Rivka Azoulay
Kuwait and Al-Sabah: Tribal Politics and Power in an Oil State

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Much of scholarly literature on Kuwait takes interest in its politics, often debunking the legislative powers of its parliament and the vibrancy of the country's domestic bargaining. Rivka Azoulay's book further breaks down the internal power dynamics by not only identifying the degree of cohesion within the ruling Al-Sabah family but also its relationships with various social groups—which ultimately guarantee the governing elites' survival.

Kuwait and Al-Sabah is organized on the core premise that "the support of the periphery is the condition sine qua non" for the longevity of authoritarian regimes (3). Drawing inspiration from the pre-modern Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun's concept of *ʿasabiyya* (solidarity), Azoulay posits that beyond the internal cohesion among ruling elites, addressing the needs of peripheral communities—who require the most mediation for access to resources—amounts to strategic patronage that cements regime control.

Employing primarily ethnographic research supported by historical sociology, Azoulay underscores the legacy of early state-building and shows how the trajectory of dynastic monarchism facilities social integration. However, as Azoulay asserts repeatedly across her work, globalizing forces, including subsequent waves of communication revolution, threaten the social fabric. The author's keen eye for detail is evident as she examines the evolving relationships between the Al-Sabah family and various social groups, including mercantile elites, *badu* (tribesmen), and the Shiʿa minority. Noticeable cracks in this equation, owing to inter-group tensions, are expounded, although generational change could have been elucidated more clearly.

The book's structure, divided into three parts, offers a chronological journey through Kuwait's political evolution. In Part I, Azoulay skillfully deconstructs the "dominant Sunni *hadar* (urban) narrative" that has long dominated discussions of Kuwait's pre-oil era. Her analysis reveals a more complex reality, where "lines of descent, lineage and sect" played crucial roles in social stratification (28). Notably, Azoulay's work excels in three areas: her insightful parsing of the merchant elite's internal hierarchy, her presentation of alternative narratives from Shiʿa and tribal communities, and her challenge to the prevailing Gulf historiography that favors maritime over desert influences.

The plurality of old Kuwaiti society is also discussed in tandem with political and spatial proximities. In other words, families were distributed geographically in accordance with prominence, evident in the old neighborhoods of

Al-Sharq, Al-Qibla, and Al-Mirqab. A similar logic applied to the *asli* or original tribes of Kuwait: the ʿAwazem and Rashaida tribespeople lived in peripheral yet accessible settlements (such as Salmiyya and Hawalli).

The 1921 and 1938 councils in pre-oil Kuwait, often explained as precursors to the parliament owing to their politicization, are given a fresh twist by Azoulay. Framed as a form of opposition to the power distribution preferences established by Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, these events are neatly weaved into the ruler's emerging alliances with the Shiʿa and tribal groups, set against a backdrop of burgeoning Arab nationalism.

Part II, dealing with a nascent and independent state of Kuwait managing its oil wealth, explains the birth of a semi-democracy owing to external threats. The mercantile elite had stakes in the power-sharing formula at this stage, with a direct say in the writing of the 1962 constitution. Yet, Azoulay points out that, in 1965, with the demise of the merchants' main Al-Sabah patron, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem, the urban elite faced a decline while a middle-class opposition came to the fore. The ebb and flows of mercantile influence are situated in domestic and regional contexts, such as the waning of Arab nationalism, the domestic stock market crash, and the emergence of Islamist currents.

The shift in economic patronage patterns provides a clever segway from Part II to Part III of the book. As the government's rent distribution targeted "actors outside the established elite," Azoulay observes how material benefits alone proved insufficient in satisfying the diverse needs of various public groups (90). The Shiʿa, as one of the "non-core" groups put under the microscope at the end of Part II, underwent various status changes: from historical Sabah allies, they embraced a period of "political emancipation" by turning against the co-optive relationship (114) before returning to the alliance in the post-invasion period.

Likewise, Azoulay traces the transformation of tribal hierarchies from security providers to vocal critics of the regime post-2008. She attributes the fragmentation of tribal ranks, explained in the opening of Part III, to the receding influence of tribal chieftains and a new generation who "cannot accept anymore the traditional modes of dealing with the regime and the unquestioned loyalty of their parents to the monarchy" (136).

The final chapters paint a sobering picture of eroding unity in Kuwait. Azoulay depicts a vocal middle class engaged in a "struggle over existing logics of redistribution of oil-derived resources," while grappling with chronic issues such as housing shortages, inadequate state services, and corruption (155). These problems are exacerbated by economic inequality rooted in long-standing clientelism.

Further, Azoulay sheds light on how rivalry plagued the ruling Al-Sabah family since 2006. The long-held "rotation of power between the Al-Jabir and Al-Salim branches" was disrupted with the ascension of the late Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad as Emir, tilting the balance in favor of the former branch (163). Such fissures in the ruling *ʿasabiyya* further complicate governance styled on paternalism.

Kuwait and Al-Sabah provides a somber closure by reiterating the lack of government buy-in, "obliging the regime to resort to more repressive measures" (177). Besides outlining the limits of political patronage, Azoulay concludes that "only by modernizing and renegotiating its monarchical pact" can Kuwait hope to address mounting public frustration (193). But refreshing the social contract requires more than clear economic reform. Revisiting the Constitution, where the distribution of power is codified, would be a logical follow-up to Azoulay's work.

Overall, despite minor inconsistencies in writing, the book presents a compelling argument for the importance of center-periphery relations in understanding Kuwait's political dynamics. The icing on the cake is Azoulay's nuanced and timely examination of Kuwait's cycles of political paralysis from the 2000s, which provides valuable context for the country's current challenges.

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Oren Kessler
Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict

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"The past is never dead. It's not even past," the American novelist William Faulkner famously wrote.[1] Oren Kessler, in his superb book, *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt andd the Roots of the Middle East Conflict*, illustrates Faulkner's timeless observation. "Palestinians, despairing over their thwarted national hopes, wage acts of protest, boycott, sabotage, and violence," Kessler writes.

1. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House: 1950), 212.