Chapter 18

The Bidun Protest Movement as an Act of Citizenship

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It is not about naturalisation (tajnis), it is about existing (wujud)

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Introduction

A particular category in the sociology of Kuwait, and increasingly used in other Gulf states, the term biduns refers to people from nearby regions (Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia) seeking naturalisation in a state that considers them as being foreigners and thus “illegally” on its territory.1 The case of the biduns is peculiar as they do not constitute a consistent ethnic or religious group per se. Rather, the term refers to a state-imposed and administratively-based status, and illustrates a phenomenon of exclusion based on a criterion that cannot be described as a primitive affiliation, although the bulk of the biduns do arguably belong to straddling tribes including both sects of Islam.2 More accurately, the category is defined by an original failure – an offence passed on from

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1 The number of biduns in Kuwait is subject to controversy. The official institution set up in November 2010 to close the file on this particular type of “illegal residents,” the Central System to Resolve Illegal Residents’ Status (later referred to in this chapter as the Central System), said it inherited 105,702 individual registered cases from the preceding organisation specialised in bidun affairs. Yet some bidun activists state that the real number of biduns in Kuwait is closer to 240,000, reflecting the government’s failure to update its statistics – based on the fact that many children of biduns, lacking proper birth certificates, do not appear in the figures (interview with the author, Kuwait, April 26, 2014).

2 This is due to the fact that branches of various tribes from southern Iraq converted to Shi’ism during the nineteenth century in order to avoid the Ottoman conscription. Yitzhak Nakash, “The Conversion of Iraq’s Tribes to Shiism,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 26 (1994): 443–63.
generation to generation – to comply with either the registration process of the Nationality Committees (between 1961 and 1965) or, up to the end of the 1980s, the appropriate rules of the 1959 Aliens Residence Law, hence its casting as “illegal” by the government in 1986.

Since 1986, and particularly following the February 1991 liberation of Kuwait, the government’s repressive stance towards the biduns has come to play a particular role in Kuwaiti politics. Firstly, in a country deeply traumatised by the Iraqi invasion, where the basis of the emir’s power was seriously questioned both from within the royal family (the new generation of princes) and the Kuwaiti political class, the group – along with Palestinians – played the role of scapegoat, as it became conflated with the image of the alien and, in particular, of the Iraqi alien. As the cultural proximity between biduns and nationals may have somehow blurred the lines between citizens and aliens, their representation as foreigners also reinforced the boundary that the state’s generous welfare policies had gradually drawn between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, creating a sense of superiority among the former that has become entrenched in the Kuwaiti national identity. Omar al-Shehabi shows that the impermeable boundary between citizens and non-citizens is fundamental for the stability of the imbalanced and heterogenous Gulf societies: “citizens and expatriates often became embedded in a network of control against each other as well as against members of their own groupings.” Secondly, the various Kuwaiti political actors, particularly the opposition, have often raised the bidun imbroglio and the government incapacity to definitively solve it in Parliament in order to use it as a political tool to embarrass the rulers, if not as a bargaining chip to obtain advantages for themselves and their constituencies. While the

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