Kuwait

Focus on Kuwait

Capital: Kuwait

Population: 1,175,000

Size: 6,880 sq. mi. (17,818 sq. km.)

Location: northwestern tip of the Arabian Gulf; bordered to the north and west by Iraq and to the south by Saudi Arabia

Climate: hot and dry desert; average temperature 90 degrees Fahrenheit

Monetary Unit: dinar

Urban/Rural Life: mostly urban

Religion: Islam

Languages: Arabic (official)

Ethnicity: largely Arab population (with no significant ethnic divisions), which includes non-Kuwaitis, such as Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis, and Egyptians; also Asians, Africans, Europeans, and North Americans

Government: emirate

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Personal Snapshot

The pig or pork is absolutely baraam (forbidden) in all Islamic countries, and it is useful for non-Muslims—teachers, other school employees, or visitors—to remember this rule. The lesson was brought home with painful clarity to a U.S. expatriate teacher of English as a second language in Kuwait. The teacher had been contracted to teach male students in a school. As a part of their education, he took a group of these students on a tour of the United Kingdom. One of the places they visited was a pig farm. The students apparently were not told beforehand what that part of the trip entailed. After the group returned to Kuwait, the administration of the school was told of the visit to the farm, the consequences of which were swift and sure: the teacher was dismissed.
Cultural Closeup

• Before this century, most people had little or no knowledge of Kuwait. However, archaeologists have discovered evidence of civilization dating back to 5000 B.C. in the area we now know as Kuwait. The Sumerians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all established their empires in this part of the Arabian Peninsula. However, Islamic influences from western Arabia have left a lasting impression on the life and culture of Kuwait.

• Much of the modernization in Kuwait has resulted from the sale of oil, which was discovered there in 1938. This has served to raise the standard of living in the country to one of the highest in the world.

• Kuwaiti society is divided into five levels: the ruling family, the old Kuwaiti merchant families, Bedouins who settled in Kuwait, Arabs from other countries, and foreigners. Kuwaitis accept that the social class into which they were born is largely a result of the origin of their families. There is hardly any tension between the classes—the king will stand next to the shopkeeper in the mosque during congregational prayers. Upper-class Arabs are always conscious of their public image. Their dress and deportment are indications of their wealth and social standing, and they will never be seen doing any form of manual labor.

• The culture of Kuwait, like that of other Arab societies, is firmly established on the Sharia, or Islamic law, which draws from the Koran and the Sunnah (the teachings of the prophet Mohammad). There is no separation between church and state. However, there seems to be a degree of flexibility permitted in Kuwait that is not seen in some of the other Arab countries. For example, in Kuwait, it is not compulsory for women to be dressed in the hijab (head covering) or abaya (black cloak), and there are fewer restrictions on female behavior in public. However, women are cautioned to dress and behave modestly, in keeping with Muslim tradition. Compared to their counterparts in neighboring Arab countries, more Kuwaiti women are educated in general and at higher levels, and more women are in the labor force in Kuwait than elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.

• Like other Arabs, Kuwaitis are very friendly and effusive. This extends to their hospitality. A host’s image may be made or broken by the quality of his hospitality. Guests are welcomed with the words Ablah wa sablan (meaning “welcome”) and are then offered a seat and refreshment. An Arab would be very surprised if you were to drink or eat alone and not try to share with those around you. It is the basic duty of Arabs to give help to and do favors for others to the best of their ability. An Arab expects total loyalty from a friend, and it is mutually understood that giving and receiving favors is an inherent part of a friendship.

• The phrase Insha Allah (“God willing”) is the essence of the Arab’s feelings about fatalism. It is considered arrogance or even blasphemy to think
that an individual has complete control over his or her fate and destiny. According to Islam, God alone has perfect knowledge and controls the fate of every person.

- Kuwaitis are uncomfortable with the impersonalized culture of filling out forms or dealing with organizations. A face-to-face interview in which a person may state his or her case is more valued. Overall, Arabs believe that people are more important than rules. The human dimension is very important and is often used as the measure of effectiveness in dealing with others.

- Like most Arabs, Kuwaitis believe the maxim *The hand of God is with the group, not with the individual*. This belief underpins all family relationships. Loyalty within the family is an assurance of support, security, and help in times of trouble. The family is the one place that is certain to offer comfort, and only foolish persons will break family ties and risk ostracism. Children are reared to give the greatest respect to parents and elders.

- Kuwaiti society is very conservative, and traditional values are highly regarded. Manners, customs, and rules of etiquette are important. Kuwaitis, no less than other Arabs, will form judgments on a person’s character based on the way he or she behaves in public.

- Hospitality and generosity are considered supreme virtues.

- A verbal promise or contract is just as binding as a written one.

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**Educational Panorama**

- The final year in high school is administered under a credit system similar to the U.S. credit system.

- Final exam scores in English, mathematics, and chemistry in the senior year are used to determine a student’s admissibility to university degree programs in science. University acceptance also depends on entrance exam scores.

- In 1981, education was made compulsory for all illiterate Kuwaiti boys and men 14 to 40 years of age and for all illiterate girls and women 13 to 35 years of age. Students in these categories are permitted to enroll in adult education programs and to continue study through such programs until they gain the general secondary certificate. They may then enroll at the University of Kuwait or any other center for the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET).

- Education centers for youth provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged students with penal records or behavioral problems, so that they might be rehabilitated into society. To facilitate their education process, these students receive school supplies, clothes, and transportation. There are also community programs allowing for continuous education to meet the needs and abilities of these students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Age</th>
<th>Hours/Calendar</th>
<th>Required Curriculum</th>
<th>Class Size</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Classroom Setup</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool, ages 2–4</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed., 32 hours/week</td>
<td>Interaction and communication, social and moral guidance</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Play-school</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten, ages 4–5</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed., 7 hours/day</td>
<td>Focuses on physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual development</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Desks in rows</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary, ages 6–9</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed.; 32 hours/week</td>
<td>Islamic education, Arabic language, English, science, math, physical education, art, music</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Monthly exams and final exam at the end of the year</td>
<td>Desks in rows, with the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary, ages 10–13</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed.; 32 hours/week</td>
<td>Islamic education, Arabic language, English, French, math, science, social studies, art and practical studies, music, home economics for girls</td>
<td>Yes up to age 14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Exams after every 5 weeks, accounting for 50% of final grade; final GPA is counted for university entrance</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate, ages 14–17</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed.; 32 hours/week</td>
<td>Arabic language, Islamic education, English, math, science, social studies, art and practical studies, music, home economics for girls</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Exams after every 5 weeks, accounting for 50% of final grade; final GPA is counted for university entrance</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary, ages 14–17</td>
<td>Sat.–Wed.; 31 hours/week</td>
<td>Islamic education, Arabic language, English, French, math, science, social studies, art and practical studies, music, home economics, physical education</td>
<td>Yes up to age 14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Exams after every 5 weeks, accounting for 50% of final grade; final GPA is counted for university entrance</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University, age 18+</td>
<td>Semesters; 4-year program</td>
<td>Administration sciences, arts, education, engineering and petroleum, health studies, law, social sciences, Sharia, social sciences, graduate studies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>Semester exams similar to those in U.S.</td>
<td>Depends on the professor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KUWAIT**

- Grades: A, B, C, D, E, F
- Homework: None
- Class Size: None
- Exams: None
- Required: None
- Curriculum: Required
- Classroom Setup: Desks in rows
- Hours: Sat.–Wed.

Understanding Your International Students
An Educational, Cultural, and Linguistic Guide
Jeffra Flaitz (ed.)
[http://www.press.umich.edu/8869/understanding_your_international_students](http://www.press.umich.edu/8869/understanding_your_international_students)
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Michigan ELT
A Closer Look

Policy

• Before the oil boom, only wealthy Kuwaiti families could afford to educate their children, and only Koranic schools that taught Koranic memorization and recitation existed. This meant that there was a high level of illiteracy in the country. That changed when the government began to amass immense oil revenues. The revenues made it possible for the government to expand education, making it free from kindergarten to university and compulsory for children aged 6 to 14.

• Since there is no separation of church and state, the school day begins with prayers at about 8:00 A.M. and ends with the early afternoon prayers. Arabic is the medium of instruction in all government-run schools.

• In the education system of Kuwait, the Ministry of Education is the policy-making body until the 12th year of children’s education. The Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for policy planning in higher education and in applied education and training programs, for providing scholarships, and for overseeing studies abroad. The Ministry of Education supplies all textbooks, and the School Curricula and Textbook Department oversees the planning of the curriculum and the preparation of textbook content.

• Education administration has been decentralized with urban spread and new residential areas due to rapid population growth. The decentralized bodies are responsible for school assessment as well as school supervision. The centralized body retains its controlling and supervisory role.

• The Ministry of Waqf and Islamic Affairs, the Program for Community Service and Lifelong Education, and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) work together to create an educational system based on the concept of education for all. The Ministry of Waqf and Islamic Affairs offers education in Islamic studies to both males and females from the age of 14. The curriculum includes Islamic studies, basic math, literature, science, and Arabic language and history. The Program for Community Service and Lifelong Education is based on the concept of self-education with the support of and access to the resources of the university. This allows members of the public, regardless of gender or age, to acquire an education through a curriculum that includes languages, business studies, humanities, information studies, and secretarial studies. The Ministry of Education hopes that this program will create a labor force ready to meet the expanding requirements of the nation. Finally, the PAAET is given the mandate to provide a national labor force to meet the needs of an expanding economy by training students for careers outside the oil industry.

• Kuwait also has a music academy, a teachers’ college, technical colleges, and Koranic schools. A large foreign scholarship program sponsors and
supports top-ranking students who are accepted into American universities. Parallel education schools were set up by the PAAET to provide education to those students who could not cope academically with the secondary education programs offered in the secondary schools. The curricula of the parallel schools provide for training in specific technological skills along with sufficient secondary-level instruction to prepare students for employment in various technical fields. On completing the parallel school program, students may gain entrance into one of the PAAET’s training institutions.

- The Kuwaiti government uses its enormous oil revenues to constantly expand the country’s educational programs. Thus, it is the only Arab country that has a School of Music. It has also initiated the opening of private schools, to which many Kuwaitis prefer to send their children. These schools are coeducational and often sponsored by foreign organizations. In addition to such schools, there are the traditional madrassas (religious schools), which are linked to mosques and provide full-time or supplementary education.

- The structure of the education system is based on a four-four-four model: four years at the primary level, four years at the intermediate level, and four years at the secondary level. Because education is compulsory for all children from ages 6 to 14 and because all stages of state-based education, including higher education, are free, adult literacy in Kuwait is now 73 percent. All students begin studies in English from the second grade.

- All public schools in Kuwait are segregated by gender from the first grade at both student and staff levels.

- The government has initiated a project to connect each government school and library in Kuwait to a telecommunications data network.

**Teaching Style**

- The typical classroom in Kuwait is teacher-centered and formal. The teacher lectures and explains, and the students are expected to take notes. The teacher may also ask questions or correct students' mistakes.

- Teachers are to be fully prepared when they enter the classroom. Their preparation demonstrates that they are doing their best for their students, and the expectation is that the students, in turn, will do likewise.

- When students wish to make a contribution or ask a question, they are expected first to raise their hands and then to stand while speaking. They are not allowed to interrupt the teacher.

- Arab students learn in a setting so formal that a deviation from the normal formality will result in the students' taking neither the teacher nor the content seriously.

- Class presentations are sometimes assigned.
Learning Style

- Just before an exam, students will cram lesson content or study review sheets given out by the teacher. They also study rules and recite them in their answers to exam questions.

- Learning is reinforced through the use of short quizzes and tests.

- Although most learning is done individually, teaching methods might include having students work in groups, write essays, and do research or projects.

Instructional Setting

- In keeping with the formal classroom culture, instruction is teacher-fronted, and the furniture is arranged accordingly. The students remain in the same classroom throughout the day, and the teachers move from room to room.

- In coeducational classes, the male students sit separately from the female students.

- All classrooms are equipped with overhead projectors and videos. There are also well-stocked libraries.

Activities

- Teachers may arrange camping trips (segregated by gender) and excursions to science museums, libraries, and places of entertainment.

- Students participate in community service tasks and projects.

- Most of the activities mentioned here pertain to the private schools. There are fewer such opportunities for students in public schools.

Discipline and Class Management

- Once a year, one student from each class is nominated to exchange places with the teacher or the administration and to carry out all of the duties and responsibilities of these persons.

- The teacher is the authority figure, and a student is considered to have crossed a boundary if he disagrees or argues with a teacher. Such misdemeanors are treated seriously. The student is first warned, and any repetition of the misbehavior will result in parents being called in to the school. Any conflicts between the teacher and a student can cause that student to be suspended or expelled. The statement “I think I’ll teach you next year” or the sight of the grade book in the teacher’s hands are understood by the student to be subtle reprimands.

- Students may not speak while the teacher is speaking. Classrooms are therefore very quiet.

- Attendance is compulsory. If students are late, they must ask the teacher's permission to join the class.
• The teacher rewards good performance with praise.
• Students stand when the teacher enters the classroom.

**Teacher-Student Relationship**

• The relationship between teacher and student may be epitomized by the statement *I am the slave of him who teaches me even one letter*. Though the relationship may be close, there is a line that may not be crossed. Teachers are expected to maintain a purely professional relationship with their students. Students are required to show respect and to address their teachers formally.

**Student-Student Relationship**

• Students form close bonds of friendship that may last long after they graduate.
• Friendships with members of the opposite sex are not encouraged.
• There is no assigned seating arrangement in the classroom. Friends are permitted to sit together and help each other during classes.
• Male students may often be seen holding hands or even kissing each other three times in greeting, as do many female students.

**Protocol**

**Nonverbal Behavior**

• A male guest will not enter an Arab’s residence unless the male members of the family are home.
• In Kuwait, men will stand if a woman enters a room. A man is permitted to shake hands with a woman, but the woman should make the first move. Every one stands when an elderly or important person enters or leaves the room.
• A guest should not use the left hand to either give anything or take food.
• An Arab man and woman will not engage in public displays of intimacy (holding hands or kissing), because doing so is cause for embarrassment.
• Arabs will stand or sit very close to others in conversation. Westerners may consider this an intrusion of personal space, but to Arabs, it is an expression of friendliness.

**Images**

• Arabs mean it when they say, *My home is your home*. This is a reflection of the value they place on hospitality.
• The words *Bismillah ar Rabann Ar-Rabeem* (“in the name of God the beneficent, the merciful”) precede every deliberate action that a Muslim
takes (e.g., getting into a car, eating, getting dressed). It will even appear on letterheads.

- Men are seen more often on the streets of Kuwait than are women.

**Forms of Address**

- Parents will address a female teacher with *abla* and a male teacher with *ustaath*. A male teacher will also be addressed with *doctor* plus first, not last, name (e.g., *Doctor Abdul*).
- To show respect, older persons are addressed with *amma or kbaala* (aunt) or *ammi* (uncle), even if the relationship is not a close blood tie.

**Dress**

- In Arab culture, men do not wear long hair. They will dress alike as a statement that all men are equal in the eyes of God. Women dressing in mannish clothing and displaying the comportment of a man invite disapproval.
- Female teachers of Arab students dress modestly and keep their legs and arms covered. The female teacher’s mother image commands attention and respect.
- Guests who are invited to a formal, social event will be considered rude if they appear in casual dress. Appropriate dress and behaviors for men and women are strictly observed.
- In the government schools, it is mandatory for students to wear uniforms. Both male and female students wear gray and white. Students in private schools wear green, red, or blue uniforms, depending on the school.
- Girls might choose to wear the traditional *hijaab* (head scarf) but are not permitted to wear trousers.

**Polite/Impolite Topics and Behaviors**

- Visitors to any Arab country should not take a photograph of any person without asking that person’s permission.
- It is considered inappropriate to walk or stand before a person who is praying.
- It is usual for visitors to remove their shoes before entering a mosque or the home of an Arab.
- Visitors should ask about the meaning of anything they buy that has Arabic calligraphy written on it. It is considered a sin to treat carelessly an object that has verses of the Koran written on it.
- A person who is invited to an Arab’s home will be greeted only by those members of the family whom he or she has arranged to meet. Guests are offered the best and most formal that the home has to offer, and they are
given seats of honor. These practices honor the guest as well as reflect
the importance that the host places on the face value of items. The host
always accompanies guests to the gate or car to bid them good-bye.

• Certain restrictions should be observed during the month of Ramadan.
  Whether or not one is a Muslim, eating, drinking, or smoking in the
  presence of a fasting person are considered unseemly forms of behavior.

• Conversations about sex in mixed-gender groups are strictly prohibited.

• Kuwaitis generally steer away from conversations about politics, especially
  those concerning Israel.

• The English words zipper, tease, air, kiss, cuss, nick, and unique sound
  like vulgar words in Arabic and are considered highly offensive.

**Gift Giving**

• Gifts are given and received with both hands. The recipient should not
  open a gift in the presence of the donor.

• A guest may take a gift of flowers or candy to the home of his or her host.

• Students receive gifts when they successfully complete a grade in school
  or when they graduate from high school or college.

• Everyone receives gifts on the days of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id-al-Adha. The first
  holiday celebrates the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and is the
  first day of the month of Shawwal, which follows the month of Ramadan.
  'Id-al-Adha falls on the tenth day of the month of Dhu'l Hijja. This day
  commemorates the sacrifice of the prophet Abraham. It is the last day
  of the hajj (pilgrimage).

• School administrators and parents present gifts to all teachers on
  Teacher’s Day.

• On Family Day, all mothers receive gifts.

**Problem/Solution**

**Problem**

I am genuinely interested in the lives of my students, so I asked one of my
Kuwaiti students about his wife, who is living here in the United States. To
my surprise, he simply did not answer me. What did I do wrong?

**Solution**

It is never appropriate to inquire after a Kuwaiti man’s female relatives. This
is regarded as an intrusion into one’s private life and a violation of a strict
moral code.
**Problem**

I am a female teacher. I often feel that my Kuwaiti students are questioning my authority. I have many years’ experience as a teacher, and I am considered to be an excellent instructor. How might I deal with this situation?

**Solution**

Kuwait is a patriarchal and patrilineal society. Most male Kuwaiti students have never studied under a female teacher, so it may be difficult for them to transcend the influence of their culture and the reality of their past experience. Although many people are familiar with the strong Arab male stereotype, few know that in Arab culture the father may be the head of the family, but the mother is the queen of the home. Her children give her great respect. She is the one who is responsible for their education. She lays down the rules and rarely negotiates. When you are confronted with obdurate male students, assume a maternal persona. Be firm and set the rules. Your male Kuwaiti students will respond well to this.

**Problem**

My Kuwaiti students sometimes seem to lose control in their personal lives. They are very often late to class and frequently do not complete assignments. They appear unmotivated to me. How might I address this problem?

**Solution**

This situation actually has less to do with lack of motivation than with having few or no study and time-management skills. In their home country, these students were accustomed to a very strict and structured learning environment and they have been carefully guided and closely directed by their teachers and families. Now, they are experiencing something completely different. They may be uncomfortable with the freedom and responsibility that they have suddenly gained and uncertain about how to cope with the unfamiliar demands of Western academic culture. You need to help them to understand the connection between attendance and learning, help them to recognize the signs of trouble in their academic lives, explain that there are penalties for unacceptable or inappropriate behavior, and teach them to manage their time more effectively.

**My Observations**

Kuwait