



Mai Al-Nakib

‘It is time to blaze forth once again’

# Unity without Islamism in Kuwait

By **Mai Al-Nakib**  
Associate Professor, Kuwait University

In the face of external attack, Kuwait stands strong as a nation. Its citizens unite unequivocally, shoulder to shoulder, refusing to allow senseless violence and stupid extremism to tear them apart. This reaction — instinctual and immediate — is admirable and true. It is true to Kuwait’s cosmopolitan history. It is true to the traditional tolerance and generosity of its people and its leaders. This openness is the animating principle of the Kuwait I grew up in, the very principle whose disappearance I have lamented since the 1990s. From last week’s tragedy, could something indispensable and lately lost emerge anew for this country? From recent global, regional, and, now, alas, local tragedies, might we absorb once and for all the hard lessons that enable ethical transformation? In dark times, it’s difficult to be optimistic. But it is precisely in dark times that we need to keep our best aspirations foregrounded and to prevent them from being overrun by fear.

Devastating attacks of the kind suffered by Kuwait on 26 June 2015 ignite an understandable sense of vulnerability amongst citizens, leaders, and residents alike. This sense of vulnerability after a terrorist attack against a nation can generate one of two reactions. The most common reaction is defensive: a fierce and overwhelming desire to attain total security. Good rarely comes of a defensive stance, and its ostensible goal — total security — is impossible to achieve, no matter how hard we try. A defensive reaction to 9/11 produced the ongoing catastrophe that is Iraq. A defensive response to Hezbollah’s 2006 attack against Israeli patrol vehicles and abduction of two Israeli soldiers resulted in the cruel and unrelated decimation of Lebanon’s civil infrastructure. Defensive reactions swiftly lay blame and bring down the axe without parsing the more complicated entanglements involved. Defensive reactions often produce the opposite of what they intend — in the cases mentioned above, less rather than more security, more rather than less vulnerability.

Sometimes, however, the sense of vulnerability produced by a terrorist attack can be so disorienting that it forces the victimized to begin to ask more difficult questions, to attempt to unpack the perplexing complexities surrounding the event. One such difficult question would be: “What are the social and structural causes behind this attack?” Another, even more difficult question is: “Are we in any way responsible for what has happened to us?” This latter question is one that a victimized nation usually and understandably finds almost impossible to ask itself immediately after an attack. It is perhaps the most urgent question of all, and no threatened nation can afford to delay its response.

This is not the first time Kuwait has been attacked. Most dramatically, of course, Kuwait suffered invasion by Iraq in 1990. During and after the invasion, it was easy to lay blame on Iraq, on Saddam Hussein, on others outside the circle of Kuwaiti victims. At that pivotal point in Kuwait’s history, Kuwaitis stood together, steadfast in the face of a clear outside threat, all internal dissent and difference — urgent only days before the invasion — suddenly of no consequence. But soon after liberation, that unity — the temporary reconciliation of differences — quickly devolved into something less admirable. As a result, others were victimized, excluded, discriminated against. Immediately following liberation, we did not ask the difficult questions that needed to be asked after a major national disaster. Was there anything about the way Kuwait was socially, politically, and economically structured before the invasion that might have contributed to the invasion or, if not to the invasion itself, then to some of its effects and regrettable outcomes? For example, among other things, we could have questioned our pre-invasion exclusionary citizenship laws, as well as our pre-invasion discriminatory treatment of non-Kuwaitis, women, religious minorities, and the bidoun (stateless), not to mention the seemingly irreconcilable political antagonisms escalating just ahead of the invasion. Engaging such questions and assessing our own shortcomings would not have been a case of blaming the victim for what was clearly an external attack. Rather, it would have expressed a sincere and exigent accounting for the divisive structures that pre-dated the invasion and, in part, conditioned it.

The experience of the invasion did little to transform these divisive structures. The primary structural division — Kuwaiti versus non-Kuwaiti — splintered into additional and equally problematic oppositions: Kuwaiti men versus Kuwaiti women and their rights; bedu versus hathar; citizen versus bidoun; Muslims versus Christians; and, let’s be honest, Sunni versus Shi’a, too. With the rise in number of more conservative Kuwaitis after the invasion, this Sunni versus Shi’a opposition intensified. Instead of the secular educa-

tion my parents and I enjoyed in Kuwait, a new Sunni Islamist curriculum spread in government schools, educating children to care about trivial religious differences that did not previously matter much to the majority of Kuwaitis — a people enriched by the maritime movement and mixture of cultures and languages from Iran, India, Africa, and elsewhere.

I would suggest that this advent of institutionalized Islamism — in schools and universities, in parliament and legislation — is at the heart of Kuwait’s post-invasion transformation. Let me be clear: Islamism, as many Muslims often argue, is not Islam. Islamism is not a faith; it is a political agenda. Institutionalized Islamism is not indigenous to Kuwait. It is an unfortunate import from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Although its appearance in Kuwait predates the invasion, in the decades since, it has taken hold and spread. One of its outcomes is the further intensification of divisiveness and sectarianism, the kind of us-versus-them logic that is so detrimental to the ethical and civic good of any state. Kuwaitis have always been a faithful people, but their practice of faith has rarely been violent or showy or exclusionary or judgmental. We were not a people that forced anyone to pray or fast or follow our version of belief. Those who wanted to pray or fast or give to charity or go to Haj did so quietly, discreetly, without having to announce it to everyone around. Kuwaitis were not a people that prevented those of different religions from practicing their faith in their own houses of worship. And yet, today, malls broadcast the call to prayer; restaurants are forcibly closed during Ramadan, even though many of our residents are not Muslim; churches are under threat of being closed; the celebration of Christmas is periodically challenged by parliamentarians; children at school learn which of their fellow students are Sunni, which are Shi’a, before they even know how to think for themselves; women feel pressured to dress and behave conservatively, even if they don’t want to and even if the law does not force them to; and so on. These are signs of an entrenched institutionalized Islamism that, I would argue, is not unrelated to the recent terrorist attack against the Imam Al-Sadeq mosque.

We all know that ISIS, via a Saudi citizen, attacked the Imam Al-Sadeq mosque on 26 June 2015, just as Iraq, by way of Saddam Hussein, attacked Kuwait on 2 August 1990. These external causes of the two attacks are easy to identify. Now, as then, Sunni Kuwaitis stand with Shi’a Kuwaitis, as they always should. It takes a time of crisis for us to realize this. But only days before the mosque attack, members of parliament were fighting each other on sectarian grounds, Sunni insulting Shi’a. These were not reasonable discussions where two sides agreed to disagree and quickly moved on for the good of the country. It was a shameful sectarian fight that makes the ISIS attack against the Shi’a mosque seem aligned with (not to say identical to) the violence exploding in our own parliament a few days earlier. In our moment of solidarity, let us not ignore the divisions thrumming beneath the surface of our admirable unity.

Structural and institutionalized Islamism creates the kinds of destructive divisions, irrational hatreds, and inevitable violence that structural racism does elsewhere. We saw the terrible outcome of structural racism most recently in Charleston, South Carolina, with the shooting that took the lives of nine African Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Structural racism in the United States produces racist individuals who can wreak havoc on fellow citizens they consider to be sub-human. Similarly, structural Islamism in Kuwait and the region produces intolerant individuals who can wreak havoc on those they consider to be sub-human. We may argue that these are the acts of isolated individuals, not indicative of the wider social, political, and economic structure. However, given the number of racially inflected violent incidents in the US just this year, the lone wolf argument is not credible. Likewise, given the religiously inflected extremism on the rise in Kuwait since liberation, it’s clear that the recent attack against the Shi’a mosque is part of a wider system of bigotry as well. The rise and spread of ISIS throughout the region confirms this. ISIS is the disavowed spawn of this regional religious extremism that, until now, Kuwait has tolerated and, tragically, institutionalized. The devil, as it were, has come home to roost.

After the invasion, around November 1991, I remember standing outside Kuwait University with a British visiting professor of literature and a group of young Kuwaiti students. We were nineteen or twenty years old, newly liberated, the “Free Kuwait” generation. Our excitement about the future was irrepressible. Things were going to be different — for women, for citizens, for res-

idents, for the bidoun. Kuwait would now have Kuwaiti gas station attendants and restaurant workers and garbage truck drivers and laborers. No job would be too low for Kuwaitis to take. We had been sufficiently humbled by the travesty of the invasion, the environmental devastation we were in the midst of, the destruction we could see all around us. We announced our plans, our hopes and dreams, with an optimism we could almost touch. That British professor looked at us with some sympathy and declared, “Nothing will change. Give it a few years. Everything will go back to what it was and worse.” We denied, we argued, we tried to dissuade him, to no end. The professor believed what he believed. And if we had had the courage and foresight and critical astuteness to look around us — for example, to recognize the treatment of Palestinians and the bidoun and women after the invasion for the discriminatory practice it was — we would have quickly realized that we were already on the miserable track the professor predicted. In 1991, in response to attack, to an understandable sense of vulnerability, Kuwait reacted defensively. In retrospect, it was a missed opportunity to transform ethical life in Kuwait.

Today, I would venture to suggest, we have another such opportunity to produce something good despite the devastating loss of life. How do we do it? Not by reacting defensively, not by seeking to produce the kind of security that can never be attained. Not by excluding others — non-Kuwaitis, visitors to the country, workers, the bidoun, whoever else. The most difficult thing to do in times of perceived weakness is to remain open and honest and tolerant. It is the most difficult thing to do, but it is also, I would argue, the most important.

ISIS is responsible for the attack, yes, but is there anything in addition to fighting ISIS that we, as a country and as a people, can do? Kuwait could decide to turn to its own unique cosmopolitan past for answers. That past could serve as a model for the present and future. Our past cosmopolitanism exists even today, despite all attempts to suppress it. It is a force that emerges heroically in times of crisis but dissipates all too quickly afterwards. When it emerges, we feel strong and unified as a nation. We become one, not despite our differences but because of them. This is what has been displayed and proclaimed since the mosque attack. Isn’t this the way we should want to be and to feel all the time? If so, it is in our hands to make it happen. It does not have to remain the optimistic, adolescent dream my British professor so quickly — and rightly at the time — dismissed.

It is time for us to return to a mixed, open, tolerant, adventurous, *secular* Kuwait. Yes, I use the dreaded word “secular” here, not to signify a lack of religious faith, but to suggest a turn away from institutionalized Islamism. Those who have faith will have faith regardless of what is taught at school or how governments are organized. School should be the place where children are exposed to the world; where they learn how to think critically and independently; where they become curious and engaged; where they explore diversity and difference; and where the sciences, arts, and humanities are not short-changed. Islam, among other religions, can be taught in religion class. But Islamism cannot be permitted to infiltrate every single subject or to determine what can be thought and said or to limit the kinds of books made available in school libraries. Islamism — Salafist, Wahabist, Muslim Brotherhood — cannot be the sole ideology at work on young Kuwaiti minds. Our young people need to be given alternatives. In my estimation, a complete overhaul of the government school curriculum is the most urgent step in the direction of a genuinely unified Kuwait. Modify this key institution, and the rest will follow.

Islam is a faith that the faithful can and do practice privately at home and together in mosques. But at school and university, at work and in government, in shops and restaurants, Islamism — divisive and alienating — has no place. It must go, and with it, all forms of xenophobia, exclusionism, bigotry, sectarianism, and fear of others. Now is the moment to utilize our own unique approach, to look to our own exemplary past for models, not to the imposed and imported models that have done us no good as a society, as a people, as a nation. Kuwait was always a trail blazer in the Gulf. It is time for Kuwait to blaze forth once again — bravely, honestly, and without fear.

□ □ □

**Mai Al-Nakib** is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Kuwait University. Her collection of short stories, *The Hidden Light of Objects*, won the Edinburgh International Book Festival’s First Book Award in 2014. Visit Facebook.com/maialnakib.