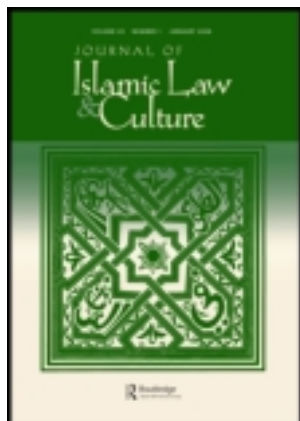


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The development of political interaction in Kuwait through the “*Dīwānīyas*” from their beginnings until the year 1999

Abdullah Mohammad Alhajeri*

This study aims to highlight the functional role of Diwaniyas in the Kuwaiti society regarding the historical heritage including its role in getting involved in the process of figuring significant social and political changes. This is particularly regarding the separating historical periods of the succession of the State of Kuwait. We are satisfied only with investigating its nature since the emergence of the State of Kuwait until the last period of the 20th century regarding our being interested with not changing the current period that its features would witnessed obviously in two or three coming decades. This is regarding the implicit overlap between the internal and external political statuses, and the impact of each of them on the other. This study also tries focusing on the Diwaniyah’s role and significance such as activist social institutions that established a sort of the political activity in the society. These social institutions represented the first types of parliaments in which the first and the most significant based political election types on the people participation without concerning the tribal or ethnic unity were practiced in them. This study also highlights how the Diwaniyas could keep this role existent over several times and the repeating crisis. It influences that political change process in Kuwait, especially after the political crisis reflected their gravity in repeated manner regarding reflecting the role of Diwaniyas in terms of not meeting the expectations of some people who expected that the Diwaniyah’s role would declined during the existence of crisis and their being stressed. It happened especially after the political participation subject, which counted as the first standard for any occurring real political and social development in any country.

Keywords: Kuwait Parliament; Kuwait tribe; Kuwait political participation; Kuwaiti society; *Diwaniya*; democracy in Kuwait.

I. Introduction

The *dīwānīya* represents the first democratic institution in Kuwait in which the most important political elections have taken place free from any tribal influence. It is doubtless that the *dīwānīya* is one of the oldest and most deeply rooted social institutions of the Gulf States, and its relationship with the political process makes it even more important. Kuwait, more than other Gulf States, has experienced various political movements that have resulted in various systems of government. Yet underlying all of these political movements has been the unofficial yet pervasive institution of the *dīwānīya*. The political importance of the *dīwānīya* lies in the fact that it is not solely, or even primarily, a political institution – it is equally a center of traditional culture, daily social life, and political activity. It has continued to play this multifaceted and dynamic role since the establishment of the Kuwaiti Emirate. The institution has deeply shaped Kuwaiti life and has affected the current form of the Kuwaiti Emirate. Indeed, so great has been the political influence of the *dīwānīyas* that many have called them Kuwaiti mini-parliaments.

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This study concentrates on the crucial political role played by this long-standing social institution, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya*, from its inception until the end of the 20th century. Contrary to the expectations of many, the *dīwānīyas* have maintained their active political role during both times of calm and crisis. The research presented here seeks to shed light upon this persistent role of the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya*, considering its role both in preserving social continuity and in producing political change, especially during the development of the Emirate. It seeks to provide answers to the following questions: have the *dīwānīyas* in Kuwait helped to foster democratic change, or have they rather clung to reactionary tribal practices? What role did the *dīwānīya* play in establishing the democratic process during the early stages of Kuwaiti state formation? Did the *dīwānīyas* represent Kuwait as a civil society based upon the cooperation of all individuals? What were the most prominent functions of the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas*, and what role did the owners of these *dīwānīyas* play in promoting political awareness? What was the function of Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* during Kuwait's political crises, and how did these *dīwānīyas* affect the Shura Council (Legislative Council) of 1921, the Council of 1938, the Constitution drafted in 1961, and the Iraqi invasion of 1990? What were the most important social changes that the *dīwānīyas* created in Kuwait during the invasion period? Did the *dīwānīyas* in Kuwait contribute to the formation of a new political system, and what was their impact on Kuwait's National Assembly? The answers to all these questions will be provided within the framework of our discussion of the role of the *dīwānīyas* in Kuwait from their initial establishment until the end of the 20th century.

II. The origins of the *Dīwānīya*

The *dīwānīya* in Kuwait has attracted much interest from researchers and writers, particularly concerning the most recent period in Kuwaiti history and the circumstances under which members of Kuwaiti society have lived during this period. It can be said that the *dīwānīya* in Kuwait is connected indirectly to the family and the tribe,¹ as well as to the infrastructure of the state and the society as a whole.² *Dīwānīyas* in Kuwait are considered an ancient social phenomenon. They can be described as an informal political, cultural, and social outlet where common and elite people alike can meet to discuss the society's affairs. Throughout their history, the *dīwānīyas* have always been the first venue for the discussion of various issues.

The distinguished status of the *dīwānīyas* in Arab culture goes back hundreds of years. In the past, the *dīwānīya* took the form of what was called the "council," which was the dominant political concept of the earliest Islamic state – elders of the tribe or the clan used to meet in order to discuss the most important issues facing

¹Ibn Khaldūn stressed the importance of the tribe and its role within society, especially in connection with social organization and the political history of the state. For more information, see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab [The Tongue of the Arabs]* (Dār Sādir, Beirut 1968) 1:602; and Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat [Introduction]*, ed. Aḥmad al-Zuʿbī (2nd edn Dār al-Arqām, Beirut 2001) 62.

²Al-Jābirī explains that the concept of the State in the ancient worldview meant the prevailing physical force and its domination of others; Muḥammad ʿĀbid Al-Jābirī, *Fikr Ibn Khaldūn: Al-ʿaṣabīya wa-al-dawla, maʿālim naẓarīya Khaldūnīya fī al-tārīkh al-islāmī [Ibn Khaldūn's Thought about Partisanship and the State: The Main Characteristics of a Khaldunian Theory of Islamic History]* (6th edn Markaz Dirasāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabīya, Beirut 1994) 216–18.

them and to solve any disputes that existed among clans and families. The origins of the *dīwānīya* can, therefore, be traced to the first of these political councils.³ We should note that the term “*Diwan*” was mentioned in the Hadith of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH):⁴ “there are guards.” In fact, we can cite the definition of Ibn Manẓūr’s lexicon *Lisān al-‘Arab* that the “*Diwan* is the Society of ‘*Ṣuḥuf*’” (newspapers),⁵ which seems particularly apt when considering that the *dīwānīya* was a common meeting place for the lower and upper classes alike. Soon *dīwāns* were used for other functions as well.⁶

III. The role of the *Dīwānīya* in Kuwait

It is not conclusively known when Kuwait City was founded. Several sources have disagreed as to when Kuwait was originally established. The two historians ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Rashīd (1887–1938) and Yūsuf ibn ‘Īsā al-Qanā‘ī (1879–1973) are considered the most prominent historians of the events in Kuwait in the first half of the 20th century.⁷ However, they themselves did not agree upon a fixed date for the establishment of Kuwait, although they agreed that Kuwait represented a part of Ben Khaled’s tribe that inhabited the Ahsaa region in the northwestern part of the Arabian Gulf. It is said that Kuwait was first sighted in 1688 by Barrack Ben Orayer, one of Ben Khaled’s princes. Alternatively, it is also said that Kuwait was also sighted in 1615 by Okeil Ben Orayer or Saadoun Ben Orayer. Abū Ḥākima, an important historian of Kuwait in the second half of the 20th century, claims that Kuwait’s foundation belongs to the 17th century.⁸ Some even suggest as late as 1713 as the first confirmed date of establishment.⁹ However, some recent records indicate that Kuwait’s first

³It was known by Muslims in the reign of the caliph ‘Umar ibn Al-Khaṭṭāb (13–23 AH) as the *Khalīfa Dīwān*, and it has been considered a point of connection between the public and the private spheres throughout Islamic history thereafter. Some scholars have located the starting point of the *dīwāns* in the time of the Persians after Kisra has called the clerics of his *diwan*, when they were talking (his *diwan*), i.e. the lunatics; Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* [*The Complete History*] (4th edn Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, Beirut 1994) I:428; also Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat*, I:121.

⁴The Hadith reads: “Allah has guards, they are Angels in the Heavens” Jawād ‘Alī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-‘Arab qabl al-Islām* [*The Detailed History of the Arabs before Islam*] (4th edn Dār al-Sāqī, Beirut 2004) IX:273; also Ibn Qutayba, ‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār, ed. Muhammad Eskandarani (3rd edn Dar Arab Book House) I:85.

⁵Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* XV:463.

⁶For instance, *dīwāns* were used to register soldiers’ names and stipends, and to record other monetary donations and distributions, in the first ages of Islam and especially in the early Abbasid period (132–232 AH). Many early caliphs relied on tribes to strengthen the caliphal support base, as many of them divided the army into tribally based regiments. Therefore, the tribe has always been an important element in the political and social decisions of the Islamic State, as is exemplified by the policies of the caliph Mu‘awiya (r. 41–66 AH).

⁷For more information, see Yūsuf ibn ‘Īsā al-Qanā‘ī, *Ṣafaḥāt min Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* [*Pages from the History of Kuwait*] (5th edn Dhāt al-Salāsīl, Kuwait City 1987) 15–16; also ‘Abdallāh Khālid al-Ḥātīm, *Min Hunā Bada‘at al-Kuwayt* [*From Here Kuwait Started*] (3rd edn al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣrīya, Beirut 2004) 362–4.

⁸Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Abū Ḥākima, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt al-Ḥadīth, 1750–1965* [*The History of Modern Kuwait, 1750–1965*] (Maktabat Dhāt al-Salāsīl, Kuwait City 1984) 17–18.

⁹Shaykh Ḥusayn Khalaf Khaz‘al, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt al-Siyāsī* [*The Political History of Kuwait*] (Dār al-Hilāl, Beirut 1962) I:37; also *idem*, *Tārīkh al-Jazīra al-‘Arabīya fī ‘Aṣr al-Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Waḥhāb* [*History of al-Jazīra al-‘Arabīya in the Era of Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Waḥhāb*] (Dār al-Kitāb, Beirut 1968).

patriarch was Sheikh Sabah and that his polity came into existence in 1613.¹⁰ One of the most important pieces of evidence is a historic document entitled “Kuwaiti Political Arabic Documents,” which shows the Kuwaiti borders as determined by Sheikh Mubarak (1896–1915) in 1912. There is also a report by Louis Billy written on 16 July 1863¹¹ stating that the Al Sabah family had been in power for five consecutive generations.¹² However, the difficulty of locating the exact date of Kuwait’s establishment does not impede our study of the political importance of the *dīwānīya* in Kuwait’s history; we will take as the beginning of our study that period during which Kuwaiti society began to operate as a unified social body. During this time, various *dīwānīyas* were established for every tribe and clan, and these became the real centers of power of influential and wealthy people. The *dīwānīyas* soon developed to become an integral part of Kuwaiti culture, and they played an important role at a time when other aspects of Kuwaiti political life were unstable or non-existent.

We start this study of the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* by seeing how earlier scholars have defined the institution, and how these definitions need revision. The renowned Kuwaiti historian ‘Abd al-Azīz al-Rashīd described the *dīwānīya* as follows:

It exists in a compartment called a sanctuary, in which there is a room with a hall at the front. On one of its sides there is another hall designed for summer use, in which the common guest refreshments and entertainments such as coffee, hearth “aloes,” etc. ... are set.¹³

He also described it as a conference room where people meet together.¹⁴ For al-Rashīd, the *dīwānīya* was a place of meeting and a conference room that anybody can visit. Another historian, Shaykh Ḥusayn Khaz‘al, claimed that Al-Sabah I (after whom the dynasty is named) was chosen as the first governor of the Al-Sabah family in a *dīwānīya* meeting.¹⁵ Yet another historian, al-Qanā‘ī, further explained that all the existing tribes (Al-Sabah, Al-Khalifah, and Al-Galahema) gathered at this *dīwānīya*, and through constructive dialogue, they agreed unanimously upon the election of Al-Sabah I as governor. This agreement became the model of the Kuwaiti social and political order: election and consensus have been preceded by talks held in the *dīwānīyas* of prominent businessmen or tribal chiefs.¹⁶

Thus, Sheikh Sabah was the first governor of Kuwait to be elected. At the time, this election was considered the most important historical event in the history of the Kuwaiti Emirate. The election was preceded by a pledge from Sheikh Sabah himself, and every tribal leader held a seat from which he could discuss and solve the problems

¹⁰The first governor of the Al-Sabah family; but the date of his reign of the principality is not known with certainty.

¹¹A British resident in the Arabian Gulf from 1862 to 1873.

¹²Maymūna al-Khalīfa al-Ṣabāḥ, *Al-Kuwayt: Ḥadāra wa-Tārīkh* [Kuwait: Civilization and History] (4th edn M. K. al-Ṣabāḥ, Kuwait City 2003) I:108.

¹³‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Rashīd, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* [The History of Kuwait] (revd edn by Ya‘qūb al-Rashīd Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāh, Beirut 1971) 339.

¹⁴Al-Qanā‘ī, *Ṣafahāt* 15.

¹⁵Khaz‘al, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt al-Siyāsī* pt 1, 43; Aḥmad al-Rashīdī (ed.), *Al-Kuwayt min al-Imāra ilā al-Dawla: Dirāsa fī Nash’ Dawlat al-Kuwayt wa-Taṭawwur Markazihā al-Qānūnī wa-‘Alāqātihā al-Dawlīya* [Kuwait from an Emirate to a State: A Study in the Creation of the State of Kuwait and the Development of its Legal Status and International Relations] (2nd edn Dār Suṭūd al-Ṣabāḥ, Kuwait City 1993) 33; al-Ṣabāḥ, *Al-Kuwayt: Ḥadāra wa-Tārīkh* I:108, the first governor of the Kuwaiti Emirate.

¹⁶This is represented by al-Qanā‘ī, *Ṣafahāt*.

of his people. It can thus be said that the *dīwānīya* was the first pseudo-parliament in Kuwait, in which various views could be exchanged with full democracy. In fact, this inclusive atmosphere integrated all tribes of all levels under one umbrella. Allegiance was now given not to tribes but to the state, marking an unprecedented shift in the loyalties of the Kuwaiti people and the ultimate step toward modern nationhood.¹⁷ It was in the old and time-honored institution of the *dīwānīya* that the ideas of statehood and democracy were fostered.

No doubt the *dīwānīya* at the very beginning of the Emirate establishment had an important role in making various political decisions. At first, *dīwānīyas* were confined only to the upper class and influential people, but they later came to include all social classes in the discussion of social, cultural, political, and economic matters. It thus helped the general populace to adopt new political beliefs; for instance, it instilled the people with the idea that, although the tribe's chief¹⁸ had the authority over his own tribe members, the governor¹⁹ had the authority to control individuals in general. When we consider that Kuwaiti society is largely composed of small tribes assembled within the political borders of the Emirate, we can see that the *dīwānīya* played a leading role in assembling these tribal powers, in mobilizing them both culturally and ideologically, and in moving them away from a parochial tribal mentality toward a more urban and nationalistic one. The *dīwānīya*, therefore, has been the liaison between tribal society and the civil society. In spite of all this, the *dīwānīya* has never received official recognition as a political institution. The *dīwānīya* has always been considered an unofficial social institution representing the Kuwaiti civil culture, and some wealthy and influential Kuwaiti families continue to own and run *dīwānīyas* to this day.

IV. Towards establishing the nation – *Dīwānīyas* in Old Kuwait during the period of rapid economic, social, and cultural change

After experiencing pronounced developments in its economy and trade, beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century and lasting throughout the 20th century, Kuwait has emerged as a commercial power and one of the most important international trade centers of the Arabian Gulf.²⁰ Its growing economic role in the region has reinforced the status of the *dīwānīya* among Kuwaiti citizens; and this, in turn, has led to advancements in the traditional form and function of the *dīwānīyas*. The country's

¹⁷Shafīq al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyat al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya wa-al-Sulṭa wa-al-Mujtama'a* [Kuwait: A Study in the Mechanisms of the Regional State, Authority and Society] (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyyah, Dār al-Amīn lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', Cairo 1995) 10.

¹⁸The tribe might be known basically as a organizational principle that uses the field of tribal membership as its basis; Khaldūn Ḥasan al-Naqīb, *Ṣirā' al-Qabīla wa-al-Dīmuqrāṭīya: Ḥālat al-Kuwayt* [The Conflict of Tribe and Democracy: The Case of Kuwait] (Dār al-Sāqī, Beirut 1996) 9.

¹⁹Ya'qūb Yūsuf al-Kandarī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya: Dawruhā al-Ijtimā'ī wa-al-Siyāsī* [The Kuwaiti Dīwānīya: Its Political and Social Role] (Y. Y. al-Kandarī, Kuwait 2002) 59.

²⁰This was also true in earlier decades when Indian trade went through Baghdad, Aleppo and Constantinople. It should be mentioned that when the Persians encircled Basra and occupied it, the trade route was moved to Kuwait. At the same time, England sent its desert postal correspondence across Kuwaiti land; the British East Indian company also transferred its center there. Kuwait was then emerging as a prominent commercial outpost, which greatly helped to support its economic position. For more details, see Reader Bullard (ed.) for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Information Department, *The Middle East: A Political and Economic Survey* (Kuwait Ministry of Information, Kuwait City 1976; repr. Macmillan, London 1950) 13.

material standard of living increased, so did the role of the *dīwānīyas* in fostering public participation in cultural and political events, especially those *dīwānīyas* owned by merchants, ship owners, and other wealthy individuals. The number of *dīwānīyas* increased remarkably throughout this period, and they have been attended by the social elite ranging from the educated classes to members of the Kuwaiti royal family.²¹

As for the physical form of the *dīwānīya*, it experienced great changes as a result of the economic development in Kuwait. When we take a look at the layout of the traditional Kuwaiti house, we find that it usually had a simple single-storey plan; separate houses were often joined together by a shared wall. The initial form of *dīwānīya* in the early 20th century was a rectangular room detached from the house, with a door leading through a courtyard to the outside. However, the houses of merchants and other wealthy people were more elaborate and consisted of two separate courtyards: one containing a number of rooms for the occupants and women of the house, the other dedicated for men and containing rooms that overlook the yard and function as a suite. Each courtyard has its own entrance, and this reflects the new tendency in Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* to offer some degree of privacy, a departure from the traditional form.²² The changes to the form of the *dīwānīya* undoubtedly correspond with the economic and social changes in 20th-century Kuwait, as well as changes in lifestyle and taste. As the number of foreigners who immigrated to work and live in Kuwait increased, the form of *dīwānīya* changed to reflect a growing desire for privacy.

Economic growth, with its accompanying cultural and social changes, drove the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* to play a leading role in fostering participation in public affairs at a time when no political organizations or parties existed. Gradually, the *dīwānīya* changed from a place of casual discussion and social interaction into a platform for all Kuwaitis to discuss crucial financial, social, and cultural issues. To understand the role of the *dīwānīya*, one should first bear in mind that the Kuwaiti family, with its internal ties and social traditions, represents the most fundamental unit in Kuwaiti society. Furthermore, the family derives its social status from its tribal roots, and the oldest man in the family usually has the final say in financial and social affairs. However, this family cannot be isolated from the social context in which it is located, especially considering that the Kuwaiti Emirate is composed of a variety of ethnicities that came together to make up the small population of the country.

The Kuwaiti *dīwānīya*, in pioneering intellectual, cultural and political movements, did not itself witness a complete change in its traditional form. In the midst of all the changes that the society was experiencing, the *dīwānīya* remained a constant feature, a familiar venue in which to discuss new social and political developments. Hence, the *dīwānīyas* began to spread in greater numbers as other aspects of Kuwaiti culture and politics entered a period of flux. The number of *dīwānīyas* in Kuwait at the beginning of the 20th century was approximately 250,²³ quite a large number given that the population of Kuwait was small at this time. Moreover, the *dīwānīya*

²¹ Al-Kandarī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya* 61.

²² Khālid Muḥammad al-Maqāmis, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya: Ta'thīruha al-Siyāsī wa-al-Ijtīmā'ī wa-al-Thaqāfī* [*The Kuwaiti Dīwānīya: Its Political, Social and Cultural Influence*] (revd edn K. M. al-Maqāmis, Kuwait City 1992) 27.

²³ According to Sayf Marzūq Shamlān, *Al-Al'āb al-Sha'bīya al-Kuwaytīya: Waṣfuhā, wa-adawātuhā, wa-mā yata'alliq bi-hā hā* [*Kuwaiti Folk Games: Their Description, Equipment, and Related Matters*] (Kuwait 1969) 34.

became more inclusive during this period of economic growth; it was no longer a reflection of the social status of the owner, particularly after the emergence of some new social classes in the wake of the country's rapid economic prosperity. Such classes included ship owners, pearl hunters, and those working in transit and re-export zones.²⁴ While the small society of Kuwait was developing within a political and economical framework different from that of other Gulf societies, there has been a social tendency to reconcile life requirements and realistic necessities.

This led to a change in the role of the emirate; while it had once been based on the tribe, it came to be based on the state and took up a central role in shaping the general political and economic situation of the country. Determining and executing these state policies would take place after discussions and consultations, for which the *dīwānīya* is well suited. By means of the ongoing discussions and decisions carried out in the *dīwānīyas*, members of Kuwaiti society came to understand better the realities of running a democratic society. For instance, one of the most important realizations reached was the need to consider ways of income redistribution and providing public services.²⁵

Moreover, the growth in the Kuwaiti population and the fact that Kuwait attracts non-Kuwaiti immigrants caused an immediate and considerable increase in the construction of houses, and consequently an increase in the number of *dīwānīyas* (as the *dīwānīya* was a traditional component of every house). As such, the *dīwānīya* became a common and widespread feature of the urban landscape in Kuwait.²⁶ In many houses, a separate structure outside the house was dedicated for the *dīwānīya*, so that men could come and go without entering the house itself; this shows that *dīwānīya* took the issue of domestic privacy into consideration. It helped foster an atmosphere of openness in the face of Kuwait's great diversity of thought and culture. The *dīwānīya* would become the backbone of many of the civil organizations that would later appear in Kuwait.²⁷

The role of the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* was greater than has previously been appreciated by scholars. In fact, it underpinned many direct social assistance programs.²⁸ For example, when the situation in Kuwait worsened in 1868 – famine struck and there was a shortage of basic resources – *dīwānīyas* opened their stores to the public, easing the suffering of the Kuwaiti people throughout the famine years.²⁹ This situation reflects the *dīwānīya*'s early role in directly addressing issues of general social welfare. Moreover, some *dīwānīyas* were owned by influential people who had the resources to help solve people's problems, such as Sheikh Muhammad Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait between 1893 and 1896, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah (r. 1896–1915), and the Sheikhs Jaber (r. 1915–17), Salem (r. 1917–21), and Ahmad Al-Jaber (r. 1921–50). These Sheikhs were princes and rulers of Kuwait who

²⁴This means the areas of the city specialized for trade, especially re-export and transit trade; Khaldūn Ḥasan al-Naqīb, *Al-Mujtama' wa-al-Dawla fī al-Khalīj wa-al-Jazīra al-'Arabīya min Manẓūr Mukhtalif* [Nation and Society in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula from a Different Perspective] (2nd edn Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabīya, Beirut 1989) 29.

²⁵Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, trs 'Abd al-Wahhāb Alūb (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyyah, Cairo 1993) 86–90.

²⁶Al-Kandārī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya* 69.

²⁷Al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyyāt al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya* 19.

²⁸'Abdallāh al-Ḥātim is a Kuwaiti historian born in 1917. In *From Here Kuwait Started* he collected accounts going back to the very first confirmed accounts of Kuwaiti history.

²⁹Such as Abd Al-Nabī Maarefy's *Dīwān*; al-Ḥātim, *Min Hunā Bada'at al-Kuwayt* 223.

took part in solving people's problems and discussing various citizens' issues inside *dīwānīyas*. Furthermore, *dīwānīyas* were used to receive VIPs and foreign guests who visited Kuwait. One such guest was Prince Abdulaziz Al-Saud,³⁰ who frequently attended the *dīwānīya* of a Kuwaiti notable when he visited Kuwait. It is worth mentioning in this context that Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah invited Dr John Van and Dr Arthurki Bennet in 1910 to introduce the medical profession into Kuwait and to serve Kuwaiti citizens; in order to facilitate this mission, the Sheikh temporarily rented a *dīwānīya* that was considered the first Kuwaiti hospital before the establishment of the general hospital in 1913.³¹

Despite challenging economic and social factors, as well as the lack of any political organizations, the *dīwānīya* at this early time accurately represented the political and social realities of all levels of Kuwaiti society. Although Kuwait at that time had some formally established institutions, it lacked any active general political vision or system. It had no political life in the real sense of the expression, other than a form of social harmony and integration between the urban and Bedouin populations.³² In a way, the *dīwānīya* at that time was like an informal mini-parliament and a venue for people to meet and discuss their concerns. In addition, the *dīwānīya* could be viewed as a point of connection between members of society and their rulers, as well as a place where various daily internal, political, social, cultural, and intellectual matters could be discussed. In some cases, *dīwānīyas* resembled schools, in that they incubated various intellectual, cultural and political trends. Thus, it can be argued that the *dīwānīya* in Kuwait was a good reflection of people's early participation in political life.

V. Kuwaiti *Dīwānīya*: its political, cultural, and social role between 1921 and 1938

The Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* was always ready to adapt to changes, which ensured the continued relevance of the institution and protected it from obsolescence. Not only was it a place where literary and religious issues could be discussed, but also a venue for the expression and circulation of economic and political opinions. Some *dīwānīya* attendees might tell anecdotes, while others would undoubtedly focus on the discussion of various scientific and literary issues. For example, the *dīwānīya* belonging to Shaykh Yūsuf ibn 'Īsā al-Qanā'ī was dedicated to the study of linguistic and religious subjects. Some *dīwānīyas* played an important role in supporting cultural and intellectual movements in Kuwait. In fact, one may argue that the initiative to build public schools stemmed from discussions about Kuwaiti cultural life that took place in these *dīwānīyas*. Such ideas were direct a result of the intellectual development that occurred as *dīwānīya* participants discussed and exchanged thoughts with one another.

Moreover, *Dīwānīya* participants were not only men, as women played an early role in the political discussions and actions held in *dīwānīyas*.³³ Some sources state that all-female *dīwānīyas* are deeply rooted in Kuwaiti culture.³⁴ They are referring

³⁰Khlaif Al-Naqib and his father's bureau; for more details, see *ibid.* 225.

³¹*Ibid.* 91.

³²Al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyyāt al-Dawla al-Quṭriya* 47.

³³Mary Ann Tétreault, 'Civil Society in Kuwait: Protected Spaces and Women's Rights', (1993) 47 *Middle East Journal* 275–91.

³⁴Al-Kandarī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwayfiya* 81.

to Sheikh Aisha Mubarak Al-Sabah and Sheikh Bebe Al-Salem and their roles not only in finding solutions to problems facing the needy or dealing with local matters, but also in discussing political affairs, particularly after the death of Sheikh Salem Mubarak Al-Sabah.

Through these *dīwānīya* discussions, Kuwaiti society realized the necessity to open up regarding internal matters. In some cases *dīwānīyas* began to interfere with the affairs of the ruling family itself, although Kuwaiti people in general did not dispute the role or the legitimacy of the ruling family. In fact, this interference saved the emirate some political turmoil that might have destroyed it, given its various challenges.³⁵ Moreover, the activities taking place in Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* were considered a form of political and social participation. As was previously mentioned, the *dīwānīya* in Kuwait had a role in establishing a number of schools, such as Al-Mubārakīya School, which was built in 1911, and Al-Aḥmadīyah School, which was built in 1921. As for Al-Mubārakīya School, the idea of establishing it can be traced back to a *dīwānīya* run by a famous Kuwaiti writer in 1910.³⁶ This school stumbled at times; therefore, there were some calls by intellectuals and notables to support this school and reform its educational format and curriculum. This all took place in meetings within *dīwānīyas*.

No doubt, different *dīwānīyas* were characterized by different political views. There were some *dīwānīyas* that supported the government, and these *dīwānīyas* were generally owned by important merchants and businessmen. They worked to raise awareness among their *dīwānīya* members about the justifications of certain political decisions or viewpoints. However, there were other *dīwānīyas* owned by political and social activists and by intellectuals that served as platforms for opposition to the government and calls for public participation in the political decision-making process. Thus, after Sheikh Salem Al-Mubarak died and Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber became the new ruler of Kuwait, various organizations in the state of Kuwait witnessed some form of modernization. Many new local specialized councils came into being. This was accompanied by a growing feeling among intellectuals in the country that there was greater need for general political participation. Therefore, they met in the *dīwānīya* of an important merchant to discuss state issues and to call for a return to a regime of joint rule. The petition that was put forward called for a joint-rule regime and establishment of a consultative council (*shūrā*).³⁷

After this historical meeting, one can say that the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* had taken its most important historical steps in the modern history of Kuwait toward determining the internal politics of the emirate. The *dīwānīya* had confirmed that it represented a

³⁵ Ahmed Jafar Abul, 'The Participation of Kuwaiti Intellectuals in the Development Process, 1961–1985' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Essex, Colchester 1992).

³⁶ Muḥammad Jawād Ridā, *Ṣirā' al-Dawla wa-al-Qabīla fī al-Khalīj al-'Arabī: Azmāt al-Tanmīyah wa-tanmīyat al-Azmāt* [*The Conflict between the State and the Tribe in the Arabian Gulf: Crisis of Development and Development of Crisis*] (2nd edn Dār al-Sāqī, Beirut 1997) 13.

³⁷ Nasser Al-Badr's *Dīwānīya*. A rumor spread about who was to blame for the failure of this attempt. However, 'Abd al-Azīz al-Rashīd, who was a contemporary of the incidents and a participant in them, absolved Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber of the responsibility for the council's failure. *al-Naqīb, Ṣirā' al-Qabīla wa-al-Dīmuqrāṭīya: Ḥālat al-Kuwayt* 30; 'Alī al-Wardī, *Manṭiq Ibn Khaldūn fī Daw' Ḥaḍaratihi wa-Shakhsīyatihi* [*Ibn Khaldūn's Logic in the Light of his Civilization and Personality*] (Jāmi'at al-Duwal al-'Arabīya, Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīya al-'Āliya, Cairo 1962) 37–113; Abū Khaldūn Sāṭī al-Ḥuṣrī, *Dirāsāt 'an Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn* [*Studies on Ibn Khaldūn's Introduction*] (3rd edn Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, Beirut 1967) 40–56; al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyat al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya* 9.

crucial but informal form of parliament wherein Kuwaiti affairs could be freely discussed, whether or not this activity was welcomed by all members of society. During the problematic period caused by Sheikh Salem al-Mubarak's death and the subsequent formation of the first advisory council, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* played a major role in creating and maintaining the emirate's political stability. As the *dīwānīya* introduced civil liberties and public participation, it confirmed the state's responsibility to govern Kuwait, administer its affairs, and plan its future. The meeting that took place in Nasser Al-Bader's *dīwānīya* confirmed that Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* and their participants, whether intellectuals, merchants, or others, were always invested in the people's political and social welfare, both locally and internationally. Thus, although *dīwānīya* does not have a formal status, it has remained an important part of the Kuwaiti cultural heritage.³⁸

The populace wanted to play a role in ruling the country, and this led to an attempt to establish a consultative council in 1920. This council did not last long and was abandoned after a few months. However, the fact that such a council was established showed that the society was capable of taking part in the political life of Kuwait, and that the *dīwānīyas* had a considerable hand in crystallizing ideas and calling for the establishment of the council. It is noticeable that most members of this council belonged to the class of *dīwānīya* owners who had taken the initial steps toward democratization through their *dīwānīyas*, or the "mini parliaments," as some people have termed them. Although political discussions in some periods were dominated by particular *dīwānīyas*, especially those in urban districts owned by influential people, political activists, and other members of the elite, we cannot confirm that all *dīwānīyas* were politically or socially active. In fact, one may say that not all *dīwānīyas* had the same level of political and social awareness, particularly in times of crisis. Nevertheless, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* had a clear impact on the avenues of political participation during the consultative council crisis in 1921.

After the failure of the consultative council, the educated elite of Kuwait began to realize the importance of entering and participating in the political arena. In light of contemporary regional and international events, they hoped to change the prevailing social and political life of the country. One may argue that, despite the eventual failure of the consultative council, the fact that this council was held in a *dīwānīya* is straightforward evidence that the *dīwānīya* was a crucial part of Kuwait's political heritage and an important stage for political action. Moreover, in addition to their political role, Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* also had a strong influence at the cultural level. In 1923, one *dīwānīya* was dedicated as the Literary Club for educated Kuwaitis, which was headed by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber. Moreover, the first library was also placed in a *dīwānīya* and was called The Ahlīya (National) Library.³⁹ Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* began to be equipped with modern technology, which contributed to the atmosphere of modernization – one of these technological advances was the radio.⁴⁰

³⁸The absence of the official political parties helped the *dīwānīya* become so crucial to Kuwaiti society. Perhaps the political role of many *dīwānīyas* intensified in times of political crisis; however, some of the *dīwānīyas* maintained their political role in all circumstances. Yet, some researchers have declared that the *dīwānīya* represented a parliament despite its lack of official parliamentary status.

³⁹Mohamed Saleh Al-Gawaan's *Diwan* with Ali El Amer's *Dīwānīya* Library. For more details, see al-Ḥātim, *Min Hunā Bada'at al-Kuwayt* 66.

⁴⁰Salah Aqqad, *The Intellectual Streams in the Arabian Gulf, 1938–1971* 59.

Even after the failure of the 1920 council, the *dīwānīyas* did not cease their political activities. In 1938, the role of the *dīwānīya* increased even further. For example, the meetings that determined eligibility to vote were held in one of these *dīwānīyas*. It was also in *dīwānīyas* that people cast ballots and votes were counted.⁴¹ *Dīwānīyas* functioned as polling stations in elections for the municipality council and other organizations. Thus, the *dīwānīya* gradually started to interact with other Kuwaiti institutions at the social and political levels.⁴² After the dangerous political and ideological changes witnessed in 1938, the *dīwānīya* became the venue where decisions were taken and political issues were discussed; however, these processes remained informal and without official backing from the British government. This leads one to conclude that it was not only the *dīwānīyas* of the intellectuals, merchants and other influential people that had a real role in the community – all *dīwānīyas*, large or small, were involved in the elections and in shaping the character of the new council. Most of these elected council members were *dīwānīya* owners, and their *dīwānīya* ownership greatly contributed to their getting elected.

Looking at the whole situation between 1921 and 1938 one can conclude that the period witnessed many unsettling changes. Due to border problems, worldwide economic stagnation and depression, and demands to return to joint rule, the elected 1938 council did not last for more than six months, from July to December of 1938. However, this council was an indication of the Kuwaiti path toward democracy, and the *dīwānīyas* had a direct connection with a number of enlightened individuals who hoped to bring about reform and modernism. Thus, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* was able to retain a large measure of balance and stability in the confusing situation caused by the swift change of political systems in Kuwait (though this is not to say that institutions and mechanisms of the state did not continue to encounter problems). It was the *dīwānīya* that was a constant feature underlying all political and social processes in the country, and that provided a viable alternative to the official state institutions.

VI. The modern Kuwaiti *Dīwānīya* and political participation: clashes between trends

Before the discovery of oil in Kuwait, the society consisted of some basic groups that determined the shape and organization of the state. The first group was the ruling family, and the second was the class of merchants and intellectuals. For the second group, who were mostly *dīwānīya* owners, the *dīwānīya* was considered the backbone of modernization.⁴³ Therefore, people would go to *dīwānīya* to discuss various urgent affairs, listen to news, and to stay apprised of the matters that concerned them and their communities. However, in those *dīwānīyas* whose attendants were divided in their support or opposition of the ruling government, the discussions were dominated by political concerns, especially regarding the economic situation and the problems faced by the municipality councils.

After the discovery of oil in Kuwait, sweeping changes permeated all levels of society: political, economic, and social. The country was declared independent in 1961, and this necessitated the discussion of certain topics in *dīwānīya* meetings. On 19 June 1961, the protection agreement that was signed in 1899 between Britain

⁴¹ Al Mzrouk and Al Sakr *Diwans*; al-Kandarī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya* 111.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyat al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya* 51.

and Kuwait came to an end. Instead, the two countries signed an agreement of friendship. According to this new treaty, Kuwait became an independent state. In these circumstances, people started to talk about the future of the country and the necessary steps that they faced. Of course, events of this importance were discussed in *dīwānīyas*.

Unfortunately, Kuwait's happiness with independence did not last long, as Iraq soon started to stir up problems with Kuwait. This is not the proper context to discuss in detail the problems with Iraq, but it can be said that the political leadership in Kuwait had no choice but to react decisively and swiftly to the threats made by Abdul Kareem Qasem, the ruler of Iraq. Therefore, on 29 June 1961, Kuwait issued a statement asserting that all Iraqi allegations toward Kuwait were groundless, and on 30 June 1961, Kuwait applied to become a member in the United Nations after it had already become a member of the Arab League. However, Iraq continued to issue threats toward Kuwait continued and mobilized some military units with the backing of several other Arab states. Again, the *dīwānīya* was the main venue for discussing these alarming events, as well as for explaining the situation to the citizens of Kuwait.

VII. Progress of political participation in parliamentary life through the *Dīwānīyas*, 1962–90

Constitutions are vital for every nation, for they determine the ideals of the state and define the powers of the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judiciary). After gaining its independence, Kuwaitis were fully aware that maintaining political freedom would require a constitution. Such a constitution must be respected and fully complied with, particularly in a world rife with political instability and complicated international relations.⁴⁴ Therefore, Kuwait started laying down a blueprint for its government, after recognizing the urgent need to create institutions that would satisfy the demands of the people and the state. The first institution founded after the oil boom in the fifties was the Construction Council set up in 1952 to carry out some construction and administrative projects. Two years later, the Supreme Executive Committee was formed to organize governmental bodies. In the early 1960s, a higher senate was set up that included members of the ruling family only.⁴⁵

All this institutional development created a kind of political movement in Kuwait, and the political awareness of the citizens began to evolve; the *dīwānīyas* acted as small political circles where all the issues were thoroughly discussed.⁴⁶ Naturally, the various *dīwānīyas* reached no general consensus about the key issues, but held different views and had political disputes. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that *dīwānīyas* of this period played a major role in enhancing the political awareness of the people and in fostering support for Kuwaiti intellectuals. In 1962, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem (r. 1950–62) endorsed the constitution and thus placed Kuwait on the threshold of an

⁴⁴ Ṣalāḥ al-‘Aqqād, *Al-Tayyārāt al-Siyāsīya fī al-Khalīj al-‘Arabī* [The Political Currents in the Arabian Gulf] (Maktabat al-Anjlū al-Miṣrīya, Cairo 1974) 247–53.

⁴⁵ Aḥmad al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Kuwayt min al-Imāra ilā al-Dawla* [Kuwait from an Emirate to a State] (2nd edn al-Markaz al-Thaqafī, Casablanca 2007) 289; ‘Abd al-Riḍā Asīrī, *Al-Niẓām al-Siyāsī fī al-Kuwayt: Mabādi’ wa-Mumārasāt* [The Political System in Kuwait: Principles and Practices] (8th edn Kuwait City 2005) 43–4.

⁴⁶ Aḥmad al-Dayn, *Al-Dīmuqrāṭīya fī al-Kuwayt: Masāruhā, Wāqī’uhā, Taḥdīyātuhā, Āfāquhā* [Democracy in Kuwait: Its Path, Reality, Challenges, and Horizons] (Dār Qurṭās lil-Nashr, Kuwait City 2005) 14.

important historical phase. Most members of the founding council were traders and businessmen who had their own *dīwānīyas*. It could be said that the new constitution struck a compromise between the traditional hereditary system of government and the popular collaborative and democratic trends.⁴⁷ Many believe that this constitution delineated all the mechanisms of political action in Kuwait, but in fact it totally ignored the *dīwānīyas* and their active role in public affairs. The members of parliament used their *dīwānīyas* as key forums for meeting with supporters from their constituencies and for conveying the major issues discussed in parliament. It was commonplace for every member of the National Assembly or the Municipal Council to have his own private *dīwānīya* in which he held weekly semi-formal meetings to receive his constituency and address their problems. Additionally, *dīwānīyas* acted as media outlets that spread news throughout the districts of Kuwait.

Despite the dissolution of the National Assembly – the first of several in the history of Kuwait – from 1976 to 1980, the *dīwānīyas* retained their role as mini-parliamentary institutions. They continued to have a great political impact on the people of Kuwait, as they had done during the first reform movement in 1921 and the more comprehensive reform movement in 1938. A clear example of the continuing influence of the *dīwānīyas* on the Kuwaiti social structure is Article Three of Law No. 65, which was enacted in 1979 after the dissolution of the first National Assembly. This law enacted a ban on any public gathering without previous approval from the authorities, but Article Three of the law excluded the *dīwānīyas* from the ban on the grounds that they were a traditional and deeply rooted social convention among the Kuwaiti people. This exclusion from the ban gave a strong political boost to *dīwānīyas*, which became practically the sole outlet for members of the community to exchange thoughts and even exert pressure on the government to reinstate the parliament. This period is referred to as the disrupted parliamentary period. In this period, some *dīwānīyas* became centers for public opinion polls on the major issues facing Kuwaiti society. Additionally, sub-elections took place in *dīwānīyas*, giving them the power to influence the peoples' choice of MPs; the MPs came to rely on the *dīwānīyas* for inside information about trends in public opinion. Hence, the *dīwānīyas* represented interim democracy during the disrupted parliamentary period.

Since the parliament and its members are assigned the task of monitoring the performance of the government and its various departments, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* has acted as an informal non-governmental regulatory organization. The *dīwānīyas* have monitored, analyzed and discussed the current government policies and the work of MPs; they aimed to assure that regulations and policies were in accord with the will of the people and the provisions of the constitution, particularly after political engagement was restricted to official governmental organizations. When the National Assembly first convened, most assembly members were inclined to pass laws that restricted collective gathering and limited freedom; the protestations of the few opposition MPs were not enough to prevent these laws from passing.⁴⁸ Many Kuwaitis viewed these restrictive laws as a clear breach of the provisions of the constitution, which expressly protects the rights of personal freedom and freedom of expression.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Muhammad 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jāsim, *Al-Kuwayt: Muthallath al-Dīmuqrāṭīyah* [Kuwait: Triangle of Democracy] (M. A. Q. al-Jāsim, Kuwait City 1992) 54.

⁴⁸Al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyat al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya* 90.

⁴⁹Al-Ghabrā, 'Voluntary Associations in Kuwait: The Foundation of a New System?' (1991) 45 *Middle East Journal* 199–215.

However, the government might have made a mistake by dissolving the parliament, as this served to enhance the role of the *dīwānīyas* in the political lives of the Kuwaiti populace. Moreover, *dīwānīyas* in this period became election platforms and race rings, where the people prepared to join the election campaigns when political life opened up again. In these *dīwānīyas*, individuals were able to express their opinions freely when meeting with different officials, and particularly with the National Assembly members who were in charge of drafting legislation. Thanks to the non-official parliamentary immunity given to the participants in *dīwānīyas*, which can be called “the *dīwānīyas*’ immunity,” the *dīwānīyas* became bastions of free speech and political expression.

VIII. Monday *Dīwānīyas*: state power and the homogeneity of community

The *dīwānīya* continued to exert its social and political impact on the Kuwaiti community, with various *dīwānīyas* vying for superiority; the influence of any one particular *dīwānīya* depended on the course of current events, as well as the activism of the given *dīwānīya* community and the political orientation of its owner. As has been previously mentioned, the discussions held Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* were generally politically oriented during election campaigns or times of political crises, and this was particularly true given the absence of formal political parties during this period. Overlapping with this political role of the *dīwānīya* is its pervasive social role, which also influences political life in Kuwait.

In 1985, the opposition represented the majority in parliament, and they tried to put into effect some regulatory measures on the government; hence, they interrogated a number of ministers, including the minister of justice. This unprecedented move taken by the National Assembly led to tense relationship with the other branches of government. This tension drove the Emir to dissolve parliament and freeze one of the most important articles of the constitution, namely Article 107. At that time, the parliament’s behavior was considered unc customary, and many Kuwaitis did not support the aggressive and inflammatory actions of parliament, even accusing the parliament of picking unnecessary battles.⁵⁰ Although the public did not look favorably upon the actions of parliament, they also did not support the subsequent dissolution of parliament, which was viewed by many as a permanent disruption of political and parliamentary life in Kuwait. The public resentment of this disruption was voiced by the 32 MPs who protested the dissolution of parliament (the second in the history of Kuwait). The MPs and Kuwaiti intellectuals saw the *dīwānīyas* as the only outlets for expressing their views and denouncing the government’s actions. Accordingly, they began holding weekly meetings on Mondays, which once again demonstrated the tendency of the Kuwaiti public to continue their political lives even in the absence of any official representative body.

Both the citizenry and the MPs used the Monday *dīwānīyas* to convey their absolute rejection of the resignation of the cabinet and the dissolution of parliament without plans to hold new elections within two months, as is clearly stipulated by the constitution. This situation aroused a great deal of concern, especially because the tension between the government and the National Assembly impeded the process and progress of democracy, and because the government showed itself relatively unwilling to accept criticism. Moreover, the dissolution of parliament and disruption of official

⁵⁰Al-Ghabrā, *Al-Kuwayt: Dirāsa fī Āliyyāt al-Dawla al-Quṭrīya* 93.

institutions reflected a lack of progress in Kuwaiti political life, and the *dīwānīyas* were left as the sole outlet for the Kuwaiti populace to express their political views.

Furthermore, some people used the *dīwānīyas* to show their resentment of the political game played between the government and the opposition, which damaged Kuwaiti democracy to such an extent that some alleged that democracy would be too fragile to survive the crisis. Some individuals also expressed their concern about the government's attempt to change certain provisions of the constitution. These feelings of resentment were exacerbated by the government's continued indifference toward the situation. This state of resentment, which lasted for three years, until the end of 1989,⁵¹ witnessed a deterioration of the political situation. The *dīwānīyas* were increasingly used to voice public outrage and criticism of the government for its disruption of the parliament. *Dīwānīya* participants discussed how the current state of affairs was negatively affecting the course of democracy, and MPs began to feel greater pressure to take action. The MPs began to mobilize their constituencies to present a petition to the government calling for the re-institution of the National Assembly as defined in the constitution of 1962. The citizens started signing the petition in the *dīwānīyas*, which breathed life to the democratic process in the midst of an extremely tense situation.

In this critical period, the *dīwānīyas* revitalized the concept of effective popular participation in the decision-making process. After several futile attempts to revive the National Assembly and parliamentary activity, the MPs felt they had disappointed their voters and decided to take action. Therefore, they called for a meeting in a member's *dīwānīya*; this meeting attracted an astonishingly large audience, as Kuwaitis thronged to the *dīwānīya* and its surroundings. This huge gathering came as a surprise to both the MPs and the ruling government.⁵² Most people present at that meeting, which was held on the evening of Monday, 18 December 1989, at Mr Jassem Al-Qitami's *dīwānīya*, expressed their extreme anger at the government. This was followed by another meeting, held on 25 December 1989 at Mr Mishari Al-Anjery's *dīwānīya*, in which the number of attendees greatly exceeded that of the first meeting. It also witnessed the participation of a huge crowd of women, who gathered in the area surrounding the *dīwānīya* and used loudspeakers to make their voices heard. Such meetings, which were usually held at night so that they would not be considered a strike or other interruption of work, had a great appeal among the people and attracted an ever increasing number of attendees.

At the time of the third meeting, which was held at Mr Mohammed Al-Morshed's *dīwānīya*, the government came to feel that the *dīwānīyas* might pose a danger to Kuwait's national security and decided to intervene. Accordingly, some of the *dīwānīya* owners were warned that further action would result in their arrest, and the police set up barricades at the *dīwānīyas'* entrances to disperse the crowds and prevent them from reaching the *dīwānīyas*.⁵³ Despite all these strict measures taken by the government, the meetings continued; the government found itself in a face-to-face confrontation with the public. Some people even tried to stoke the feelings of anger and resentment against the government by posting signs on the doors

⁵¹Hādī Rāshid, *Ḥall Majlis al-Umma wa-al-Ḥaraka al-Dustūrīya [Dissolution of the Kuwait National Assembly and the Constitutional Movement]* (Kuwait City 1992) 21.

⁵²Ibid. 28.

⁵³Ibid. 31.

and walls of the *dīwānīya* with phrases such as: “the *dīwānīya* is closed under orders from the higher authority.”⁵⁴

This situation led the government to believe that the *dīwānīyas* posed a threat to its security by provoking social and political unrest. Accordingly, the government surrounded some *dīwānīyas* with barbed wire and blocked the main roads leading to them in order to prevent them from receiving visitors. Despite these stringent measures taken by the government, some people continued to gather in places nearby. At the regular time of the Monday *dīwānīya* gatherings, the media issued an announcement on 20 January 1990 that the Emir would address the nation with a keynote address. In this speech, the Emir emphasized the importance of security, stability, democracy, and the need for dialogue. There is no doubt that the pressure exerted by the huge public gatherings at the “Monday *dīwānīyas*” had a great impact on the governmental resolutions that were later adopted.

In this heated situation, the *dīwānīyas* came to play a crucial transitional role in the history of Kuwait; some of these *dīwānīyas* had been political forums, where all forms of speech – positive or negative, in support of the government or in opposition to it – could be freely practiced. One of the most prominent speakers in these historic *dīwānīyas* was Dr Ahmed Al-Khateeb,⁵⁵ who was considered a major opposition leader in Kuwait at this time. The *dīwānīya* did not limit itself to traditional patterns of social networking and news circulation, but used loudspeakers and television screens to broadcast videos of meetings held in other *dīwānīyas* to the people gathering outside. Also, the *dīwānīyas* distributed recorded tapes, newspapers and foreign magazines to the public when the government had restricted access to such media and imposed strict surveillance and censorship measures. Surprisingly, the unique role of the *dīwānīya* in leading the suspended political movement in the country served to transform some of these *dīwānīyas* into popular commissions for spreading public awareness about the political rights of citizens; the *dīwānīya* thus became a proper substitute for the government in the absence of a parliament and other political organizations.

In imposing restrictions on the *dīwānīyas*, the government had no intention of eliminating them altogether, but it sought rather to limit their political influence and to deprive the opposition of a major weapon it wielded against the government.⁵⁶ Moreover, it was clear that the opposition movements that had taken up headquarters in the *dīwānīyas* were not well organized, and their actions were mostly characterized by spontaneity (particularly in the Monday *dīwānīyas*). After the government had arrested some of the prominent opposition leaders, the *dīwānīyas* remained the major communications network; as such, they helped preserve balance and stability in the society, and prevented the situation from devolving into chaos or escalating into violence.

Eventually, the government realized the seriousness of the situation and allowed the *dīwānīyas* to continue operating, recognizing the uniqueness of this traditional and longstanding Kuwaiti institution. At last, the government called for dialogue, which eventually led to the re-establishment of the National Council (although this step was met with substantial opposition, including calls to boycott the elections). The National Council began its sessions on 9 July 1990 but was interrupted after only one

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Kuwayt min al-Imāra ilā al-Dawla*.

⁵⁶Tétreault, ‘Civil Society in Kuwait’; al-Ghabrā, ‘Voluntary Association in Kuwait’.

session by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. After the complete liberation of Kuwait in October 1992, the National Council was reconvened and Kuwaiti democracy resumed its normal course.

IX. The *Dīwānīya* and the Iraqi invasion of 1990

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent collapse of all government institutions, the Kuwaiti people had no choice but to resist the occupation and manage their social affairs by themselves. In the absence of a government and a state, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* found itself almost alone as the backbone of the national resistance movement against the occupation (with the help of a few other institutions such as cooperative associations and mosques). After the Iraqi invasion, many Kuwaitis would go to the mosques to perform prayers and then gather at the *dīwānīyas*; such gatherings played an essential role in promoting a spirit of endurance and resistance against the invading Iraqi forces. The historical role of the *dīwānīyas* in Kuwaiti life was enhanced further during this period, as they functioned as social and political organizations and the headquarters of the Kuwaiti resistance. Members of the resistance movement would take refuge inside these *dīwānīyas*, where they would assemble and prepare for their new operations against the invading forces. Solidarity commissions were also established and organized in the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas*, which were also used for the storage of medicine, equipment, and surgical instruments. From the first moments of the Iraqi invasion, the *dīwānīyas* also became a crucial source of information, as the occupying Iraqi forces imposed a nearly complete news blackout. This drove the *dīwānīyas* to seek information from radio and television stations, and they assigned people the task of tracking, analyzing and spreading the news.⁵⁷ In addition, some *dīwānīyas* specialized in gathering and spreading the news of the Kuwaiti ruling family from al-Taif in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, some Kuwaiti intellectuals began frequenting the *dīwānīyas* to analyze the current events for the youth of the Kuwaiti resistance and to enhance their morale.

In fact, despite the various roles played by the *dīwānīya* during the Iraqi invasion, under no circumstances can we ignore its political dimension; it had played a direct role in manifesting the concepts of collaboration and solidarity among the Kuwaiti people, unifying them in the just cause of defending themselves against the invading enemy. This political activity also created an atmosphere of security for many districts, as *dīwānīyas* were active in providing local services for their communities. Even the MPs of the suspended parliament would convene in the *dīwānīyas* on specific dates, which the Kuwaiti government – temporarily relocated to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia – was informed about.⁵⁸ In these wartime circumstances, the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* again confirmed its role as a key player in planning and managing the internal affairs of the country and in mustering support and loyalty for the legitimate government. In the absence of a parliament, cabinet, and other governmental organizations, political groups used to hold their meetings in the presence of other opposition groups, such as the Democratic and Islamic Assembly and the National Assembly.

Despite all this activity, it must be noted that the number of *dīwānīyas* drastically declined as a result of the Iraqi invasion, oppression against their owners, surveillance, and a ban on gatherings. Also, the numbers of *dīwānīya* participants declined after the

⁵⁷Such as the *dīwānīya* of the al-Ma'ārifī family.

⁵⁸Al-Kandarī, *Al-Dīwānīya al-Kuwaytīya* 135.

invasion, and discussions there were largely confined to the political issue of the Iraqi invasion and the social issue of securing food and other basic necessities for the Kuwaiti populace. Moreover, the *dīwānīya* had become simpler in all of its physical components due to the shortage of resources.

X. The *Dīwānīya* and the institutional rebuilding of the state: the assembly of 1992

The Iraqi invasion had broken down everything in Kuwait, especially the organization and operation of the government, such that the Kuwaiti people were uncertain whether political and parliamentary life would be restored after the Iraqi occupation had ended. Hence, after the liberation, increased pressure was put on the state; critical voices multiplied in the *dīwānīyas* and censured many government figures, so that the relations between the government and the populace reached an all time low during this transitional period. Therefore, it was paramount to find a solution to end this tension and restore parliamentary life by electing a new National Assembly.

At the same time, the general need for survival and continuity were strong motives for the society to rise up, overcome the shock, and rebuild its institutions in this critical historical period. Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* not only served the Kuwaiti need for continuity – it had been a traditional part of Kuwaiti society since the founding of the country – but it also presented the face of Kuwaiti culture and heritage to the world after the invasion period. It had the ability to stand as a symbol for Kuwaiti culture and to represent equally the official and popular aspects of Kuwaiti life. In addition, the *dīwānīya* held the key for restarting the National Assembly, especially by introducing programs and ideas for the candidates.

However, because of the government's procrastination, the Kuwaiti opposition found itself in a difficult situation. The government did not carry out the promised reforms as quickly and uniformly as the opposition had anticipated, and it only declared a date for the new elections 19 months after the government had returned to Kuwait. This was too long in the eyes of the Kuwaiti opposition, given the urgent need to restore parliamentary and political life. The opposition hoped to ensure public participation in political decisions about rebuilding the security forces, military, and economic structures, as well as calling to account those persons who proved guilty during the invasion. In May of 1992, the Interior Ministry refused to allow the opposition to hold a public conference to discuss the latest political, economic, and security measures, and it cancelled the *Amiri* decree on establishing the National Council. However, the Kuwaiti parliamentary elections were held on 5 October 1992, and they proved especially important both internally and externally. The elections were a happy conclusion to the insistent political demands made by the populace since 1989, and they provided a strong impetus for the opposition leaders to continue their demands for reform from inside Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas*. Most of the elections campaigns held in *dīwānīyas* were characterized by a high degree of frankness, as critical issues were freely discussed. Particularly pressing were issues such as calling to account the persons who proved guilty during the invasion, maintaining a separation and balance between the three branches of government, and supporting the powers of the National Assembly, especially in the fields of finance and regulation.

In general, it has been noticed that the *dīwānīya* was the most important vehicle for the candidates and the electorate to voice their opinions in the elections of 1992;

it has also been noticed that the more influential the owner of the *dīwānīya*, the more influential the *dīwānīya*. In addition, the *dīwānīya* was the place where official meetings were held, where the memberships of most committees in the Assembly were discussed, and where the ballots were counted in the race between Ahmed Al-Sa'adon and Moubark Al-Doyle for Speaker of the National Assembly. Moreover, the candidates for ministerial positions were elected in *dīwānīyas*, after a rigorous campaign by state leaders to grant official approval to measures taken in the *dīwānīyas*. Thus, a unique mixture of the official and the unofficial emerged, which is a special characteristic of Kuwaiti politics.

As the power of the newly elected parliament increased, so too did the role of the *dīwānīya*, given that the *dīwānīya* was the main stage for the Assembly's demands for increased government accountability and increased parliamentary authority vis-à-vis the executive authority. Parliament members also called for the restoration of Article 13 of 1963 concerning gatherings and processions, which had been cancelled by Article 65 of 1979. Five Assembly members presented a bill to amend the gathering law in a way to suit the new reality in Kuwait, which would restore the *dīwānīya* to its previous position before the Assembly crisis in 1986. The bill for establishing an authority for "The Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" started one of the hottest debates ever known in the *dīwānīyas* and sparked a frenzy among the media and the public. Finally, the nonexistence of political parties⁵⁹ in Kuwait gave the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* a prominent role in National Assembly. Some of them played an important role in coordinating and regulating ideological activities – mostly in secret, due to the ban on political parties – which enabled the *dīwānīya* to be a part of the political decision-making process and to continue acting as an effective political tool in this latest stage of Kuwaiti history.

XI. The *Dīwānīya* and the National Assembly, 1996–99: social benefit and political gains

The processes of social and cultural change in Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion affected the society in general and the *dīwānīya* in particular. In the context of the *dīwānīya*, the most important of these changes was the government's indirect encouragement of the institution; high-ranking state officials would visit existing *dīwānīyas* and facilitate the licensing and construction of new *dīwānīyas*, and many decision-makers and sheikhs opened their own *dīwānīyas* to receive their guests. The elections in 1996 won the government a comfortable majority, which limited the influence of the opposition on the ground. However, this did not lessen the tension between the National Assembly and the government, and the *dīwānīya* became the most important arena for the conflict between the two branches and especially for the criticism of the government.

Another result of the changes in social patterns after the Iraqi invasion was that the Kuwaiti *dīwānīyas* started to become increasingly specialized. Some *dīwānīyas* were designated for entertainment and leisure, to the exclusion of political or social activities; other *dīwānīyas* were especially for youths or relatives and neighbors; religious *dīwānīyas* took on a unique spiritual and ideological character (for instance, some of them held religious lectures and lessons); *dīwānīyas* owned by politically

⁵⁹Yooosuf G. Abbass Ali, 'Political Participation in a Developing Nation: The Case of Kuwait' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 1989).

oriented people and National Assembly members specialized in politics; the so-called cultural *dīwānīyas* owned by university professors and other professions also came into the picture; some *dīwānīyas* were designated for craftsmen, hobbyists, and others; some mixed-gender or all-female *dīwānīyas* appeared, the most famous being that of Rasha Al-Sabah, who is considered the first woman to run a *dīwānīya* with a scientific and academic flavor; and finally, the Ministers' *dīwānīyas* were started by His Highness the Crown Prince Sheik Saa'd Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah expressly to discuss social problems.

However, things were not always rosy for the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya*, for the current National Assembly issued a decree that halted sub-elections, which were mostly held in the *dīwānīya*. This decree increased the tension between the National Assembly and the government, and it ultimately led the government to resign on 16 March 1998. The new government that formed on 22 March 1998 included three elected ministers, which prompted the Crown Prince to report that the government and the Assembly were at an impasse; consequently, on 4 May 1999, the Amir of Kuwait issued Decree No. 34 for the year 1999, which dissolved the parliament before it had completed its constitutional term. New elections were held on 3 July 1999 to elect members of the National Assembly for its ninth legislative term, which ended in 2003.

XII. The *Dīwānīya* and political participation: the march to democracy in Kuwait

From the establishment of the state of Kuwait until the end of the 20th century, the *dīwānīya* has been an institution of great importance in Kuwaiti life. In spite of all the political maneuvers made between the government and the opposition, the *dīwānīya* has maintained its heritage and its history in the Kuwaiti conscience – it has remained a place for solving the political problems and discussing the social issues facing the country. The *dīwānīya* has even had the power to sway public opinion, undermining some groups and strengthening others. Even after the government's decision to suspend political activities in a particular period, the *dīwānīya* remained active in its political and social roles.

In the past, any friction between the government and the parliament could cause a constitutional crisis that often led to the dissolution of the parliament or the resignation of the government. But amidst the turmoil, the *dīwānīya* was always the safety net that connected the various parties: the government, the parliament, and the populace. It also continued to be one of the most important lynchpins of social life, a place of gathering for all occasions and without any restrictions on the freedom to discuss all issues. During political crises in Kuwait, the *dīwānīyas* were transformed into headquarters of political operations; moreover, we can say that most features of the parliament and municipality councils were determined through *dīwānīya* discussions. In the past, the government had also often turned a blind eye toward certain non-governmental elections practiced in *dīwānīyas*, as some tribes would choose candidates, hold elections, and announce the results in the so-called "sub-elections" or "tribal elections" in the *dīwānīyas*.

Ultimately, one could ask: was the *dīwānīya* the real (if unofficial) outlet of political and social life in Kuwait, amidst the ongoing conflict between the executive and legislative branches after the drafting of the constitution in 1962? There is no doubt that the democratic process, in its various shapes and forms, has primarily been carried out through the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya*. As such, it can be said that Kuwaiti democracy has

existed much longer than its purported beginnings in 1962, the year the constitution was created. In fact, the *dīwānīya* has been the most prominent historical, political and social factor in Kuwait, in terms of establishing public political participation and in breaking certain traditions of political repression. The institution of the *dīwānīya* has thus opened up Kuwaiti political life, both during times when the National Assembly was functioning and in times when the parliament had been suspended.

Additionally, the *dīwānīya* enhanced its positive role in Kuwaiti society by taking on new social, political, cultural, and informative functions. This expanded role of the *dīwānīya* convinced the Kuwaiti people that the future of Kuwait rests on two axes: the civil society and the state. The state with its institutions, powers, and laws gives structure to the community and promotes feelings of loyalty and nationalism among its members. On the other hand, the state should encourage the populace to participate actively in the political process, in such a way that does not depend on tribalism, fanaticism, or petty local loyalties.⁶⁰ Kuwait needs neutral institutions, as it has no political parties and its democratic experiment is still developing its most basic structures. Therefore, the state should increase awareness of the importance of political participation instead of increasing restrictions, and it should allow for intermediary links between the state and society.

Before the discovery of oil in Kuwait, it was a small traditional country with a central city that managed its affairs; the role of the government was not considered complete without the input of the citizens and their participation in solving problems through various institutions (such as *dīwānīyas*, *shūrā* (consultative) councils, or municipality councils). These were the bases for political participation in Kuwait.

The ongoing conflict between the National Assembly and the government underscores the importance of these intermediary links between the state and the people; these links have a history and a heritage in the Kuwaiti national consciousness. There is no doubt that the Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* represents the most prominent and important link in Kuwaiti life; it is considered a safety valve and a pillar of support. The Kuwaiti *dīwānīya* has also contributed both directly and indirectly to the transformation of authority from individualism to collectivism and from centralization to decentralization. It has faced great challenges alone and succeeded in conquering them. People must also realize that Kuwaiti society today is not as it was in the past. Maintaining sound political participation within a clearly defined framework will help establish a civil society in Kuwait that more closely reflect the needs of the populace. In doing so, however, the country should not forget or ignore its historical heritage and its long-standing civil and public institutions such as the *dīwānīya*.

⁶⁰Ali al-Zubi, 'Tribal Solidarity as Reflected in the Election of the Kuwaiti Parliament' (unpublished master's thesis, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 1995).