed pressure on key players in the Middle East. The crisis and its fateful conclusion impacted the standing of the Palestinians of Kuwait who headed to new destinations to start a new chapter in their lives while also dealing with their own traumas after leaving their secondary home country and the stable community they enjoyed there. In addition, the impact of the exodus of Palestinians from Kuwait could also be connected to the evolving Palestinian identity and

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<sup>203</sup> Abboud, “I Tell you what’s in my Pocket.”

national consciousness. The divisions that set each group of Palestinians apart can be attributed to the geography and social economy of its host country. The unifying traits of Palestinians in diaspora can be gleaned through this and other tragic episodes of expulsion and persecution. They can be seen in shared pursuits of an imagined ideal homecoming that can only be attained through perseverance, activism, and constant remembrance of a uniquely Palestinian culture and an increasingly differentiated history that continuously fine-tunes the Palestinian identity.

The expulsion of many Palestinians and the ending of their unique moment in Kuwait in 1991 did not necessarily signal the total absence of Palestinians in Kuwait. They still worked and lived in Kuwait in much smaller numbers while keeping a low profile and struggling to shoulder the extra financial and psychological burdens placed upon them as non-Kuwaiti Palestinians. Instead, it signals the end of a vibrant, settled community of Palestinians that established a symbiotic presence in Kuwait predating its inception as a modern national state. Palestinians provided knowledge, experience, and huge efforts to build and vitalize significant sectors of Kuwait's establishments and infrastructure; meanwhile, Kuwait provided Palestinians after 1948 with much needed security and opportunity. Palestinians built successful careers, attained higher education, brought in their families, built communities, and organized their active struggle for liberation with the help and blessings of Kuwait's government and society.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait brutalized and traumatized the Kuwaitis, devastated Iraq and its people, and tore the fabric of the Palestinian communities of Kuwait. The first direct victims are the Kuwaitis who suffered through an oppressive occupation of their country. At least one thousand Kuwaiti civilians were killed during the invasion including 41 children ranging in age between newborns to 15. According to the Office of Martyrs in Kuwait, youth as young as 14 and 15 joined resistance groups and were executed either for writing anti-Saddam

graffiti like Mansour Al Ibraheem, or for carrying arms like Abdulla Al Fuzay'.<sup>204</sup> Kuwait also endured a financial loss of over 52 billion dollars and significant destruction to many of its oil, military, and civil establishments. Iraqis constitute the biggest long-term victims. The UN Compensation Commission founded in 1991 to allocate monetary compensations from Iraq to claimants who suffered losses due the Iraqi invasion successfully ended its mission in February 2022 after receiving 52.4 billion dollars in compensation from the Iraqi government.<sup>205</sup> The severe sanctions imposed on Iraq until 2003 exacted a high toll on Iraqi civilians and children. The power and influence of Saddam's regime's in the region dwindled steadily until its absolute demise after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 which devastated Iraq's population and infrastructure and resulted in almost one million deaths.

The third victim group was, undoubtedly, the Palestinian expat community whose affliction was abused and appropriated by Saddam Hussein to polish his image as a nationalist hero.<sup>206</sup> The Palestinians in Kuwait were evicted once again and experienced a second exodus as they were uprooted from their secondary homeland, a place where they worked and built lives and livelihoods for themselves and their families for decades. Many of them were arrested, killed, tortured, or harassed during the first period after the liberation. Many more were simply denied visas to return, their contracts annulled, and had to leave abruptly en masse. Starting a life elsewhere after a big trauma of forced or semi-forced expulsion was a harsh and unexpected twist of fate.

The victimization of Kuwait's Palestinians in 1991 was the result of compounded factors that include Kuwait's direct response and active hostility towards them. The Kuwaiti reaction

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<sup>204</sup> Jamal Yali," Kuwait's Children Martyrs", *Kuwait News Agency(KUNA)*, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2626873&language=ar>

<sup>205</sup> The United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press releases, SC/14801, Feb.22, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14801.doc.htm>

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was based on generalizing the guilt of a few from within the Palestinian community in Kuwait. More importantly, it was also in response to the support of the PLO and many Palestinians outside Kuwait for Saddam.<sup>207</sup> This presumed support was arguably not for his invasion of Kuwait, but for his perceived stance against the multinational coalition headed by the United States. The Kuwaiti stance formed despite the fact that most of Kuwait's Palestinians were either neutral or supportive of Kuwait's liberation efforts. Those that worked against Kuwaitis presumably held personal grudges, had special agendas, or resented the increased restrictions, exclusions, and discrimination that they experienced during the late 1980s.<sup>208</sup>

Palestinians were also victims of a short-sighted leadership that did not take into account the situation of its Palestinian constituents in Kuwait. It did not take into account the deep-rooted and important Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations, let alone the moral imperative to unequivocally stand against invasion and occupation. In addition, they were used by Saddam who appropriated their cause for his own regional ambitions and grievances, especially when he portrayed the occupation of Kuwait as the first step in the liberation of Palestine.<sup>209</sup> They were also victims of the long Israeli occupation of their land and denial of their rights and freedoms, which created a Palestinian victim diaspora to begin with. In general, Kuwait's Palestinians disapproved of the vocal support of the PLO and other Palestinians for Saddam's regime, because they had a better understanding of the motives, false propaganda, and nature of the Iraqi occupation. Their lives and livelihoods were as disrupted as those of Kuwaitis. They also had loyalty to Kuwait and had much more at stake than Palestinians elsewhere.

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<sup>207</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Institute for Palestine Studies, "The initiative of President Saddam Hussein to solve the Gulf Crisis", *Journal of Palestinian Studies* vol.1, no.4, Fall,1990, p.256, <https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/4%20%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AC.pdf>



Iraq has been associated with Arab nationalism even before the Baath Nationalist Party took over in a military coup in July 1968. Arab nationalism or *Al Qawmiya Al Arabia* was a major driver of the Arab Revolt that helped to topple the Ottomans in WWI. King Faisal and King Ghazi embraced Arab nationalism and installed numerous well-known secular Arab Nationalists in their cabinets particularly in the culture and education sectors. Sati Al Husri, originally from Syria, and Darwish Meqdadi from Palestine are renowned Arab nationalists who produced prolific writings and text books that influenced entire generations in Iraq and the entire Arab world since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>210</sup> In reality, the deep-rooted nationalist ideology suffered numerous setbacks after the death of the nationalist president of Egypt Jamal Abdel Nasser, but the First Gulf War was probably the most significant blow.

One consequence of the Gulf War was that the idea of Pan-Arab nationalism or *Al Qawmiya* had finally given way to the narrower state nationalism or *Al Wataniya* after the trauma Saddam's Baathist regime inflicted on Kuwait and the schisms he created in the region. Kuwait embraced Arab nationalism early on even while under the British protectorate. Kuwait's uneasy relationship with Iraq entailed fear of Iraq's recurring ambition to annex Kuwait on historical and Pan-Arab nationalist grounds; however, Kuwait's urban elites and members of its ruling family were still drawn to the Arab Nationalist ideology that dominated the urban and intellectual centers of knowledge in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and other cities the region.<sup>211</sup> Although Kuwait and other Gulf states were the most afflicted with disillusionment in Arab nationalism as a result of the First Gulf War, the Arab world as a whole loosened its collective

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<sup>210</sup> Sati Al Husri, *My Autobiography in Iraq 1927-1941* (Beirut: Dar Al Tali'a, 1967) [https://archive.org/details/20210201\\_20210201\\_0325](https://archive.org/details/20210201_20210201_0325) ; Ernest C. Dawn, "The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 67–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/163586>.

<sup>211</sup> Coll 17/11 'Iraq. Relations with Arab Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. Propaganda against Kuwait', British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/12/2864, in *Qatar Digital Library* <[https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc\\_100000000602.0x000196](https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000000602.0x000196)> [accessed 28 March 2024]

grip on the Pan-Arab nationalist ideology. The Iraqi scholar Mohammad Jawad Rida describes the post-Gulf War mood: "The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait erased the spiritual fulfillment provided by Arab nationalism and created a spiritual vacuum."<sup>212</sup> The Kuwaiti psyche experienced a shift that can be at least partially attributed to the trauma of the Iraqi invasion. This shift, according to Ali As'ad Watfa, the Sociology Professor in Kuwait University, left Kuwaitis in general less inclined to value Arab nationalist notions or the Palestinian issue. It also made them more inclined to accept discrimination between citizens and immigrants.<sup>213</sup> In addition to tribal loyalties and state nationalism, the Islamist awakening or the *Sahwah* that arose in the Arab world in the 1970s became a more persistent substitute of Arab nationalism and managed to successfully survive the trauma of the First Gulf War.

The complexity of the loyalties and inclinations in the post-Gulf War Kuwait in the region as a whole is further tangled by continuously changing geopolitical realities such as the series of Arab-Israeli peace treaties, the rise of global terrorism, and the post 9/11 wars in the region. The relationship between Saddam's fateful invasion and any or all of these new realities is hard to establish with certainty, but it is by no means a farfetched assumption. The post-Gulf War Middle East was a different, more chaotic geopolitical milieu than it had been a few years earlier.

In addition to the human calamity experienced by more than 300 thousand Palestinians as they set out to rearrange and restart their lives elsewhere while carrying their emotional traumas, the political and economic consequences of the rupture between Kuwait and the Palestinians were far-reaching and impactful within the delicate geopolitics of the region. The magnitude of

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<sup>212</sup> Mohammad Jawad Rida, "Arabs in the Twenty First Century: Past-Oriented Education and Unpredictable Challenges", *The Arab Future*, n.32, 1998, 47-63, 48.

<sup>213</sup> Ali As'ad Watfa, *The Political and Social Challenges in Kuwait and the Arab Homeland: Investigating contents of Political awareness of Kuwait University Students* Vol.31, no.3( Kuwait, *A'lam Al Fikr* publication, 2003) <https://www.transparency.org.kw.au-ti.org/upload/books/447.pdf>

the impact of the First Gulf War on the Palestinians and their cause was arguably secondary only to the Nakba of 1948 and the Naksa of 1967.<sup>214</sup> The exclusion of Iraq as a regional power that counters the influence of Iran and forms a deterrent to Israel reshuffled roles and priorities in regional politics.<sup>215</sup> More pertinent to this study is the isolation of the PLO and the decentralization of the Palestinian cause when it comes to Arab regimes generally and Gulf countries in particular.<sup>216</sup> This new reality and the loss of remittance funds aiding Palestinians in the Occupied Territories brought forth a sense of urgency to reach a quick settlement of the Palestinian issue. The US administration saw a need and an opportunity to broker a deal that had the potential to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

#### **4.1 Palestinian Exodus from Kuwait**

As George W. Bush declared the success of Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait on February 27, 1991, Kuwaiti forces regained power and the Iraqis surrendered or withdrew from Kuwait. Almost immediately, a campaign of vengeance against those deemed complicit with the Iraqi occupation began. The Palestinian population that stayed in Kuwait after the liberation was an easy target. Kuwaitis considered the Palestinians in Kuwait as a fifth column due to their perceived sympathy or presumed collaboration with the Iraqis. This campaign of vengeance also came at a time when attempts at reducing the numbers of Palestinians were in place even before the invasion. The persecution of Palestinians in Kuwait was so wide-spread and alarming that it drew significant criticism from international human rights monitors. Organizations such as the Kuwaiti Association to Defend War Victims, Middle

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<sup>214</sup> Watfa, *The Political and Social Challenges in Kuwait*.

<sup>215</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Arab public opinion and the Gulf War," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): 437-452.

<sup>216</sup> Philip Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 31-46.

East Human Rights Watch, and International Amnesty highlighted this campaign and helped to apply international pressure to bring about some resolution.<sup>217</sup>

Among other non-Kuwaitis, hundreds of Palestinians were arrested and tortured, and scores were killed in this campaign until the Crown Prince Sheikh Sa'd Al Abdulla Al Sabah" threatened to arrest and hang from lampposts six members of the royal family who participated in the kidnapping and torture."<sup>218</sup>This initial reaction subsided with the lifting of martial law by June, 1991, but the arbitrary detention and torture continued until September 1991 when the prison administration was improved. Still, wide-spread hostility, arbitrary deportations, and blatant discrimination were hard to bear by most in the Palestinian community. A grim reminder of this dark period is the testimony of a Palestinian doctor who documented the abuses he witnessed in a book titled *They Tortured us in Kuwait*.<sup>219</sup>The same title refers to an online group with several hundred followers. The group was set up to document that same period and the numerous abuses against Palestinians in Kuwait.<sup>220</sup>A series of diplomatic correspondence between the Palestinian observer to the UN and the representative of Kuwait regarding the situation of Palestinians in Kuwait in the aftermath of Kuwait's liberation highlight the tensions and concerns regarding the rampant abuses of Palestinian residents in Kuwait at that time.<sup>221</sup> Edward Said describes the situation in 1991,

<sup>217</sup> Human Rights Watch Jan 1, 1992, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/467fca5a23.html>; Denise Porter Kemp, Palestinians Persecuted after Gulf War by Israel, Kuwait, Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXV, Number 161, 10 October 1991, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19911010-01.2.13&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->, Amnesty Report, October 1, 1992 Index Number: MDE 17/002/1992, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde17/002/1992/en/>

<sup>218</sup> Philip Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 31–46, 42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328660>.

<sup>219</sup> Lubada, *That's how they Tortured us in Kuwait*.

<sup>220</sup> How they tortured us in Kuwait," Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/p/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B9%D8%B0%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%89-%D8>

<sup>221</sup> Nasser AlKidwa, Observer of Palestine to the UN, "Palestinians in Kuwait, Letter from Palestine," New York: UN, March 6, 1991, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-184334/>; Muhammad Abdulhasan, Representative of Kuwait in the UN, "Palestinians in Kuwait, Letter from Kuwait," New York: UN, June 24, 1991, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-188986/>.

Most dramatically, the entire Palestinian community in Kuwait has been undergoing severe tribulations, with torture, deportation, arbitrary arrests, and summary killings the order of the day; leaving aside the immeasurable material losses to this community and its dependents in the Occupied Territories, there is the additional fact that the restored Kuwaiti authorities have announced that those Palestinian residents who left Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation will not be allowed back, leaving tens of thousands of refugees in a Jordan already severely overburdened. Those who have remained face astringent measures, among them further deportation and imprisonment, against them.<sup>222</sup>

Mr. Jamil Abboud, a Palestinian math teacher, records highlights of the time period between the Iraqi invasion and his exit from Kuwait on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1991, exactly 18 years after arriving to its old airport on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1973.<sup>223</sup> He recalls the tough situation most Palestinians experienced under the Iraqi occupation and in the aftermath of Kuwait's liberation. Iraqis condemned Palestinians who did not actively support the invasion claiming that Iraq invaded Kuwait to liberate Palestine. Kuwaitis condemned Palestinians who did not actively voice resistance to Iraq's invasion citing the hypocrisy of supporting one occupation while resisting another. He records an encounter with a Kuwaiti bystander during the occupation who asked him to chant: *Long lives Kuwait*. After doing so, Abboud asked for the reason behind this strange request. The Kuwaiti bystander said that he wanted to make sure Palestinians were still loyal to Kuwait. When the war ended, the Iraqis left files containing names of Palestinians who allegedly dealt with them; Abboud suggests that these files were left on purpose by Iraqis to punish those who did not cooperate. Either way, Palestinians were randomly detained, humiliated, interrogated, tortured, or executed in the early weeks and months after the liberation of Kuwait.

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<sup>222</sup>Edward W. Said, "Reflections on twenty years of Palestinian history," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 5-22, 7.

<sup>223</sup> Abboud, "I Tell you what's in my Pocket."

Abboud's account of his final month in Kuwait is both poignant and telling of the tragic conclusion of this unique chapter in the Palestinian and Kuwaiti history. After the liberation of Kuwait, Jamil Abboud's three children were not allowed to go back to their schools, so his family had to leave for Jordan in order to enroll in its schools for the new school year a month prior to his own departure from Kuwait. He relates the humiliation his family encountered on the way to the airport at Kuwaiti checkpoints. He counters this bitter experience with the appreciation he felt from some of his Kuwaiti students who begged him for tutoring, even for the duration of the one month he had left. His personal experience in Kuwait's airport was so distressing and humiliating that he filed a complaint with a sympathetic officer just before getting on the plane. On his way to Amman, he relates overwhelming feelings of disappointment while comparing scenes from his hopeful arrival to Kuwait to his humiliating departure after spending 18 years as a diligent educator in a country that practically kicked him out. However, two years later Mr. Abboud was heartened when his old students reached out to him with messages of love and appreciation. He proudly displays their messages on his blog.<sup>224</sup>

At that point, most of the remaining 150 thousand Palestinians opted to leave Kuwait; only about 30-50 thousands stayed behind. In addition to the physical danger to Palestinians and their families, many of their work contracts and permits were either cancelled or never renewed. Those who stayed behind had to endure more financial burdens as they had to pay back rent and bills for the year under occupation; they lost access to any public education and college admission. They also had to endure continuous harassment and job insecurity. A percentage of the ones who stayed were Gazans who held Egyptian documents that give them no place to go. Others had citizenship in other countries and had to renew both their work contracts and residency permits annually or every other year. As Mai Al Nakib, a Palestinian- Kuwaiti scholar,

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<sup>224</sup> Abboud, "I Tell you what's in my Pocket."

laments the loss of the vibrant Palestinian communities in Kuwait, she also laments the absence of the Kuwaiti recognition of the loss to Kuwait of a constructive constituent of their country and the possibilities this recognition can facilitate in bringing about more meaningful pluralism and inclusiveness. She quotes Michael Dumper who reflects on the situation of Kuwait's Palestinians in autumn of 1991: "Pockets of Palestinians will survive as restaurateurs, managers, and technicians, dependent as never before upon government and Kuwaiti approval. But the large, vibrant, challenging, virtually self-sustaining community has gone, probably forever."<sup>225</sup>

The collective financial loss of the Palestinian community during the year of Iraqi occupation is estimated at 8 billion dollars and the ripple effect from then on includes financial strains on countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank as Palestinians relocated to these destinations en masse. Unlike other expatriate communities in Kuwait who bought properties in their home countries, the Palestinians invested in liquid assets since buying properties in Kuwait or in their home country was not a viable option. Those who had other nationalities, for example Jordanian, could have bought land or property if they felt connected enough to the country whose passports they held. After the invasion, Jordan received over 300 thousand Palestinians coming from Kuwait, most of whom had no savings, homes, or jobs. Out of the estimated 6 million Palestinians in 1990, a figure that has since more than doubled, 1.6 million were already living in Jordan.<sup>226</sup> Between 30 and 40 thousand Palestinians with Israeli IDs went to the West Bank; a smaller number had ties with Lebanon, and an estimated 21 thousand relocated to Western countries. A few thousands eventually resettled in other Gulf countries. Clearly, Jordan was the major recipient of Kuwait's Palestinian population. Their resettlement in Jordan had a

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<sup>225</sup> Al-Nakib, "The People are Missing," p.30

<sup>226</sup> George Abed, "The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1991): 29–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537196>.

surprisingly positive effect in the following few years and after the initial strain felt during their immediate arrival to Jordan subsided.<sup>227</sup>

Palestinians arrived to Jordan from Kuwait in several waves. Some were already spending their summer in Jordan while most arrived during the Iraqi occupation. A large number of Palestinians were eventually forced to leave Kuwait after the reinstatement of the Kuwaiti government. An initial flux was induced by the direct persecution and harassment of the Palestinian community; another influx was driven by extremely restrictive governmental measures on residency in Kuwait. The latter waves included those who migrated from Palestine directly to Kuwait and never lived in Jordan prior to their expulsion from Kuwait.<sup>228</sup> Most of them had no investments or significant ties to Jordan.

Although Palestinians resettling in Jordan can be termed ‘returnees’ since they held Jordanian passports given in the 1950s when the West Bank was under Jordanian guardianship, many had never lived or considered living in Jordan prior to the First Gulf War.<sup>229</sup> This mass influx aggravated existing strains on Jordan’s struggling economy and meager resources. In 1988, Jordan went through a recession that exacerbated its national debt and led to a significant drop in the value of its currency. With help from The IMF and World Bank, the debts were reduced and rescheduled and Jordan pledged to cut down expenditure. In the first half of 1990, the GDP rose by 1.5% only to drop by 9 points in the second half when the First Gulf War unfolded.<sup>230</sup> The Jordanian economy was hit hard due to restrictions on trade with Iraq and later with Saudi Arabia. Jordan’s economy was largely dependent on Arab oil states as providers of

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<sup>227</sup> Nicholas Van Hear, "The impact of the involuntary mass ‘return ‘to Jordan in the wake of the Gulf Crisis," *International Migration Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 352-374.

<sup>228</sup> Van Hear, "The impact of the involuntary mass ‘return ‘to Jordan in the wake of the Gulf crisis.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Yann Le Troquer, and Rozenn Hommery al-Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan: The Palestinians’ Third Exodus," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538306>.



subsidiaries, markets for Jordanian products, and employment of Jordanian expats who in turn provided remittances to their families and kin in Jordan.<sup>231</sup> Predictably, all three aspects of this relationship were damaged significantly during and immediately after the First Gulf War.

As the Palestinian/Jordanian expats started to arrive and settle in Jordan, they faced immense difficulties despite variations in their initial conditions and their subsequent abilities to recover and integrate into Jordanian society. The prevalent perception that the Palestinians who came from Kuwait were relatively wealthy was not accurate. In fact, almost one third of the returning Palestinians were skilled or semi-skilled laborers, low ranking employees, and small scale entrepreneurs. According to the 1975 Kuwaiti census, Palestinians formed 28% of Kuwait's engineers, 34% of typographers and designers, 37% of the entire number of doctors and pharmacist in the country, 25% of the nursing staff, 38% of Kuwait's economists and accountants, and 30% of educators. They also took part in the skilled or semi-skilled labor force. They comprised 23% of production and worker supervisors, 20% of carpenters, 25% of metal smiths and fine equipment fabricant, 25% of electrical workers, 27% of sanitation workers, and 26% of transportation advisors.<sup>232</sup>

Financial hardship and psychosocial problems were widespread among the various segments of Kuwait's Palestinians that settled in Jordan. Even those who managed to retrieve some of their funds from Kuwait were faced with the high cost of living in Jordan and the expenses of obtaining a home or a job in the absence of adequate knowledge or connections in Jordan. Many who tried to start a business ended up losing their investments rapidly, and those who were waiting to get new jobs had to wait for a very long time amidst the economic downturn already afflicting the country. By 1993, about half of the working adults that left Kuwait and

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<sup>231</sup> Troquer&Al Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan."

<sup>232</sup> United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia(ESCWA), "The Return of Jordanian/Palestinian Nationals from Kuwait", 1991,5, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1309192?ln=es>

resettled in Jordan were still unemployed.<sup>233</sup> Many drastically changed their line of work; some started small shops or restaurants that had limited success while others took up farming, worked with livestock, or started small industries. In addition, the ratio of dependents was almost four to one working member, a reality that further strained household budgets and public services in Jordan.

The newly arrived population that required services and jobs was perceived by many local compatriots as a threat or a nuisance. Ironically, however, the excessive zeal that the Jordanian community displayed in supporting Saddam was one of the factors that further implicated Kuwait's Palestinians in the alleged collaboration with the Iraqis. It was also a constant point of contention as Kuwait's Palestinians were generally against the invasion, so they were sidelined and harassed for going against the public sentiment. A fraction of the local community, however, which was on the receiving end of remittances from Kuwait's Palestinians up until 1990 was now forced to support returning family members who were experiencing sudden homelessness and destitution. A level of frictions within households hosting repatriated families was not uncommon at least in the first two years.<sup>234</sup>

Several factors helped turn things around for both Palestinian newcomers to Jordan and to the country as a whole. Despite its economic problems, the Jordanian leadership was aware of the possible opportunities presented through the newly arrived influx of skilled, educated, and accomplished workers and their savings. King Hussein of Jordan acknowledged in his speech to the Jordanian Parliament in December 1991 that the sudden increase amounting to 10% of Jordan's population strained Jordan's resources and services, but he also acknowledged that the returnees comprised possible assets considering their higher levels of skill and education and the

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<sup>233</sup> Van Hear, "Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis."

<sup>234</sup> Seteney Shami, Wasan Hijazi, and Aseel Sawalha, "Gulf War Returnees to Jordan: Coping Strategies and Long Term Implications." *Center for Migration Studies special issues* 11, no. 4 (1994): 235-238.

diverse experiences they garnered due to their distinct occupational and economic environment.<sup>235</sup> In addition, the transfers of the returnees' savings and liquid assets started to trickle in. The total deposits rose by 8.5% from August 1990 to June 1991 even before the official authorization of bank transfers were issued in Kuwait. From 1991 to 1992, deposits in foreign currency rose from 1.4 billion to 3.2 billion dollars. "The Central Bank reserves were double the average level of the mid 1980s. The general inflation many had feared did not materialize, though certain sectors were affected."<sup>236</sup>

The vitalizing impact of the new influx was also evident in the housing and construction sectors and investments in new businesses within the financial, industrial, and agricultural fields. Skilled health workers and educators helped improve and expand health care and education. Many successful private hospitals, universities, and schools were founded after their arrival. These newly established institutions offered healthcare, educational services and higher education to newly repatriate families and provided employment opportunities to health workers, teachers, college professors, and administrators. The revenue from car taxes, which were often the subject of complaints by returning expats, was substantial; and the rising demand for goods and services invigorated the consumer market. In 1992, all sectors of activity showed a marked growth in GDP that registered an 11.3% rise that went down to a 6% rise the following year.<sup>237</sup>

Although the Jordanian government tried to set up programs and initiatives to assist Kuwait's Jordanian/Palestinians to resettle, the returnees had to organize themselves to attain more guidance and advocacy as they navigated the uncertainties of wrapping up a severed livelihood and commencing a new one in an unfamiliar environment. In September 1991,

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<sup>235</sup> Al Hussein Bin Talal, "King's Address to the Eleventh Parliament," December 1991, <http://parliament.jo/node/36>

<sup>236</sup> Troquer & Al Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan", 42-43; Central Bank of Jordan Thirtieth Annual Report, 1993, p. 27. Jordan Times, July 21, 1993.

<sup>237</sup> Troquer & Al Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan."

Kuwait's returnees founded the Cooperative Society for Gulf War Returnees under the leadership of a wealthy Palestinian businessman from Kuwait.<sup>238</sup> The new society advocated on behalf of all returnees with the authorities and international organizations. Its "primary tasks were to provide relief to the neediest cases, especially in the medical domain; to inform returnees of their rights in Jordan; and to facilitate investments likely to promote self-sufficiency in the employment field."<sup>239</sup> It facilitated the setup of a free clinic that reportedly managed numerous psychosomatic cases in addition to alleviating the high costs of medical care in Jordan. The society also helped returnees fill in their compensation forms with the UN Compensation Commission and attempted to expedite the process that was lagging behind. They also demanded that the government introduce adjustments to ease their situation, especially in terms of taxing their vehicles and providing opportunities in Jordanian markets and workplaces. With some of these compensations and adjustments taking place, a gradual improvement in the situation of Palestinians in Jordan occurred. According to the Jordanian Labor Minister Abdel Karim Kabareety, by July 1992 "The majority of the Jordanians repatriated from Kuwait have been integrated into the economic life of the Kingdom, and their return has contributed to increased economic activity despite the new costs it has placed on the state."<sup>240</sup>

However, on a Psycho-social level it took several more years for most of the returnees to adjust to their new environment; some decided to migrate to Western or other Gulf countries. According to a survey research of 207 Palestinian/Jordanian repatriated workers in December 1991, over 30% wished to go back to their Gulf State, another 20% wanted to go to Palestine,

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<sup>238</sup> Troquer & Al Oudat," From Kuwait to Jordan."

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 48.

and about 20% wished to migrate to the US or Europe.<sup>241</sup> According to Troquer and Al Oudat who conducted interviews with scores of returnees, only 10% of those interviewed felt truly at home in Jordan. Eventually, when the researchers conducted follow-up interviews in 1995, most of those who wanted to go back to Kuwait felt more settled in Jordan.<sup>242</sup> One example of the resettlement and integration of Palestinian/Jordanian returnees to Jordan's society stands out. Rania Al Yassin was born in Kuwait city in August 1970 and received her education in Kuwait's New English School. She obtained her Bachelor's degree from the American University of Cairo in 1991 and then worked in the information technology sector before getting married to then Prince Abdulla Ibn I Hussein in 1993 and becoming the Queen of Jordan in February 1999.<sup>243</sup>

Even after being fully resettled in Jordan or elsewhere, the mixed feelings of nostalgia and bitterness lingered on as can be gleaned from writings and memoirs of Palestinians who left Kuwait. Publications that combine the truthfulness of memoirs and creative expressiveness of fiction reveal this mixture of emotions as the writers reflect on memories of youthful bliss, warm communities, and hopeful dreams for the future before their ultimate disillusionment and eventual rupture. Reflections on cities, destinations, identity, belonging, and the fate and history of Palestinians continue to taunt and remind them of their historical and ongoing predicament.<sup>244</sup>

In the dedication of his novel/memoire *Kuwait, Baghdad, Amman*, Usaid Al-Hutary writes: "To the child that is dying inside me, who still lives in Kuwait."<sup>245</sup> Blogs and virtual group formations such as the group founded in the West Bank titled "I was in Kuwait and I have memories there" express the collective nostalgia to an idealized time and place framing the

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<sup>241</sup> Hisham H. Ahmed, and Mary A. Williams-Ahmed, "The impact of the Gulf Crisis on Jordan's economic infrastructure: a study of the responses of 207 displaced Palestinian and Jordanian workers," *Arab Studies Quarterly* (1993): 33-61.

<sup>242</sup> Troquer & Al Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan".

<sup>243</sup> Rania Al-Abdulla, Official Website, <https://www.queenrania.jo/en/rania>

<sup>244</sup> Nawal Halawa, *Al Ankaliziya* (UAE: Midād lil-nashr wa-al-tawzī', 2017).

<sup>245</sup> Usaid Al-Hutary, *Kuwait, Baghdad, and Amman* (Amman: Alaan Publishing, 2022).

Palestinian moment in Kuwait.<sup>246</sup>The group description conveys these emotions and seeks members who share these same experiences and emotions. “It is the longing for the land that witnessed the stumbles of our childhood, and the sky under which we blossomed, longing for a beautiful exile, longing for beautiful times.”<sup>247</sup>When the group was formed in May 2020, its founder Ayman Abu Sharar expected a few hundred followers, but ended up with more than 130 thousands. Other groups with similar names also emerged to connect those who lived the Palestinian moment before 1990. While some post class photos or group pictures hoping to reconnect with long lost friends or neighbors, others visit the site to reminisce on the old times and to share and view pictures and posts of familiar places, television shows, sports activities, and other tokens of the vibrant life that was abruptly shattered by the war and its aftermath. Some threads shed light on the emotional depth and diversity among those who left Kuwait after the war. In response to an emotional post, one commenter questions the exaggerated attachment some Palestinians express towards Kuwait despite its hot climate and discriminating policies. The answers include a postulation that Kuwait was the setting of childhood memories and youthful adventures, so the two get conflated. Another praises the simplicity, sense of community, and kindness experienced there. Others decry the deteriorating attitudes towards immigrants in Kuwait nowadays. Each seems to be expressing their cumulative personal experiences in Kuwait both past and present. Some posters still assert that they would give up anything to go back there.<sup>248</sup>

While the largest number of returnees resettled in Jordan, a substantial number estimated at 30-50 thousand Palestinians went to the West Bank and Gaza. Some went back immediately

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<sup>246</sup> Ayman Abu Sharar, “I was in Kuwait and I have memories there”, Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/810752075674170>

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> “I was in Kuwait and I have memories there,” Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1610951195844764/about>

after the war; others went back after the Peace Accords with Israel that allowed a total of 100 thousand Palestinians into the West Bank. In addition to the difficult conditions in the Occupied Territories exacerbated by two and a half years of economic turbulence and decline due to the Intifada, the official government subsidiaries and private remittances from Kuwait and other Gulf states that comprised the highest percentage of aid to the region almost completely stopped.<sup>249</sup> Markets in nearby Gulf and other Arab countries provided an outlet to Palestinian products and produce and helped boost the economy of the Occupied Territories. Although the new influx of Palestinian returnees was relatively small, it immensely strained services, institutions, and vital infrastructure in the Occupied Territories. The economic problems that accompanied the influx from the Gulf were gradually easing as money transfers, compensations, local investments, and human resources began to vitalize the local economy. Furthermore, bigger and more profound changes were on the horizon for a more comprehensive reshuffling of the sociopolitical and economic situation there. The Oslo Accords and the arrival of the Palestinian authority to the Palestinian territories in 1994 were closely linked to the geopolitical climate in the aftermath of the First Gulf War.

#### **4.2 Geopolitical Aftermath and the Palestinian Situation**

The First Gulf War was a profound shock to the Arab world that never expected a full-blown invasion and occupation of one Arab country by another. The military intervention of the US- led coalition that was backed by some Arab countries against the Iraqi Republic brought forth mass casualties and financial losses and deepened geopolitical instability in the region. There were many shifts in attitudes and relations within the countries in the region that resulted in a schism between the six Gulf countries and the states and polities that presumably supported

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<sup>249</sup> Abed, "Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis"; Palestinians External Trade under Israeli Occupation (Geneva, 1989); Recent Economic Developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Geneva, Oct.1990).

the Saddam regime during its occupation of Kuwait. This schism led to vindictive and punitive policies by the Gulf against Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and of course the Palestinians. The presence of US troops on Saudi soil was also a major development. Although American presence predated the Gulf invasion, it was limited and covert. The US was concerned with setting up military bases in Saudi Arabia ready to be used by US forces in case of threats to Gulf oil supplies. No significant troops were deployed there until the Iraqi invasion. More than 500 thousand US troops were deployed there. After the war ended, 5000 troops remained.<sup>250</sup>

A predictable decline in Pan-Arab sentiments and eminence was noticeable while regional and partial coalitions became stronger. Political and economic relationships within organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that was established in 1981 and the Damascus Declaration countries that included Syria and Egypt along with the six Gulf countries solidified new alliances in the region and replaced old ones. An anticipated decline of political Islamist movements did not materialize; conversely, militant and extremist groups like Al-Qaeda formed and were arguably fueled by the US presence in Saudi Arabia.<sup>251</sup>

As for the PLO, the losses were beyond measure both financially and politically. The PLO was the biggest loser in terms of financial assistance, diplomatic and political support, and position of the Palestinian issue in Arab politics. The PLO was extremely dependent on assistance from rich Arab countries. It had received \$24 million from Kuwait, \$48 million from Iraq, and \$72 million from Saudi Arabia not including the remittances and liberation taxes paid by Palestinians in Kuwait which amounted to \$50 million.<sup>252</sup> Yasser Arafat was sidelined and isolated diplomatically and the PLO was declared a terrorist organization after the war. The US

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<sup>250</sup> Martha Wenger and Joe Stork, "The US in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Report* 168 (January/February 1991), <https://merip.org/1991/01/the-us-in-the-persian-gulf/#:~:text=By%201988%2C%20the%20US%20Army>,

<sup>251</sup> Barry Rubin, "An Essay on Arab Lessons from the 1991 Kuwait Crisis and War," *Middle East* 5, no. 2 (2001): 21.

<sup>252</sup> Mattar, "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis."



sought other Palestinian figures from within the Occupied Territories to form a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation to negotiate peace with the Israelis. The Palestinian delegation engaged in negotiations in Madrid was loyal to Arafat, but it was headed by Hydar Abdel Shafi, a respected figure from within the Occupied Territories.<sup>253</sup> The delegation was shocked when secret negotiations with the PLO in Oslo were made public and the signing of the declaration of principles of the Oslo Accord was carried out on September 13, 1993.<sup>254</sup>

The First Gulf War itself provided the conditions to bring about the long delayed and sought after peace treaty between the PLO and the Israeli government. In the immediate post-Cold War climate and after defeating Saddam Hussein, the United States president George W. Bush and his foreign secretary James Baker put pressure on all parties to move forward to settle the Palestinian- Israeli conflict. This meant supporting the more moderate leadership of Israel's Labor Party, Yitzhak Rabin and his Foreign Minister Shimon Perez. Although Arab governments were already primed to accept a two-states solution based on international resolutions 242 and 338 that recognize the State of Israel and guarantee a Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, nothing was made public yet.<sup>255</sup> The first summit of 1988 was concluded with the agreement of virtually all big Arab countries including Assad of Syria with the exception of Qaddafi of Libya who was not in attendance. The Palestinian National Conference PNC met in Algeria and Arafat declared the PLO charter as obsolete, or *coudaque*, in preparation for recognizing Israel on the basis of a two-state solution.<sup>256</sup> Arafat declared that

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<sup>253</sup>“The Madrid Peace Conference.” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 2 (1992): 117–49.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2537235>.

<sup>254</sup> Anthony Wanis-St. John, “Analyzing the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process,” in *Back Channel Negotiation: Secrecy in the Middle East Peace Process* (Syracuse University Press, 2011) 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1j1nv3w.6>.

<sup>255</sup> UN Résolutions, <https://peacemaker.un.org/middle-east-resolution242>; <https://peacemaker.un.org/middleeast-resolution338>

<sup>256</sup> Walid Al Khalidi, *The Middle East Postwar Environment* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991).

the PNC accepts UN resolutions 242 and 338 in his UN address in Geneva, December 1988.<sup>257</sup>

The Oslo Accord in 1993 was the culmination of many developments in the region including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Palestinian *Intifada* of 1987, but the First Gulf War and its aftermath set the stage for this historic agreement to take place between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. Although many other significant events have taken place since then, the First Gulf War left an indelible mark on the trajectory of Middle East geopolitics in general and the Palestinians and their cause in particular.

### 4.3 Palestinian Identity and National Consciousness after the Rupture

It is helpful to trace the emergence of a uniquely Palestinian identity or national consciousness in order to assess the role of diasporic communities and experiences in further developing and fine tuning these psychosocial and political concepts. While Palestinians lived under the Ottoman rule until World War I, they had a sense of belonging as a collective to the Ottoman Caliphate. Christians and Jews living in historical Palestine under the Ottoman rule were granted the status of *Dhimis* under the *Millet* system but were equally connected to the broader Muslim Caliphate. Narrower regional connections bonded communities living in cities like Jaffa, Hebron, or Tulkarm or villages surrounding those urban centers. In addition to spatial proximity, cultural, linguistic, and historic ties created larger communal affinity coupled with multiple other affiliations such as religion and socioeconomic status. Palestine as a geographic region has been known for millennia, but it was recognized during the Ottoman rule as part of Southern Syria and could be seen in early maps and travel literature. However, it was designated as a separate administrative unit after “the establishment of the autonomous *mutasarriflik* of Jerusalem in 1876.”<sup>258</sup> The Ottomans delineated and extended the province to include what later

<sup>257</sup> United Nations, “The Question of Palestine,” Historical Timeline, <https://www.un.org/unispal/historical-timeline/>

<sup>258</sup> Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine*.

became Mandatory Palestine under the British in order to meet military challenges in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Palestinian national consciousness as defined by Benedict Anderson began to truly develop with the weakening Ottoman grip in the late 1800s and the emergence of nation states in the region when the Ottoman Caliphate collapsed after 1918.<sup>259</sup> Anderson views nationalism as belonging to a clearly defined politically imagined community that is inherently limited and sovereign.<sup>260</sup> The impact of World War I cannot be overestimated as it brought to the surface the idea of nation states and the delineation of borders. State nationalism in surrounding countries as well as in Mandate Palestine was beginning to emerge in part because of the shared geography, culture, and background but also because of shared struggles against colonizers and deep-seated aspirations for liberation and independence. Palestinians were not different from their neighbors in their growing consciousness of their distinct situation. Peasants and urban elites alike were increasingly aware of the threats they were facing. Rashid Khalidi makes a case for the emergence of this narrower Palestinian national consciousness between 1917 and 1923.<sup>261</sup> However, a flurry of Palestinian publications emerged as early as 1908 that expressed a maturing awareness of Palestine as a sociocultural and political unit facing external threats. A particularly telling example of these early publications is the newspaper *Palestine* or *Filastin* which was founded by the Haifa-born Christian Palestinian Isa Al Isa in 1911. It remained in print with a few interruptions during the Great War until April 1948.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian identity: The construction of modern national consciousness* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>262</sup> Filisteen, "Jrayed-Arabic Newspaper Archive of Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine", available online 15 July 1911-April 24 1948, National Library of Israel, <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=falastin&ai=1&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>

At that stage however, Arab nationalism set Arab states apart from the seat of the Caliphate in Istanbul. Turkey emerged as a secular republic and cut ties with the Arab world. Arab nationalism, which emerged during the latter decades of the Ottoman rule, tinted state nationalism that was emerging in various regions of the Arab-speaking world. Palestine and the holy city of Jerusalem became increasingly central Arab concerns. The prospect of permanently losing Jerusalem and parts of historical Palestine to Britain or to Zionists with an increasingly visible plan to build their state on its soil troubled the newly formed or newly independent surrounding Arab states. After the Nakba and the refugee crisis it generated, large numbers of Palestinian refugees went to neighboring states. New problems and dilemmas emerged between Arab host communities and Palestinian refugees. On the one hand, Palestinians themselves did not want to become fully integrated in host societies and clung to their right to return. On the other hand, neighboring countries thought of Palestinian refugees as both a political liability and economic burden.

The increasing sense of distinctiveness between Palestinians and Arab states and societies became clearer after the formation of the PNC and the PLO in the mid 1960s to represent the Palestinian will in Arab and international forums. However, Jordan retained administrative ties and claims to the West Bank until 1988. Furthermore, disputes between the PLO and Jordan in 1970 and tensions in Lebanon that culminated in the exit of the PLO from Lebanon in 1983 followed by the Sabra and Shatila massacres further alienated the Palestinians from the overarching Arab umbrella. The Camp David accords in 1978 sidelined Egypt, which used to be the biggest advocate for Palestine especially during the rule of Jamal Abdel Nasser. Arabs progressively perceived Palestinians as distinct others despite lingering support for their cause. Palestinians who did not obtain another nationality viewed themselves as aliens in their

relationship with the states they were subjugated in or evicted from. In actuality, Palestinians were also victims of reckless and erratic decisions by their representatives especially the PLO as can be gleaned from the costly stance of Arafat during the First Gulf War.

While Pan-Arab nationalism was starting to fade, it would occasionally become rekindled with the emergence of fiery and charismatic leaders, like Saddam Hussein, who fought Iran for eight years and enthroned himself as the hero of Arab nationalism. He fatefully invaded neighboring Kuwait for geopolitical, economic, and personal reasons, but made grandiose claims about Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine. This Pan-Arab flare that engulfed receptive masses was coupled with unfortunate stances by the PLO and Jordan as they voiced reservations against military moves against Iraq. Arafat did not shy away from being viewed as aligned with Saddam despite his more tempered rhetoric. The crisis of 1991 clearly shattered much of what was left of the Pan-Arab excitement and breathed strength and resolution to narrower state, regional, and tribal loyalties. However, it is fair to say that while governments became increasingly isolated in their geopolitical calculations, the people or what is often referred to as the *Umma* retained the bonds of common culture, tongue, history, and aspirations. Nationalism on that level makes itself visible when opportunity arises such as during the Arab Spring and even in competitive sports. Nonetheless, the strong Pan-Arab affiliation was greatly diminished at the hands of Saddam Hussein.

Palestinians felt persecuted and victimized time and again by Israel and the international community, but also by other Arab states. They were also aware of the shortcomings of their political leadership as well. Faced with the realities of their origins and identity, they are often reminded of their plight on the news, on borderlands, and whenever official documents need to be produced. It is hard to accurately measure the impact of the First Gulf War on the

development of the Palestinian identity, but it is conceivable that the crisis created another knot that further particularized and deepened its distinct character. The crisis shattered the delusion of being able to unfold as Palestinian individuals and communities in host societies around the world including fellow Arab countries. The Palestinian moment in Kuwait constituted another episode, another link in the chain of past and ongoing diasporic experiences of Palestinians. Each of those episodes added a wrinkle that deepened and fine-tuned the Palestinian identity or what it means to be Palestinian. In some ways, Palestinians became aware of their distinctiveness even among Arab compatriots in host countries who share a common culture, language, and a great deal of history. When they feel singled out by policies or treatment during daily interactions, their sense of being Palestinian and their sense of otherness become magnified.

While Palestinians share the dream of return, generational stories, cultural tropes, and family ties in the homeland, the spark that is being Palestinian is often rekindled as the external world emphasizes their otherness, their statelessness, and their unfulfilled dream. Ghassan Kanafani wrote to his son:

I heard you in the other room asking your mother, ‘Mama, am I a Palestinian?’ When she answered ‘Yes,’ a heavy silence fell on the whole house. It was as if something hanging over our heads had fallen, its noise exploding, then – silence. Afterwards...I heard you crying. I could not move. There was something bigger than my awareness being born in the other room through your bewildered sobbing. It was as if a blessed scalpel was cutting up your chest and putting there the heart that belongs to you...I was unable to move to see what was happening in the other room. I knew, however, that a distant homeland was being born again: hills, olive groves, dead people, torn banners and folded ones, all cutting their way into a future of flesh and blood and being born in the heart of another child...Do you believe that man grows? No, he is born suddenly – a word, a moment, penetrates his heart to a new throb. One scene can hurl him down from the ceiling of childhood onto the ruggedness of the road.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt* (New York: Committee for a Democratic Palestine, 1972), 5, <https://pflp-documents.org/documents/PFLP-Kanafani3639.pdf>

Kuwait in 1950s to 1980s was a point in time and space that temporarily allowed the Palestinian identity to unfold in a different geography. Building on notions of Pan-Arabism or *Qawmiya*, the Palestinian intelligentsia of the first wave made key contributions to the formation of the modern Kuwaiti state in various sectors of society. Palestinians en masse found opportunities in Kuwait to flourish and build careers and self-develop educationally, professionally, and socioeconomically. They lived with their families in relative comfort despite increasing restrictions that constantly reminded them that they do not really belong in Kuwait and that they have a real or imagined homeland elsewhere. They could not forget that they belong to a stateless community of Palestinians sprinkled around the world that are also trying to settle and fulfill human needs while also dreaming of and striving in different ways to find a way home.

The implications of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait highlight the irony of the fragmenting effects of diasporic dispersal while also accentuating the unity with other segments of Palestinians in suffering and estrangement in other host societies. Rosemary Sayigh highlights this paradox in her research of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. She asks:” If perceptions sampled from Palestinians in one region of the diaspora differ widely from those in another; or if sampled from the same group, they differ widely between two points in time, what does this mean for the interpretation of findings?”<sup>264</sup> Sayigh finds singular representation as a major unifying factor for dispersed communities. In addition, community and familial ties across countries, common ancestral history, ties to the geography of the homeland, common struggle for self-determination, and a unifying myth of return can all be unifying factors that set Palestinians as a people in diaspora or under occupation apart from all others. Dynamic responsiveness to

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<sup>264</sup> Rosemary Sayigh, “The Palestinian Identity among Camp Residents,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 3 (1977): 3–22, 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535577>.

international geopolitical changes often highlights the vulnerability of the Palestinians and the fluidity of their Social and political status. Impactful geopolitical changes remind them of their unity in persecution and statelessness, especially when such changes involve violence perpetrated by or against segments of the Palestinian population.

On the one hand, the Palestinian experience in Kuwait gave birth to a section of the Palestinian people with distinct memories of an alternate temporary homeland with all the baggage it holds in terms of joys, sorrows, opportunities, and limitations. On the other hand, the experience as whole adds to the Palestinian differentiation and highlights their bond as a nation in a perpetual crisis of statelessness while reflecting the resilience and adaptability that enable Palestinians to thrive in host societies around the world. This paradox of diversity and unity of the Palestinian people can be gleaned from anecdotes of Palestinians who share a personal or ancestral experience in Kuwait. Some of these anecdotes and reflections to follow shed light on the dynamic and responsive process of identity making for Palestinians in diaspora.

Selma is a half British, half Palestinian young lady who lived in Kuwait and studied in an international school. She relates how she abruptly became aware of her Palestinian identity when her father went through detentions and interrogations in Kuwait before he was finally released. While living in her new home in Durham, this episode rekindled in her a sense of being Palestinian, being persecuted, and belonging to a community that is still struggling for recognition and proper representation. She relates: “I was back at Durham for my second year at the university, but nothing was the same. I wasn’t the same... I dropped a law course to take one on the politics of the Middle East. I became renowned for getting over-emotional at dinner parties.”<sup>265</sup> She decided to study the geopolitics of the Middle East and speak more for the

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<sup>265</sup> Selma Dabbagh, “A Road Taken”, in *Being Palestinian*, edited by Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 119-121, 121



Palestinian cause. She even went back to the West Bank; “and what did I find in the West Bank? Quotidian nobility. And who can dislodge the power of that?”<sup>266</sup>

Tariq is another example of a Palestinian Christian American, whose experience in the Gulf and his parents’ ordeal after the 1990 war threaded fragments of long buried perceptions of distinctiveness and statelessness. Tariq’s family joined relatives in the US as the crisis unfolded although his father, a businessman, managed to return afterwards to work in Kuwait without his family. As Tariq points out the absence of preoccupation with Palestine and grappings with being Palestinian while living in Kuwait and studying at an international school, he relates how his consciousness of his Palestinian origins and their implications suddenly peaked when the Gulf War was disseminated through US media outlets. “Imagine all of a sudden seeing your home on television, on CNN...It was really bizarre. I didn’t know how to feel about a lot of things. There were a lot of unanswered questions. I knew I didn’t fit in Kuwait and obviously not in America.”<sup>267</sup> He turned to Middle East studies and worked with a joint Palestinian/Jewish activist NGO. Then, he planned to return to the West Bank and chart a life of activism in pursuit of social change and political advocacy. Although he was disillusioned by the realities of the situation and the political process in the West Bank, his resolve changed form but remained strong in pursuit of educating the West and commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Tanya relates an earlier affinity to her homeland in Palestine through family and stories. She points out how her parents’ Jordanian passports that at some point made no sense to her were crucial for her parents in order to find something that would ensure an exit were they to become displaced again. “My parents’ fears of expulsion were not unfounded. In 1990, home shifted again and by some providential fate, asylum pleas turned us from Gulf pawns into brisket

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<sup>266</sup> Dabbagh, “A Road Taken,” 121.

<sup>267</sup> Juliane Hammer, *Palestinians born in exile: Diaspora and the search for a homeland* (University of Texas Press, 2005), 26.

loving Texans.”<sup>268</sup> The familiarity of family culture and cuisine, her family stories, pictures, wedding traditions, family trips were strong reminders of her roots and her diasporic status. At 22, she traveled to Palestine without her parents. She picked her destination herself.” I found resolve in disentangling the mythical visions of home, but no symbol, no indigenous ornament and no recipe for stuffed grape leaves could emancipate me from the myopic exercise of identity making. All of these conventions did not make me more Palestinian.”<sup>269</sup> Her eyes were set on seeing Palestine for herself. Tanya acknowledges the diversity of the Palestinian experience in diaspora, its richness, and its multiplicity. One thing that strings those multiple experiences together is “how one senses nothing but rootlessness anywhere and everywhere, or one’s memories blur with each news report and we are all a little afraid of forgetting the stories that have been passed onto us. These ideas might produce comfort, but the only thing that rings true is that being Palestinian in the diaspora has no singular meaning.”<sup>270</sup> It can perhaps imply failure to fully assimilate, the retention of generational narratives and traumas, the heartache when hearing news about Palestine, identifying with the marginalized and the oppressed, building communities, and fear of forgetting that is often defeated by constant reminders that include how Palestinians are perceived in their host countries, especially when they choose to maintain their identity as Palestinians. For Tanya,” Palestine awaits us so long as we exist. Our connection to Palestine cannot be bound or measured. I wonder how many Palestinians and ways of being Palestinian in the diaspora among us, uncounted. What vision of home includes us all?”<sup>271</sup>

Then there’s Reem who was born in Manchester but lived her formative years in Kuwait, where she also experienced her first sense of being Palestinian. At age four, she performed a

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<sup>268</sup> Tanya Keilani, “A Vision Affirmed”, in *Being Palestinian*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 233-235, 234.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. 235

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. 235

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. 235

song about Jerusalem originally sung by the Lebanese singer, Fairouz. When everybody in the audience started crying, she thought that it was because of her bad singing but later realized that her song stirred up longings for Palestine and the holy city. Another pivotal moment was when her aunt started crying and waving her scarf at the screen as the news of the burning of Al Aqsa mosque in 1967 were broadcast through the screen. Her visit along with her parents to Palestine was one of the most powerful identity affirming moments she recalls, especially in the way her mother reacted to the changed landscape and her union with family and friends. “All I could see were weeping faces and draws of relatives, hurrying to dig their heads into mothers’ shoulders.”<sup>272</sup> She recalls the wedding that she attended, the food, the stories, and the songs that must have had a role in some of her key life choices. She became a musician, singer, and broadcaster. She produced her project “Palestinian songs from the motherland and the diaspora” in 2006. She lives her Palestinian identity through words, song, and art. For her, living apart from Palestine in diaspora is not viewed as a hurdle but a source of power and fire; “and so the more Palestinians are separated from Palestine and from each other, the closer we become; the more we dig into death, the more we are determined to live. It is this uncomfortable, yet life affirming *Sumoud*, which underlies our and my sense of being.”<sup>273</sup>

Even Palestinians who never lived in Kuwait have a level of awareness of the privileges they had while enjoying relatively high salaries and a comfortable lifestyle; they are also aware of the calamity that ended the Palestinian experience in Kuwait. The impact of this experience could be felt directly through the halting of remittance and the period of economic difficulties relatives and acquaintances from Kuwait went through. This secondary awareness of the Palestinian diaspora in Kuwait is present, however, on a more historic and psychological level.

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<sup>272</sup> Reem Kelani, “Bridge to Palestine”, in *Being Palestinian*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 236-238,236.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.238. *Sumoud* is the Arabic word for resilience.

The tragedy that befell Palestinians is another reminder of the precarious nature of Palestinian life and settlement. Hala Alyan, a Palestinian-American poet, describes the series of choices and events deciding the fate and destination of Palestinians:” The trail that you like to retrace sometimes, the chains of turns and valleys and choices that scattered your family, that fated you to have a life of America and lipstick and Beirut nightclubs and poetry, instead of the ones your cousins have- an upbringing in Kuwait, a childhood in Wichita. Or even a life in Gaza, some of them never leaving the sea side.”<sup>274</sup>

#### 4.4 Summary and Reflections

After the Iraqi invasion and the shortsighted stance of Arafat that was decried by prominent Palestinian intellectuals like Edward Said and Walid Khalidi, and politicians like Rafiq Qablawi and Abu Eyad who were both assassinated during the First Gulf War, the Palestinian moment in Kuwait was starting to come to a cataclysmic end.<sup>275</sup> Although Palestinians in Kuwait were as a whole significantly sympathetic with the Kuwaiti plight and resentful of the Iraqi occupation that disrupted life, brought destruction and carnage, and brutalized innocent Kuwaitis and many Palestinians, they were viewed as complicit with the Iraqis. This view was induced by several external and internal factors. As a result, they were subjected to the bitter resentment of Kuwaitis that proved to be disastrous after the liberation of Kuwait in February, 1991. The popular Palestinian sentiment, and indeed that of many other Arabs, may have been understandable in expressing suspicion towards further American involvement in the region and attacks on one of the most influential Arab countries. However,

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<sup>274</sup> Hala Alyan, ”In Dust,” *On Being Palestinian*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 63-69, 64.

<sup>275</sup> Barbara Harlow, “The Intellectuals and the War: Interview with Edward Said”, MERIP 171, July/August, 1991, <https://merip.org/1991/07/the-intellectuals-and-the-war/>; Khalidi, ”The Gulf Crisis: Origins and Consequences”; Ghabra, *The Nakba and the Emergence of a Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*.

support for Saddam Hussein who actually created this disastrous situation and the divisions thereafter was ethically and politically unjustifiable. His use of the Palestinian cause to dress his political ambitions in the region succeeded in swaying many and eventually alienating them from Gulf countries. Kuwait's Palestinians left en masse during the invasion and after the liberation heading mostly to Jordan but also to other destinations, such as the West Bank, Gaza, the United States, or other Western countries. They faced financial and social difficulties that lasted for several years before they began to integrate and settle in their new destinations. On a psychological level, however, their complicated feelings towards Kuwait, which was the birthplace of many and the backdrop of precious memories, lingered on. Their yearnings and disappointments are conveyed in various forms including recording their memories in written or audio-visual forms, creating semi-fictional memoirs, artistic expressions, or social media groups and visiting or actively trying to return to Kuwait.

The Palestinian experience in Kuwait and its fateful conclusion left significant and indelible marks on the geopolitical map of the region and on the psyche of the Palestinian population that went through this experience. The unique circumstances that brought communities of Palestinian educators, professionals, businessmen, and laborers to Kuwait and the details of the life they had there created a distinct segment of Palestinians with shared traits, memories, and experiences that distinguished from other Palestinian groups. The sudden and tragic ending of this population that tore the social fabric of decades-old Palestinian communities in Kuwait also set them apart from Palestinians elsewhere. Ironically, however, the episode as a whole rekindled a common notion of being Palestinian, even in those who were not aware of it before. They became refugees and experienced the secondary displacement that marked the Palestinian experience at large. Many younger Palestinians were oblivious to their Palestinian

identity before being awakened to it after the rupture. It motivated them to probe, explore, reflect, and in many cases become activists committed to help the Palestinian issue in their own capacities. While no generalizations can be made without huge statistical data, it is clear that the Palestinian moment in Kuwait imprinted different memories, gave rise to distinct mindsets and sense of comradeship among those who were once Kuwait's Palestinians. These traits set them apart, while rekindling a sense of belonging to the larger Palestinian collective with its precarious existence, its joys, woes, and aspirations by linking their particular tragedy to the series of challenges and calamities experienced by the various segments of Palestinians time and again.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Along with an old video of a popular school concert celebrating Kuwait's National Day, an administrator of the nostalgic Facebook group "I was in Kuwait, and I have memories there" posts an affectionate note on behalf of Kuwait's Palestinians.

Kuwait for most of us represents an extended history of our lives. It began with fathers and mothers and the inception of Kuwait. It was our birthplace. It saw our childhood and school years. Some finished their studies there, worked, and got married. Events prevented some from resuming their journeys on this good land. Kuwait is a big part of our history. It held our brightest days. This, in short, is what Kuwait means to most of us.<sup>276</sup>

Although a few dissenting comments wonder why Palestinians forgot the cruel treatment they endured in Kuwait in the final years, most comments echo the original positive sentiment. In all likelihood, time softened the sharp edges of memory in favor of an idealized past. However, the psychosocial effects of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait remain much more nuanced. They could be gleaned in the reflections of Kuwait's Palestinians and their children. Nostalgic feelings towards life in Kuwait are complicated by disillusionment, bitterness, and realization of the precarity and temporariness of the diasporic life of Palestinians.

In this study, the history of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait, its origins, and the geopolitical and socioeconomic context in which it occurred are presented. Palestinian life in Kuwait throughout the five decades between 1950 and 1990 included building communities, family life, various forms of support networks, and political activism. The relationship between Palestinians and Kuwait's government and society was built on mutual interests, Arab nationalist and religious affinities, and commitment to the Palestinian cause. For Palestinians in Kuwait, it offered a mixture of great opportunities for personal development, challenges, and increasing restrictions they had to endure. Kuwaiti policies, attitudes, and action formed the setting and

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<sup>276</sup> Majed Taqatqa, "I was in Kuwait and I have memories there," Facebook group, Aug.2, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kuwai>

external factors that surrounded and helped to shape this experience. The fallout between Palestinians and Kuwaitis following the Iraqi invasion and the controversial stance of the PLO and the Palestinian public opinion outside Kuwait led to a generalized anger towards Kuwait's Palestinian communities. Palestinians in Kuwait, however, were either neutral or actively supportive of Kuwaiti resistance although elements within the community cooperated with the Iraqi. The impact of the Iraqi invasion and the ensuing First Gulf War went beyond the immediate suffering of Kuwaitis, Iraqis, and Palestinians. The political map of the region significantly changed as a series of peace treaties were signed with Israel. Interregional relations became more polarized as a result of the deep scars left by a full-fledged invasion of one Arab country to another and the violent war this invasion sparked. The study goes further to trace the impact of the Kuwaiti moment for Palestinians. It includes the development of the Palestinian identity and the place of the Kuwaiti moment in the formation and evolution of this Palestinian identity and national consciousness. Despite the fragmenting effects of this experience that involved a segment of the Palestinian people, the conclusion which involved displacement, persecution and cruelty, highlight the unity of the Palestinian condition, marked by precariousness, temporality, statelessness and loss. It also highlights resilience and adaptability, while adding another knot or a wrinkle in the fabric of the Palestinian collective memory of the lost homeland and the precious nature of diasporic homes, despite natural human attachments and fledgling roots.

### **5.1 The Palestinian Moment in Kuwait**

Palestinians came to Kuwait initially as experts recruited to help modernize the infrastructure of the budding oil state in the 1930s. They came as immigrants in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba when they were evicted from their cities and villages in Mandatory Palestine.



This wave, however, included highly educated groups whose skills were in high-demand. Whereas refugees settled initially in adjacent areas like the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria, those who managed to go to Kuwait went through formal vetting and had to offer valuable skills and expertise to be admitted to Kuwait. Many also received help from compatriots already settled in Kuwait. Numerous Palestinian refugees left their camps in search of a better future and livelihood for their families. Villagers who had few other skills than farming went to Kuwait and had to quickly gain skills as laborer in various fields. In the late 1950s, some Palestinians were desperate enough to make dangerous journeys or deal with illegal smugglers to get into Kuwait. Existing networks and Kuwaiti connections helped them settle and acquire valuable skills. By 1965, 48% of the public sector and 41.4% of the private sector in Kuwait were made up of Palestinians.<sup>277</sup> They maintained and developed their uniquely Palestinian identity while integrating and contributing to the Kuwaiti social and cultural milieu.

Overall, Palestinian immigrants to Kuwait varied greatly in terms of their educational and socioeconomic background. Two values can be clearly articulated as motivating Palestinian life in Kuwait. The first is education and self-development. Many Palestinians found in Kuwait an opportunity to enhance their own education, acquire new skills, start businesses and pursue better futures for their children. The other value is family and community. Most Palestinians opted to live close to other family members, encourage and facilitate bringing other family members to Kuwait, and form family funds or centers. The settled nature of Palestinian families in Kuwait was motivated by the absence or at least the scarcity of alternatives due to the occupation. Despite their diligent pursuit of livelihood, self-improvement and family life, Palestinians in Kuwait were deeply committed to Palestine and the dream of liberation and homecoming. They actively pursued cultural and political representation. Many were active in organizing political

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<sup>277</sup> Ghabra, *Al Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait*, 73.

movements and cultural societies. Kuwaitis welcomed these efforts due to their overwhelming support for the Palestinian cause. The memoirs of Khairi Abuljebain provide a close look into the life trajectory of a leading Palestinian figure that started his life in Kuwait as a teacher and proceeded to work in several government ministries and hold key positions in Kuwaiti and Palestinian organizations.

The struggles of the Palestinian community in Kuwait to put their kids in college and to move from one job to another became more difficult in the late 1980s. Lack of job security and threat to family residency in Kuwait became real problems at that point as new restrictions were imposed on job contracts and work visas. A sense of bitterness and alienation grew among the second generation of young Palestinians. At that point almost 500,000 Palestinians lived in Kuwait.

## **5.2 The Rupture**

Despite the growing sense of alienation among Palestinians in Kuwait due to increasing restrictions on work visas, limitation of access to education, and threats to the durability of family life in the late 1980s, many Palestinians would have probably been content to continue living in Kuwait and adapting to the changing sociopolitical climate for decades to come. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took everybody by surprise. Few people anticipated the level of hostility that amounted to a full-fledged occupation of the entirety of Kuwait and not just disputed areas on its northern borders. Palestinians were caught in the middle. They were used as a tool to legitimize Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. In addition to the list of grievances that Saddam had against Kuwait including refusing to drop Iraq's war debts, its disproportional exploitation of joint oil fields, and denying Iraq, the ability to rent the two islands that would

facilitate the use of Iraq lone seaport, Iraq resorted to the historical claims that Kuwait used to be an Iraqi district.

While the Palestinians in Kuwait were as disturbed by the invasion as the Kuwaitis, some cooperated with the Iraqis who tried to win the allegiance of Palestinians with both threats and enticement. They threatened them with job termination, detention, and violence, and enticed them with favorable treatment. Thus, they implicated them further in their oppressive occupation of Kuwait. The Baathist Iraqis brought some of Iraq's Palestinian factions loyal to Saddam and had them man check points and conduct aggressive searches and interrogations of Kuwaitis. Saddam Hussein tied his withdrawal from Kuwait to the liberation of Palestine. Yasser Arafat denounced the invasion of Kuwait, but also rejected military action against Iraq, especially if it involved allowing US forces in the region. The standoff between Iraq and the Western coalition working on behalf of Kuwait polarized public opinion and had many Palestinians and other Arabs side with Iraq in this dispute.

Palestinians in Kuwait experienced the reality of the Iraqi occupation and did not believe Iraqi propaganda for the most part. However, some of those who stayed in Kuwait were driven by necessity to follow Iraqi regulations in terms of reporting to work, changing license plates, and going to school. This presumed cooperation further enraged Kuwaitis, who were boycotting the illegitimate Iraqi authorities in Kuwait. Most Palestinians, like many Kuwaitis, opted to leave Kuwait during the invasion. Uncertainty surrounded the whole situation, and it was increasingly dangerous to straddle loyalties and allegiances inside Kuwait without risking physical harm. Even Kuwaitis attacked schools that operated during the occupation killing several Palestinians.

After the liberation of Kuwait, Palestinians were harshly persecuted; many were arrested; some were executed; and the general attitude inside Kuwait was extremely vindictive and hostile

towards Palestinians. Termination of job contracts and visas forced those who were outside Kuwait to stay there and forced more than 150,000 Palestinians to leave even before obtaining their savings and job compensations. The rupture that violently ended the Palestinian moment in Kuwait had lingering impact on the psyche of Kuwait's Palestinians, on the geopolitical standing of the Palestinian cause, and on regional priorities and affiliations. On the long-term, it left a deep scar on the Palestinian psyche. Some look back nostalgically at Kuwait as a paradise lost while others remain bitter about the humiliation and persecution of Palestinians who contributed greatly to the building and development of the Gulf State. About 30-50 thousand Palestinians stayed in Kuwait after 1991 because their employers deemed their qualifications essential for their establishment or because they had nowhere else to go. Both had to put up with daily encounters with hostile Kuwaitis and increased financial burdens and limitation to public services. By the end of 1991-1992, Kuwait's vibrant, motivated, and thriving Palestinian community suddenly ceased to exist.

### **5.3 Ramifications to Palestinians and Geopolitical Map**

The First Gulf War caused huge rifts in the region as the rich Gulf States that supported the economies of poorer and more populated countries, such as Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan, withheld their support, cut economic ties, and evicted most expat populations. The Arab League that symbolized the common interests of Arab countries became secondary to regional associations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council; and the countries of the Damascus Pact that sided with Kuwait and the coalition against Iraq. A Syrian and Egyptian workforce replaced Palestinians and other non-favorable nationals. The notion of Pan-Arab nationalism that marked the hay days of Nasser and later Saddam Hussein was significantly eclipsed by local and regional affiliations. Islamism, however, survived this rift, and may have been one of the factors that

mended Kuwait's grievances against Palestinians in terms of political support for the Palestinian cause.

Yasser Arafat and the PLO became increasingly isolated both regionally and internationally. The US administration pushed for a peace settlement between Palestinians and Israelis that culminated in the 1993 Oslo agreement after secret negotiations that bypassed Madrid's open negotiations with a Palestinian delegate of experts from the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Kuwait's relationship with the Palestinian authority, headed by Yasser Arafat, was troubled due to his controversial statements. The Palestinian office in Kuwait remained close even after the death of Arafat. The tension started to ease with the formal apology of Arafat's successor Mahmud Abbas. In 2013, a Palestinian embassy was opened in Kuwait and diplomatic relations with Kuwait were resumed. The Kuwaitis supported the second Palestinian intifada and attempted to break the siege imposed on Gaza. Financial and political support has also been a constant in Kuwait foreign policy towards the Palestinian cause. Vocal calls to bring back Palestinian educators to assist in improving the deteriorating educational system in Kuwait led to hiring Palestinian teachers from Gaza and the West Bank after 2017. However, the effective pre-First Gulf War Palestinian community of Kuwait never rematerialized.

The Palestinians who left Kuwait struggled to collect their dues from their Kuwaiti employers and from the United Nations Compensation commission. Most settled in Jordan; a smaller number settled in the West Bank and Gaza; and others found their way to other Gulf States, the United States, or other destinations. There were also inevitable waves of immigration from Jordan to other countries as opportunities and needs arose. The first few years after the First Gulf War were particularly hard as families were struggling to find residence, employment, and a measure of closure; but eventually, Kuwait's Palestinian population adapted to its new situation.

The psychosocial scars, however, lingered on. Palestinians in Kuwait actively sought to connect with other Palestinians from Kuwait to reminisce on old times and share fond memories in Kuwait which they considered more than a place. It was also a significant part of their history that held their childhood memories, youthful adventures, and spirited years of career-building, family life, friendships, and community.

The unique circumstances that brought thousands of Palestinian educators, administrators, professionals, businessmen, and laborers to Kuwait and the details of the lives they had there gave birth to a distinct segment of Palestinians with shared traits, memories, and experiences that distinguish them from other Palestinian communities. The sudden and tragic eviction of this population that tore the social fabric of decades-old Palestinian communities in Kuwait also set them apart from Palestinians elsewhere. Ironically, the episode as a whole rekindled a common notion of being Palestinian, even in those who were unaware of it before. Kuwait's Palestinians experienced forced displacement, a condition that marks the Palestinian experience at large. Numerous young Palestinians were oblivious to their Palestinian identity before being awakened to it after the rupture. It motivated them to probe, explore, reflect, and in many cases become activists committed to help the Palestinian issue in their own capacities. While no generalizations can be made without huge statistical data, it is clear that the Palestinian moment in Kuwait imprinted different memories and gave rise to distinct mindsets and affinities among those who lived in Kuwait. These traits and connections set them apart while emphasizing their belonging to the larger Palestinian collective, its precarious existence, its joys, woes, and aspirations by linking their particular tragedy to the series of calamities, and challenges experienced by the various segments of Palestinians time and again.

#### 5.4 General Reflections

In “Antithesis,” a poem dedicated to his friend Edward Said, the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish depicts the pervasive diasporic Palestinian consciousness.

On the wind he walks. And in the wind he realizes his identity. The wind has no ceiling. It has no abode. The wind is a compass guiding the stranger northward. He says: I am from there. I am from here. But neither am I there, nor here. I have two names. They meet and they depart. And two languages, I have forgotten in which I used to dream.<sup>278</sup>

The Palestinian diasporic experience in Kuwait shares numerous features with other diasporic experiences, but it has several distinctive traits that set it apart. The Palestinian plight that displaced hundreds of thousands more than seven decades ago is compounded with an abrupt ending and another displacement after five decades of settled life in Kuwait. The ongoing nature of the Palestinian issue makes visible Palestinians around the world vulnerable to geopolitical variables that affect the policies of host countries and incur psychosocial responses of Palestinians. However, such responses are not always the same. Like other nations, Palestinians have various points of view regarding geopolitical and local events. After all, they differ in socioeconomics, education, experiences, aspirations, worldviews, and priorities despite sharing a common ancestral homeland, culture, and generational traumas. This normal propensity to adopt various points of view is further emphasized in the case of the Palestinians because of their dispersal, statelessness, ongoing quest for liberation, and the distinctive locales and circumstances in which they live.

Common and fragmentary traumas, however, are deeply embedded within the Palestinian psyche. The common traumas of the Nakba, Naksa, and ensuing Israeli occupation are compounded with fragmentary and episodic traumas such as the crack down on Palestinian

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<sup>278</sup> Mahmud Darwish, “Antithesis”, tr. George Nicolas Al Hage, website, <http://www.georgenicolasel-hage.com/mahmud-darwishrsquo-poem-ldquoantithesisrdquo.html>

resistance in the 1970 events of Black September in Jordan that resulted in the death and eviction of thousands of Palestinians, the 1976 massacre in the refugee camp Tal Al Zaatar in Lebanon, and the 1982 war in Lebanon that resulted in the massacres of Sabra and Shatila.<sup>279</sup> In addition to being victims of the First Gulf War in Kuwait, Palestinian refugees in Iraq and Syria were also caught up in the geopolitical turmoil and sectarian wars that unfolded there after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian revolution of 2012.<sup>280</sup> Many of them fled to other countries while the rest are still enduring the dangers of the volatile political climate in the region. Therefore, the Palestinian condition can be marked by precarity, temporariness, contingency, and insecurity. These persistent characteristics of the Palestinian existence prompted Palestinians to value and pursue higher education and professional development in order to better adapt to a precarious life that can fall apart and require rebuilding at any point. Palestinians also value their memories and are eager to convey and document them whenever possible. This can be reasonably inferred from the plethora of Palestinian memoirs and digital logs that detail their experiences in Kuwait, for example. This trait could be another outcome of their persistent sense of loss and precarity and their desire to keep their memories and history alive. Another trait that could be gleaned from the Palestinian experience in Kuwait is the propensity to self-organize in order to provide support networks, seek favorable resolutions of local issues, and build political advocacy.

There are numerous prisms that can shift the focal point of a study of the Palestinian diasporic experience in Kuwait and its implications. The cultural melding of Kuwaiti and

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<sup>279</sup> “Black September”, UNRWA, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/black-september>; The massacre of Tal Al-Zaatar: A Tragedy that Still Haunts Palestinians, Pal Archives, Days of Palestine, Aug. 12, 20023, <https://daysofpalestine.ps/the-massacre-of-tal-al-zaatar-a-tragedy-that-still-haunts-the-palestinians/>; Bayan Nuwayhed Al- Hout, *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* (Pluto Press, 2004). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs4j6>.

<sup>280</sup> The 2003 War and the Backlash against Iraqi Palestinians, Human Rights Watch, 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/iraq0706/4.htm>; Palestinians in Syria, Minority Rights Report, updated 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/palestinians-4/#:~:text=Prior%20to%20the%20outbreak%20of,and%20280%2C000%20are%20internally%20displaced.>



Palestinian cultures could have been probed more thoroughly. The implications of this experience on immigration studies and notions of allegiance and citizenship can be another helpful prism. However, the focal point here is the multifaceted story of this particular Palestinian diaspora, its origins, its gradual emergence, its fruition, and its abrupt demise. This study is also an examination of the repercussions of this experience in relation to the geopolitical events in the region. But more importantly, it is an exploration of the evolving Palestinian identity that is at once fragmented in particular diasporic geographies and united in consecutive traumas and persistent precariousness that deepens Palestinian scars and breathes boundless life into their dream of return to an idealized homeland.

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