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## **When the Subalterns find their Voice – The Example of Kuwait’s Bidun**

### **Abstract**

The wave of revolutionary uprisings in a series of Arab countries in 2010/11 also encouraged a number of minorities in the MENA region to take to the streets and raise their voices against discrimination and marginalization. Parts of Kuwait’s stateless Bidun were among the subalterns who now began to call for their civil rights as long-term residents of the country. The protests began in 2011, were upheld sporadically until 2014, and resurfaced in mid-2019 following the suicide of a young Bidun. After a brief look at the historical background and context, this contribution will focus on the mobilization and activities of pro-Bidun organizations in recent years (2011–2014/15, 2018–19/20) and ask whether there are signs of a broader alliance between Bidun and Kuwaiti citizens to counter the increasingly authoritarian, anti-democratic governmental policies. It will be argued that as from 2018/19, a rapprochement of positions can be discerned. However, the year 2020 brought a new setback.

**Keywords:** Kuwait, Stateless (Bidun) community, Pro-Bidun organizations, “Central System” (CS), “Platform for the Defence of the Bidun in Kuwait”, “Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens”



## Political Activism of the Bidun in 2011 and Beyond – A Novelty

When on 18 February 2011 parts of Kuwait’s stateless (Bidun)<sup>1</sup> community started their peaceful protests to bring attention to their plight and call for their civil rights as long-term residents of the country, this kind of mobilization and activity marked a new phase in the Bidun movement which has crystallized since the mid-2000s with the help of Kuwaiti nationals. Obviously, the protesters in 2011, most of them from the younger generations, were inspired by the wave of revolutionary uprisings in a number of Arab countries (the so-called “Arab Spring”), and took advantage of the coming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kuwait’s independence. Like other social movements and minorities in the MENA region<sup>2</sup> and beyond, Kuwaiti Bidun used social media networks intensively, and thus were able to garner both significant media attention and supporters of their cause nationally and internationally. Despite crackdowns, arrests, and repression, the demonstrations and sit-ins were upheld sporadically until 2014. In mid-2019, the fate of a young Bidun, who had committed suicide out of desperation,<sup>3</sup> led to new protests, arrests, trials and long prison sentences for three activists. Dramatic appeals by human rights organizations notwithstanding, the position of the government has not changed substantially so far. Instead of presenting convincing reform plans, it resorted to existing and new laws in order to stifle critical voices. These attacks on fundamental human rights targeted Bidun as well as Kuwaiti activists. As the post-2011 phase is deemed to be crucial for the future relation between state and society, particularly for the ongoing debate between advocates and opponents of the Bidun cause, this contribution will focus on the mobilization and activities of pro-Bidun organizations in recent years (2011–2014/15, 2018–19/20) and ask whether there are signs of a broader alliance between Bidun and Kuwaiti citizens to counter the increasingly authoritarian, anti-democratic governmental policies. It will be argued that as from 2018/19, a rapprochement of positions can be discerned.

<sup>1</sup> Bidun, in Arabic *bidūn* [ǧinsiyya], “without [nationality]”, alternatively spelled in English publications as “Bidoon”, “Bedoun”, etc., is a general term and category. In fact, the situations of the Bidun are varied in terms of access to resources, networks, and rights. The children of Kuwaiti mothers, for instance, are entitled to education in public schools, and Bidun who have close family ties with Kuwaitis, or were/are still employed in the formal sector (ministries, army) are relatively more privileged than the majority, while those without official documents are the most excluded and vulnerable among the Bidun. The divisions have arguably been one of the outcomes of the government’s policy toward Bidun. Cf. Claire Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality, and Society in Kuwait*, London–New York–Oxford 2018 (here paperback edition 2019), pp. 112–114.

<sup>2</sup> For minorities in Egypt (Bahai, Muslim Brothers), see David M. Faris, *Dissent and Revolution in a Digital Age: Social Media, Blogging and Activism in Egypt*, London–New York 2013, chapter 5 (“Voices for the Voiceless: Social Media Networks, Minorities, and Virtual Counter-Publics”, pp. 118–145).

<sup>3</sup> Human rights activists reported that he was unable to obtain official documents and consequently lost his job while official sources criminalized him (Hamad H. Albloshi, ‘Stateless in Kuwait’, “AGSIW”, 8 Nov. 2019, Viewed 31 July 2020, <<https://agsiw.org/stateless-in-kuwait/>>). This is not the first or the last suicide among Bidun. For two other cases in 2019 see: Amnesty International, ‘Kuwait: Rising Signs of Despair Among Bidun Highlight Cruelty of Draft Law’, Public Statement 21 Nov. 2019, MDE 17/1362/2019. According to the Minority Rights Group (ed., *Kuwait – Bidoon*, Updated December 2017, Viewed 9 March 2020, <<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bidoon/>>), “suicide rates are high within the Bidoon community”.

Without doubt, the Bidun issue is complex, touching upon overlapping and interconnecting economic, social, cultural, and political aspects. But it is also a quite confusing topic<sup>4</sup> because of the contradictory statements and assessments by state authorities, activists, journalists and academics alike. At the same time, it cannot be denied that Kuwait's Bidun community has experienced discrimination and marginalisation, combined with threats, coercion and defamation over more than three decades, and that the authorities bear the primary responsibility for the escalation of the situation. Consequently, the Bidun's case offers a particular example of systematic, gradual social and legal exclusion and disempowerment, and may be considered representative of a specific type of the (new) subaltern,<sup>5</sup> that is, individuals and groups who are not only cut off from upward and in a sense 'outward' social mobility but are even deprived of the basic human right to have rights. Thus, the issue illustrates the growing imbalance in neo-liberal systems, and with particular reference to Kuwait, where the government has used old and new divide-and-rule strategies in order to preserve the privileged status of a tiny elite, it shows the increasingly dysfunctional rentier system.<sup>6</sup>

### Brief Outline of the Historical Background and Context

The history of the Bidun and the continuous deterioration of their situation in Kuwait have already been described in a plethora of publications. Therefore, a brief outline of the historical context may suffice here, though it is worth mentioning that several aspects remain unclear, not least because of the absence of basic statistical data and diverse narratives.

The precarious legal condition of Kuwait's Bidun has its origin in the establishment of Kuwait's nation-state in 1961 and the application of the 1959 nationality law, which introduced the concept of different levels of nationality, linked with a difference in rights enjoyed by citizens by origin ('first-class' citizens) on the one hand, and citizens by naturalization ('second-class citizens') on the other.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, until 1986 the Bidun

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<sup>4</sup> An impression of this confusion can be glimpsed at ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, 'Anfragebeantwortung zu Kuwait (...)', 3 April 2019, Viewed 13 August 2020, <<https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2005718.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> On contemporary understandings of (new) subalternity, including G. Spivak's, see Sarah Bracke ('Is the subaltern resilient? Notes on agency and neoliberal subjects', *Cultural Studies* 30, 5 (2016), pp. 839–855), who, among other things, points to the relational and gendered character of the subaltern and discusses the potential consequences for the subaltern's agency, especially in times of (political, economic, ecological, etc.) crises (e.g. pandemics).

<sup>6</sup> Rivka Azoulay and Madeleine Wells, 'Contesting Welfare State Politics in Kuwait', *Middle East Report* 272 (Fall 2014), pp. 43, 46f.

<sup>7</sup> Male naturalized citizens were granted suffrage in 1994; women in Kuwait had to wait until 2005 (cf. note below). On the historical background of statelessness in Kuwait see, e.g., Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, chapters 1–4; Marie Brokstad Lund-Johansen, 'Fighting for Citizenship in Kuwait', Master-thesis, Middle East and North Africa Studies at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo (Autumn) 2014, <<http://www.duo.uio.no/>>, chapter 2; for a brief overview <<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bidun/>>.

community enjoyed a status similar to Kuwaiti nationals and had access to government services. In addition, until 1989, they were included in the national census.<sup>8</sup> The Iraqi invasion and its consequences (Second Gulf War and Kuwait's liberation in 1990/91) provided the state authorities with a suitable opportunity to more than halve the numbers of the Bidun<sup>9</sup> and to deprive the bulk of them of the rights to formal employment and welfare benefits (such as access to free public education and health services). As a result, additional costs for basic services and precarious employment with lower pay<sup>10</sup> caused more poverty.<sup>11</sup> Since 1993, Bidun have been officially treated as "illegal residents". Identity documents are no longer available to them; the registration of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths is no longer possible.<sup>12</sup> In 2000, the parliament passed a law that pledged to naturalize 2,000 persons a year, yet the law has not been applied consistently, and the quota has never been filled up. The "Central System"<sup>13</sup> (CS), established in November 2010, was to become the major bone of contention for human rights activists. The CS was not the first state body with a mandate to solve the Bidun issue but it is vested with larger powers than its predecessors, has a separate PR department, and the controversial head of the agency, Šālīḥ al-Faḍāla, has ministerial rank. The agency intensified the "administrative violence"<sup>14</sup> (arbitrary, not transparent procedure of granting

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and Françoise De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration and the Labour Market in Kuwait 2019', Explanatory Note No. 3/2019, <<http://gulfmigration.org>>, p. 4. Most Bidun have a nomadic, Bedouin background and have been living in the country for generations; their ancestors were either unable or unwilling to register as citizens in the specified period (1961–65); a smaller part, many of whom originally came from neighbouring Arab countries, was recruited to serve in Kuwait's army or police. The children of Kuwaiti mothers and Bidun or non-Kuwaiti fathers constitute another minority inside the stateless community. For a different narrative (Bidun as a "micro ethnic group of the sub-ethnic group" from the "Northern tribes" native to the Arabian Peninsula) cf. Susan Kennedy Nour al Deen and Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli, *Report to the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Bedoon Indigenous Rights in the Context of Border, Migration and Displacement*, 1 February 2019, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 17, and below. On the "transnational foundations of the Kuwaiti emirate" see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, chapter 2, here pp. 45–46: "People from Kuwait all come from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran ...". It is worth mentioning that the origin of the ruling family is also problematic (accused of brigandage and piracy by Ottoman authorities) – see R. M. Burrell, 'Al-Kuwayt', in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition*, vol. V, Leiden 1986 (fasc. 1982), pp. 572–576, here p. 573.

<sup>8</sup> De Bel-Air, 'Demography', p. 19, note 13.

<sup>9</sup> During the war many Bidun fled to Iraq (instead of Saudi Arabia as many Kuwaitis did) because they lacked the passports necessary to enter Saudi Arabia. Others, serving in the Kuwaiti army, were held as prisoners of war in Iraq. After the war, these Bidun were refused return to Kuwait (De Bel-Air, 'Demography', p. 21, note 54; Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, p. 33f.).

<sup>10</sup> For the difference in income between Bidun and Kuwaiti nationals (rough estimations) see, Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 136, Table 4.3.

<sup>11</sup> On "Bidun's survival strategies", see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, pp. 141–151. (Religious) charity funds are playing a significant, but double-edged role.

<sup>12</sup> The under-registration of births of Bidun children until 2011 may be one reason for the alleged under-estimation of the number of Bidun in official records (De Bel-Air, *Demography*, pp. 13 and 21, note 53).

<sup>13</sup> Or, "Central Agency", is the common abbreviation for "The Central System for Resolving the Status of Illegal Residents" (*al-ġahāz al-markazī li-mu'ālaġat awḍā' al-muqīmīn bi-šūra ġayr qānūniyya*).

<sup>14</sup> This term is used by C. Beaugrand (*Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 116) who defines it as follows: "the use of all possible administrative means to delegitimise claims by anybody feeling some sense of entitlement".

or denying naturalization; coercive measures to force persons to drop their claims and/or acknowledge an identity or status they rejected) and monopolized the right to determine who is entitled to apply for basic rights. For their part, the Bidun have no right to challenge the CS's decision judicially. The introduction of colour-coded "reference (review) cards" (*biṭāqāt murāḡa'a*) in 2012 presented a new stigmatizing and discriminating effort and was accompanied by a governmental framing of Bidun as enemies of the state, playing the card of sectarianization and securitization. The coloured cards reflect the holders' legal status<sup>15</sup> and are not valid as identity cards, but essential for getting access to basic services; they are often referred to as "security cards" because the holders' legal status is fluid. These cards do not cover unregistered Bidun (about 12,000 persons, or circa 10%, according to official sources). To counter protests by Bidun and Kuwaiti citizens (involved in the anti-corruption campaign, etc.), more restrictive laws were passed. Already in 2014/15, deportations (together with the deprivation of civil rights) and arrests had taken place as a result of the "iron fist policy" announced by the cabinet in 2014, "which promised 'a decisive and firm confrontation with whatever could undermine the state, its institutions and conditions'".<sup>16</sup> The new Cybercrime law, which came into effect in January 2016,<sup>17</sup> includes far-reaching restrictions on internet-based speech, such as prison sentences and fines for insulting religion, religious figures, and the emir. The law further limited the space of action for Bidun and civil society organizations,<sup>18</sup> although even before, websites had been shut down, bloggers arrested, intimidated and threatened by

<sup>15</sup> The majority of Bidun have a yellow card, which means their status is "under review". The holders of a green card (34,000 persons according to official data) are said to have the best chances to be naturalized, while those with the red card have none, either due to the lack of the required documents or a criminal record. Since the Bidun protests started, the number of Bidun individuals with "security blocks" against them has greatly increased (Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 141; ACCORD, *Anfragebeantwortung*, pp. 4f.). Officially, there are two types of cards with different validity length (one or two years). Cards with much shorter validity (three, six months) have been issued over the past few years, sometimes hindering access to basic services that require identity papers valid for at least three months.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Madeleine Wells, 'Sectarianism, Authoritarianism, and Opposition in Kuwait', in: *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, eds. N. Hashemi, D. Postel, London 2017, p. 254. At the same time (Nov. 2014) it was revealed that Kuwait had been negotiating with the Comoros Islands (a state member of the Arab League) since 2008, in order to achieve a deal similar to that reached by the UAE before, i.e. to provide undesirable Bidun with Comorian passports ("economic citizenship") in exchange for a permanent residence (see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, pp. 131f., 217f.; De Bel-Air, *Demography ...*, p. 6).

<sup>17</sup> The law was approved by the National Assembly in June 2015. On the vague provisions (esp. articles 6, 7, and 13, which "are an effective barrier to critical political speech over the Internet") see Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Kuwait: Cybercrime Law a Blow to Free Speech', 22 July 2015, Viewed 22 Feb. 2020, <<https://hrw.org/node/279576/printable/print>>.

<sup>18</sup> On the downgrade of civil society's spaces and the reorientation of civil society organizations in general see, Barbara Unmüßig, *Civil Society under Pressure*, 2 Dec. 2015, <[https://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2016/04/civil\\_society\\_under\\_pressure\\_shrinking\\_spaces.pdf](https://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2016/04/civil_society_under_pressure_shrinking_spaces.pdf)>; on the situation in particular countries see also, Saskia Brechenmacher, *Civil Society under Assault*, 18 May 2017, <<https://carnegiendowment.org/2017/05/18/civil-society-under-assault-repression-and-responses-in-russia-egypt-and-ethiopia-pub-69953>>.

exploiting the broad national security laws<sup>19</sup> or vague and ambiguous provisions in other laws. The regime's increasing authoritarianism coincided with Kuwait's joining the Saudi-led war coalition against Yemeni Huthis. Since then, the regime has aligned its policies with the other, more autocratic Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.<sup>20</sup>

### Pro-Bidun Organizations Before and After 2011 – Agendas, Activities, and Prominent Members

The first two (unregistered)<sup>21</sup> Bidun-run societies were set up in 2008 after Kuwaiti citizens had been making efforts to disseminate information (and spread awareness) about their difficult situation since the beginning of the new millennium.<sup>22</sup> Of utmost importance was an event held in November 2006, organized by the Kuwaiti Society of Human Rights (KSHR), when Bidun were given the chance to speak for themselves in public.<sup>23</sup> At around the same time, activists in exile<sup>24</sup> and (anonymously) in Kuwait<sup>25</sup> had started campaigning and blogging in favour of Bidun rights. Though the two organizations

<sup>19</sup> In contrast to Bahrain and other Arab countries, Kuwait has no specific “anti-terrorism” law but uses national security laws enacted between 1970 and 2006 instead for dealing with terrorism. On these laws and their problems see the Master thesis by Fatemah Alzubairi, *Kuwait and Bahrain's Anti-terrorism Laws in Comparative and International Perspective*, Dept. of the Faculty of Law, University of Toronto, 2011 (available online).

<sup>20</sup> As of 2015, the government seems to have stopped issuing special passports (“Article 17 passports”) that allowed eligible stateless residents to leave the country, albeit under certain conditions such as pilgrimage to Mecca, health problems, higher education (Wells, *Sectarianism*, pp. 235 and 342, note 70). According to another source (US Department, March 2019, as quoted in ACCORD, *Anfragebeantwortung*, p. 8) even afterwards exceptions were made on “humanitarian grounds”.

<sup>21</sup> Classified as “illegal residents”, Bidun are neither allowed to demonstrate nor to establish an officially registered organization.

<sup>22</sup> On the mobilization of Bidun between the mid-2000s and the beginning of 2014 and 2017 respectively, see Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, chapters 4 and 5, and Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>23</sup> Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, pp. 148f, 150, 198f. As a result, the “Bidun Popular Committee” came into being in the same year. The formation of the Bidun-run organizations can be seen as an act of self-determination and resistance to what they perceived as a patronizing attitude by Kuwaiti citizens.

<sup>24</sup> The best-known example is the London-based Muhammad Wālī al-'Anazī (most often transliterated as “Enezi” or “Anezi”), who had left Kuwait in 1991 (Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 200), obtained citizenship in the UK, and created the “Kuwaitis' Bidun Movement” (*Ḥarakat al-kuwayṭiyyīn al-bidūn*), registered in England and Wales, in 2006 (@KuwBedMovement). In January 2020, he was tried in absentia and sentenced to life imprisonment by the Kuwaiti criminal court which passed sentence on the protesters detained in mid-2019. See report by AI, 28 Jan. 2020, Viewed 27 March 2020, <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/kuwait-heavy-prison-sentences-of-activists-demanding-rights-of-citizenship/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Mona Kareem (b. 1987) was to become one of the prominent bloggers. On her blogging activity see her interview with the journal “Jadaliyya” (*Mona Kareem on Blogging and Dissent in Kuwait*, 22 March 2013). She left Kuwait to study in the USA (PhD in Comparative Literature 2018) and sought asylum there. The last entry on her blog (<http://monakareem.blogspot.com/search/label/Bedoon>) dates from March 2013. Apart from writing and translating (especially poetry), teaching and publishing, she is still active on her twitter account (@monakareem), but seems to have shifted to less politically sensitive activities.

created in 2008 (the “Kuwaiti Bidun Congregation” and the “Kuwaiti Bidun Committee”) differed in their perceptions of priorities, they took part in the 2011 demonstrations. With the names of their organizations and the symbols (flags, signs, etc.) carried along during the demonstrations, the protesters showed their loyalty and belonging to Kuwait, but also emphasized that they saw themselves as victims of an unjust, racist policy. Following the temporary arrest of the entire leadership of the two activist groups in 2012 for participating in proscribed protest marches, new organizations emerged:<sup>26</sup> “Group 29” and “Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens”. The first group, whose name refers to Article 29 of the Kuwaiti Constitution that (in principle) guarantees equality of all people before the law,<sup>27</sup> was formed by seven highly-educated Kuwaiti citizens, all female, but the group also included Bidun women. Until 2015, “Group 29” was able to publish announcements and comments on its own website, Facebook page and Twitter account, but then the activists seem to have shifted to Instagram and private twitter accounts. Their activities consisted of lobbying, writing reports, monitoring and arranging demonstrations and conducting awareness campaigns. One of the concrete results of their protests was that Kuwait University eventually accepted a quota of 100 and 150 Bidun students in 2013 and 2014 respectively.<sup>28</sup> The group’s objective, to put pressure on Kuwaiti authorities to sign the 1961 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless People, did not meet with undivided approval because the new generation of Bidun activists do not consider themselves stateless and refuse to be identified with other stateless people. One of the group’s founders and well-known defenders of the Bidun cause is Ibtihāl al-Ḥaṭīb (Ebtehal Al-Khateeb), who has stateless people in her extended family like many other Kuwaitis. She studied English literature in Kuwait and the USA (PhD 2003) and teaches at Kuwait University.<sup>29</sup> Late in December 2018, she was one of the three<sup>30</sup> Kuwaiti pro-Bidun activists who formed the “Platform for the Defence of the Bidun in

<sup>26</sup> The first groups maintained their activities, though on a smaller scale (cf. Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, 204). It is plausible to assume that there is still some form of cooperation between them and the “Muwaṭīnūn” group.

<sup>27</sup> Enfranchisement of women was finally achieved in 2005, after a struggle of nearly 30 years by women’s rights activists. However, until today, and in contrast to Kuwaiti men, Kuwaiti women cannot pass on nationality to their non-Kuwaiti/Bidun spouse or their children. Several couples divorced in an effort to allow their children to apply for citizenship – a procedure which may take up to 15 years. For a new initiative (“Gray Area Campaign”) started by four young women to “raise awareness of this issue” and their release of the video #bas\_ummī\_kuwaytiyya (But My Mom is Kuwaiti), see Leanah Al Awadhi, ‘Gray Area: Advocating for the Noncitizen Children of Kuwaiti Mothers’, “AGSIW”, 13 Nov. 2018, Viewed 31 July 2020, <<https://agsiw.org/gray-area-advocating-for-the-noncitizen-children-of-kuwaiti-mothers/>>.

<sup>28</sup> Until 1987, Bidun were allowed to register at the University (Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 125). Since then, even children of Kuwaiti mothers have been barred from registering. For a picture of one of the sit-ins organized by “Group 29” in front of the university, see Amnesty International, *The ‘Withouts’ of Kuwait: Nationality for Stateless Bidun Now*, MDE 17/001/2013, London (Sept.) 2013, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. her biography on the official website, Viewed 31 July 2020, <[www.muzaffar.com/ea/cv.htm](http://www.muzaffar.com/ea/cv.htm)>.

<sup>30</sup> The other two founders are Lamā al-‘Uṭmān and Fahd (Rāšid) al-Muṭayrī who are also teaching at Kuwait University.

Kuwait” (*minaṣṣat ad-difā* ‘*an bidūn al-Kuwayt*). In its foundational, tweeted statement,<sup>31</sup> the Platform addresses an urgent appeal to Kuwaiti society: first, to declare solidarity with the Bidun, and second to protest against the government measures regarding the Bidun, with the final aim of changing the present method of dealing with the issue. It is remarkable that the declaration starts with a collective admission of guilt: “We all, the government and the people, ... are responsible” for the worsening of the Kuwaiti Bidun’s situation, either by supporting or by ignoring their state-sponsored repression. Even the civil society organizations are said not to have taken notice of the arbitrariness and absolute, uncontrolled powers exerted by the CS. In April 2019, the three founders of the Platform participated in a symposium organized by the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum. In their speeches, they shed light on diverse aspects of the difficult situation of the Bidun (in historical, legal, educational terms, etc.) and explicitly criticized dishonest politicians (government and political parties) and their hypocritical rhetoric on human rights, their failure to solve the issue, the politics of extortion and anti-Bidun discourse in the media and racism.<sup>32</sup> Al-Khateeb especially expressed concern about the long-term human and social costs of the oppressive policy by saying, “The state created from the Bedoon today for no reason a group that is unable to support itself”. After the event, the activist was targeted by an intense twitter campaign.<sup>33</sup> Despite such smear campaigns, the Platform continued to publish on their website ([www.bedoun.org](http://www.bedoun.org)), next to their own statements, demands, and comments, the announcements of other activists and organizations. On 28 July 2019, the Platform demanded a “just and comprehensive solution for stateless people – *li-‘adīmī l-ġinsiyya (al-bidūn)*”. As a first step, they called for the “immediate naturalization of those persons whose applications have since long been acknowledged”, i.e. the holders of a ‘green card’, and for “guaranteeing sufficient civil and social rights to all stateless people without restriction or condition” until their claims on nationality are assessed or rejected. In the second case, judiciary control has to be assured. In addition, the Platform asked the civil society to participate in the process of drafting a new nationality law.<sup>34</sup>

The “Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens” (*Muwāṭinūn al-Kuwaytiyyūn al-Bidūn*) is primarily a Bidun organization, in terms of leaders (all male), “members”<sup>35</sup> and support base. The group’s central figures have higher education, in contrast to most of its followers

<sup>31</sup> For a reprint see ‘D. Ibtihāl ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Ḥaṭīb taktubu: minaṣṣat ad-difā ‘an #bidūn al-Kuwayt’, *An-Nuḥba*, 31 Dec. 2018, Viewed 13 August 2020, <<https://www.nokhbanews.com/?p=32121>>.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. YouTube of the Conference (*Nadwat aḍwā’ ‘alā qaḍīyyat al-bidūn*), 11 April 2019, Viewed 6 June 2020, <<https://alminbarkw.org/3638/>>.

<sup>33</sup> Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), *Kuwait: Prominent advocate of Bedoon rights, Dr. Ebtihal Al-Khateeb, targeted by twitter campaign*, 23 June 2019, Viewed 31 July 2020, <<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2157>>.

<sup>34</sup> For similar demands, in reaction to official announcements to solve the issue, see the statement on 24 September 2019 (*Bayān ṣādir ‘an maġmū’a mina l-akādīmīyyīn wal-ḥuqūqīyyīn bi-ṣā’n al-ḥall al-murtaqab li-qaḍīyyat #‘adīmī l-ġinsiyya fī #al-Kuwayt#al-bidūn#ḥall\_ qaqḍīyyat al-bidūn*).

<sup>35</sup> The term is put in brackets, as Beaugrand (*Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 206) describes the organization as a “loose electronic platform”, and Brokstad Lund-Johansen (*Fighting for Citizenship*, p. 16) speaks of “rather a clandestine organization”.



and supporters. The “Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens” arranged their first demonstration on 2 October 2012,<sup>36</sup> and at least over the next two years, their main activities consisted of planning, organizing, and coordinating demonstrations through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The protests and marches<sup>37</sup> were combined with an extensive social media campaign: blogging, tweeting, and commenting on recent events and ongoing discrimination,<sup>38</sup> as well as documenting the demonstrations and thereby showing the Bidun’s agency but also exposing police violence against peaceful, unarmed protesters. This footage was posted and used to make videos on YouTube, and many of them were then utilized by TV channels and human rights organizations. Thus, they succeeded in achieving a certain degree of national, regional and international media attention; at the same time, the group’s major activists were engaged in reaching out and reporting to human rights organizations, especially international ones such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). It comes as no surprise, that the leading activists of the organization were constantly summoned, questioned, or arrested and sentenced. Another major field of the organization’s activities aimed at increasing the level of awareness about human (civil and political) rights within the Bidun community, particularly the “lost generation”, born after 1986, who started to consider the status quo a more profound threat than the possible consequences of participating in protests.<sup>39</sup> Already in September 2013, the “Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens” demanded that the CS should be abolished because of its incompetence and arbitrariness and that the Bidun should have the right to appeal against its decisions. In the same announcement, the organization pointed to the Bidun’s participation in building the Kuwaiti nation; in spite of their contributions and great sacrifices, the statement goes on to say, the Bidun are still discriminated against and isolated. Affirming the “Muwāṭinūn’s belief in the values of a democratic state, constitutional civil concepts and international human rights”, the announcement also reminded the Kuwaiti government of its international obligations (under various international conventions ratified by Kuwait) and the possible damage to its reputation if it did not change its policies towards the Bidun.<sup>40</sup> In the beginning, the “Muwāṭinūn” Bidun activists adopted a kind of “all or nothing” approach, demanding fully fledged naturalization for all Bidun (except for those who bought forged passports),<sup>41</sup> and as they were not convinced that international laws and conventions would lead to any substantial change to their situation, they perceived local mobilization as more effective to raise awareness about Bidun rights instead. Unsurprisingly, due

<sup>36</sup> According to Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Like the first demonstrations, the Bidun protests most often took place at the western outskirts of Kuwait City in Tayma (Taima), where a lot of Bidun live.

<sup>38</sup> For a recent video to illustrate the desperate situation of Bidun see: *#ṣarḥat\_bidūn* (“The Bidun’s outcry/call for help”), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBoj2mzjAr0>>.

<sup>39</sup> Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, pp. 54, 66, 87.

<sup>40</sup> For the announcement see *Ṭaḡammu’ ‘muwāṭinūn’ yuṭālibu bi-ḥall ḡahāz li-l-bidūn*, “Alaan”, 24 Sept. 2013, Viewed 17 Sept. 2020, <<https://www.alaan.cc/article/153592/>>.

<sup>41</sup> Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 211; Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, p. 84.

to their personal experiences, they made use of a more emotional language and more explicit ('radical') terminology to describe their harsh daily struggle to survive and to legitimize their claims of citizenship. Their strategies, rhetoric, and uncompromising point of view without presenting a practical concept of solving the issue, initially met with criticism by "Group 29" members and other Bidun groups.<sup>42</sup> Though admittedly, through their provocative actions and statements they have challenged the constructed concept of nationality and the common understanding of identity.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the group seems to have changed its strategy, probably because of the recurrent arrests of its hard-core members, the fact that continued demonstrations lost their momentum, and the increase in both security restrictions and closing of civic spaces. In May 2018, now under their new logo (*Muwāṭinūn Kuwayt – al-maṣrū' al-waṭanī li-ḥall qaḍīyyat al-kuwayṭiyyīn al-bidūn*, "Citizens of Kuwait – the national project of solving the issue of Kuwaiti Bidun"), the organization presented its proposal for "Ending [the] Bedoon Issue in Kuwait by 2022".<sup>44</sup> The proposed plan envisaged a tripartite committee, consisting of the government, UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), and representatives of both the stateless Bidun community and NGOs, which would be responsible for negotiating an appropriate solution to the problem. As initial steps for 2019/20, the proposal suggested, among other things, the naturalization of all children born in Kuwait (in order to guarantee rights to education, etc.), to draft a new nationality law including the right to judicial appeal, providing unregistered Bidun with documents and immediate naturalisation of those qualified for it (i.e. holders of a 'green card'). Over the past years, one of the founders of the group has come to particular prominence as an outspoken representative of Bidun rights: 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Faḍlī (Abdulkhakim Al-Fadhli)<sup>45</sup>, who studied at the Kuwaiti branch of the Arab Online

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, esp. pp. 74–78 (on the disagreement concerning terminology, tactics, and strategies), 82–86 (83: accusation of "arranging poorly organized" and "costly" demonstrations, disapproval of the rejection of female participation in demonstrations because of anticipated police violence). In spite of occasionally harsh mutual verbal attacks on social media, "as defenders of the Bidoon cause", Group 29 "felt compelled to support the respective 'troublemakers', if they were arrested or their fundamental rights were violated" (p. 86).

<sup>43</sup> It is quite interesting that some hard-core activists of the movement ('Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Faḍlī, see further below, and his friends, according to Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, p. 48) avoided being identified as Sunnite or Shiite, and referred to themselves as "Shinni", "in between" instead.

<sup>44</sup> Available on the Twitter account of the organization (@Q8Citizens) in form of a diagram. The first announcements under the new emblem date from 2014 (e.g., 18 Nov. 2014 relating to depriving thousands of Bidun children of access to education because of conditions set by the CS).

<sup>45</sup> Actually, there are two activists with the same name in the "Kuwaiti Bidun Citizens" movement, both born in 1976 (see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 206f). The other ("the doctor") is a dentist, who studied in Ukraine. See, for instance, his comment on the accusation of the London-based campaigner al-Enezi of planning the assassination of the head of the CS ("such accusations of terrorism are nothing new"): 'Liqa' ḥaṣṣ ma'a n-nāṣiṭ al-ḥuqūqī 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Faḍlī ḥawla ittihām Muḥammad al-'Anazī bi-muḥāwalat iḡṭiyāl Ṣāliḥ al-Faḍāla', *Shabakat Sarmad*, 4 Dec. 2018, Viewed 15 March 2020, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_1LPMulDdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_1LPMulDdw)>. "The doctor" was arrested twice, first in 2012, and again in mid-2019 after the protests triggered by the suicide of the young Bidun <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/kuwait-authorities-crackdown-on-protesters-demanding-citizenship-rights/>>, 17 July 2019, Viewed 9 March 2020. Finally, in January 2020, he was released, together with a dozen other activists, "on a pledge of good conduct for two years and the additional condition of bail

University, and temporarily worked as a car mechanic and repair engineer. Since 2011 he has been imprisoned and gone on hunger strike more than a dozen times, the last time between September 2016 and July 2017. Prior to his release on 1 August, he had to sign a legal declaration that he would not participate in any further protests; otherwise, he would be imprisoned again and deported.<sup>46</sup> As Beaugrand noted, by being arrested and then sentenced, the Bidun activists forced the authorities to acknowledge their status as legal subjects, and the hunger strikes were intended to further expose state violence.<sup>47</sup> In 2019, for example, comments on the protests and their consequences were distributed on social media together with the pictures of the 12 hunger striking activists,<sup>48</sup> and provoked reactions by human rights organizations. Despite disagreement about some of his activities and positions,<sup>49</sup> Al-Fadhli seems to have gained popularity and influence, especially among young Bidun, for his courage, fearlessness and steadfastness. In December 2017, he was chosen as “Human Rights and Freedom of Speech Defender” by local and regional Arab human rights organizations after he had been a finalist in the “Front Line Defenders Award” of the same year.<sup>50</sup> Besides, the hard-core activist had been an important interview partner and a major source of information for a number of scholars who did field research in Kuwait and published their studies on the stateless community in recent years: Claire Beaugrand, Marie Brokstad Lund-Johansen, and Susan Kennedy Nour al Deen. Shortly after completing her doctoral studies at the University of Adelaide (2017), the latter founded the “Bedoun Archive”<sup>51</sup> project in order to provide a “counter-narrative” to the “discursive misrepresentation of the Bedoun”, by “protecting

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payment” <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/kuwait-heavy-prison-sentences-of-activists-demanding-rights-of-citizenship/>>.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Kuwait*: ‘Human rights defender Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli chosen as Human Rights and Freedom of Speech Defender for December 2017’, “SCM”, 7 Dec. 2017, Viewed 31 July 2020, <<https://scm.bz/en/rotator-en/kuwait-human-rights-defender-abdulhakim-al-fadhli-chosen-as-human-rights-and-freedom-of-speech-defender-for-december-2017/>>.

<sup>47</sup> Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 211 and p. 208 respectively.

<sup>48</sup> On 22 August 2019, the detained prisoners announced their hunger strike (@Q8Citizens – ‘Bayān “muwāṭinūn” – al-am‘ā’ al-ḥāwiya fī muwāḡahat al-iḥtiḡāz at-ta‘assufī’). It is noteworthy that their declaration is introduced by a partial quotation from Koran sūra 2, verse 250, actually referring to the story of David against Goliath. In Arthur D. Arberrry’s translation the passage runs as follows: (“... they said,) ‘Our Lord, pour out upon us patience, and make firm our feet, (...)’”. It continues by describing the circumstances of the detention and the situation in prison, and then announces the decision to start the hunger strike.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Brokstad Lund-Johansen, *Fighting for Citizenship*, p. 18, and note above (41).

<sup>50</sup> <<https://scm.bz/en/rotator-en/kuwait-human-rights-defender-abdulhakim-al-fadhli-chosen-as-human-rights-and-freedom-of-speech-defender-for-december-2017/>> and <<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/abdulhakim-al-fadhli/>>, both Viewed 31 July 2020. It is noteworthy that in the video produced for the “Front Line Defenders Award” two prominent female human rights defenders in the Gulf region support his candidature: the Kuwaiti author Hadīl Buqrays (Hadeel Buqrais) and the Bahraini Maryam al-Ḥawāḡa (Al-Khawaja), at that time co-director of the “Gulf Center for Human Rights” (GCHR).

<sup>51</sup> The archive is housed at the Australian Data Archive of the Australian National University in Canberra. Kennedy mentions al-Fadhli as a “community custodian” of the archive: Kennedy Nour al Deen, Al-Fadhli, ‘Report to the UN Expert Mechanism’, p. 63.

important primary and secondary data resources”.<sup>52</sup> On 1 February 2019, Kennedy Nour al Deen and Al-Fadhli<sup>53</sup> submitted their report on “Bedoon Indigenous Rights (...)” to the “UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” in Geneva. The wording in the report clearly carries the handwriting of Kennedy when there is repeated talk of “erasure” and “ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Bedoon”, terms that the academic has used previously in her writings.<sup>54</sup> Despite the fact that the term “ethnic cleansing” should be employed carefully, it is far from clear whether the (voiceless) majority of the Bidun would agree to such a description, though many of them (as also some observers) perceive the discriminatory measures against them over the past years as a systematic effort to reduce the size of or even to eradicate the community.<sup>55</sup> Be that as it may, dramatic appeals like these, and even more so the suicide incident(s) in 2019, have apparently stimulated the debate and led to new initiatives and proposals to solve the Bidun issue.

In an interview given in February 2019 on the occasion of a symposium entitled “28 years after liberation, what’s the benefit for Kuwaitis?”, the prominent Kuwaiti political scientist and human rights activist Ghanim al-Najjar (Ġānim an-Naġġār), who had earlier played a key role in launching “The Bidun Talk” event in 2006 and is known for his inclusivist position, was also asked about the Bidun issue. He insisted that they deserve to receive their rights, reminding the audience that the Bidun once constituted 80% of the army.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, he underscored that democracy is the only solution; as the authorities have not changed, they have multiplied the country’s enduring problems.<sup>57</sup>

In the same month, the “Human Rights Committee in the National Assembly forwarded legislation ... to give biduns civil and social rights similar to Kuwaitis, and for them to be granted permanent residency in Kuwait”.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Susan Kennedy Nour al Deen, ‘The Bedoun Archive: A Public Archive Created for the Northern Tribes Bedouin of Kuwait’, “Education as Change”, 22,2 (2018), #3435, pp. 13, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Kennedy Nour al-Deen, Al-Fadhli, ‘Report to the UN Expert Mechanism’, pp. 1, 63: Kennedy in her capacity as the Co-Director of “End Statelessness Foundation” in Australia, and Al-Fadhli as the “Director” of “The National Project to Resolve the Kuwaiti Bedoon Case” in Kuwait.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy Nour al Deen, ‘The Bedoun Archive’, pp. 3, 8, 11, 16, 21; Kennedy Nour al Deen, Al-Fadhli, ‘Report to the UN Expert Mechanism’, e.g., pp. 17, 56–57 (critical remarks on Beauprand’s objection to referring to ethnic persecution of the Bidun), p. 63 (with reference to her doctoral thesis of 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Cf., for instance, Salam et al. (eds.), *Kuwait – Take Concrete Steps to end Suffering of Stateless Bidun*, 30 Jan. 2020, Viewed 20 Feb. 2020, [p. 4], <<https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bidun-statement-FINAL.pdf>>.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Beauprand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 106: This is a rough estimation because no official statistics exist.

<sup>57</sup> ‘D. Ġānim an-Naġġār, ‘Nadwat „ba’da 28 ‘ām ‘alā at-tahrīr māḍā istafāda al-Kuwaytiyyūn?’, 24 Feb. 2019, Viewed 9 March 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGXMME-ZdJ0>>. For a short biography of Ghanim an-Najjar, <<https://www.ahrfund.org/team/ghanim-alnajjar/>> or <<https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/ghanim-al-najjar-the-human-rights-discourse-is-vastly-improving.html>>, 5 Nov. 2013, Viewed 9 March 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Albloshi, ‘Stateless in Kuwait’.

The suicide incident in mid-2019 and the crackdown on the subsequent protests are said to have inspired Kuwaiti people's sympathy for the Bidun's cause.<sup>59</sup> In November 2019, the Kuwaiti Lawyers' Association proposed a law<sup>60</sup> that would provide immediate naturalization for part of the Bidun, and the granting of permanent residency, partially with the option of later naturalization, for other parts of the Bidun community.<sup>61</sup> The proposal shows striking similarities to the agendas put forward in recent years by diverse pro-Bidun activists. Thus, in 2019 a broad consensus on the future steps in solving the issue seemed to materialize, and this was first and foremost the result of the concerted effort of both Kuwaiti- and Bidun-run organizations. After a difficult formative phase of constant reshuffling and reorientation, their approaches to solve the issue have drawn nearer to each other, although they still may disagree on the terminology, tactics and strategy – related to their status and access to (material and immaterial) resources and individual experiences. Guaranteeing permanent residency to all Bidun promises to improve their living conditions, at least to remove the huge daily pressure from them, and the immediate naturalization of a great portion of the Bidun is long overdue. As the Bidun do identify with Kuwait, do not seek to overthrow the regime, but want to reform the system, they have much in common with a great number of Kuwaiti liberals. In spite of their limited repertoire, the Bidun-run associations have used all ways of action at their disposal, even at the risk of great damage to themselves and their families.

### Chances for Solving the Kuwaiti Bidun Issue?

It is often argued that the divide-and-rule strategies of the Kuwaiti authorities have succeeded in fragmenting the Bidun community as well as the pro-Bidun movement and Kuwaiti society, which in the end would be detrimental to the Bidun's cause. Furthermore, it is assumed that the proponents of their rights may be outnumbered by those who refuse to make any concessions to the stateless community,<sup>62</sup> and the official hardliners

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<sup>59</sup> Aisha Elgayar, ““Without” Protection: Kuwait's Stateless Bidoon residents live on the margins of one of the world's richest states”, *The Investigative Journal* 6 (Feb. 2020), Viewed 9 March 2020, <<https://investigativejournal.org/without-protection-kuwaitis-stateless-bidoon-residents-live-on-the-margins-of-one-of-the-worlds-richest-states/>>.

<sup>60</sup> The proposal has to be seen as a counter-draft to the governmental draft law of the same month mentioned below.

<sup>61</sup> Albloshi, ‘Stateless in Kuwait’; Al, ‘Kuwait: Rising Signs of Despair’.

<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to say how many Kuwaitis would agree to an inclusivist position towards the Bidun. The followers of the pro-Bidun social media forums may not exceed a few thousands, but these numbers may not be a reliable variable for measuring the approval of Bidun rights among the wider public. Due to the awareness campaigns of recent years, more Kuwaitis may be convinced nowadays that the government is mainly responsible for creating and complicating the issue. Cf. the impression of persons interviewed by Brokstad Lund-Johansen (‘Fighting for Citizenship’, p. 87) in 2013. – On 5 December 2020, the general elections to the National Assembly were held. While the opposition made gains, no woman was elected: ‘Kuwait opposition scores win in parliamentary election’, “MEE”, 6 Dec. 2020, Viewed 10 Dec. 2020.

are described as a homogenous group.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, it is conspicuous that the strict opponents of Bidun rights felt compelled to form a coalition in early 2019 (“Group 80”), one of whose members is the head of the CS.<sup>64</sup>

Without doubt, Bidun in Kuwait have become increasingly visible, active and outspoken over the past few years, and awareness of their dilemma has been raised nationally and internationally. As a result, the authorities were challenged and had to react. Limited concessions notwithstanding,<sup>65</sup> they have not altered their policies substantially, still trying to gain time while simultaneously attempting to further weaken the pro-Bidun movement. In November 2019, the chairman of Kuwait’s National Assembly, Marzouq al-Ghanim, presented a new draft law which can be regarded as a slap in the face of all those who did their utmost over the past decades to promote Bidun rights, as it perpetuates the official position by treating the Bidun as “illegal residents” and delivers an ultimatum to them of one year to declare their “original nationality” in order to get access to basic rights such as free health care and free education.<sup>66</sup> Another provocation happened on 29 January 2020 when the “Central Agency’s” member of the Kuwaiti delegation to the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review Working Group in Geneva claimed that the country has nothing such as illegal residents or stateless population, adding that the Bidun have access to basic services. The report by a Kuwaiti human rights activist via Twitter sparked a hashtag on the blatant lies of the government.<sup>67</sup>

The collapse in oil revenues (since 2014) and the COVID-19 epidemic have not only exposed but also intensified the social and economic inequalities in the Gulf countries in general and Kuwait in particular. In spite of the lack of qualified medical personnel, the Kuwaiti authorities were still unwilling to allow Bidun doctors, who are working in the Ministry of Health and offered their help, to be integrated into the hospitals’ staff members. The refusal triggered harsh comments by pro-Bidun activists on social media platforms. Already in April 2020, the executive director of HRW pointed to another alarming trend worldwide: to what extent the epidemic has offered authoritarian regimes

<sup>63</sup> Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf*, p. 175; Albloshi, *Stateless in Kuwait*.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Kuwait: Human rights defenders Abdulhakim Al-Fadhli and Hamed Jameel summoned for cyber-crime investigation’, “GCHR”, 11 Feb. 2019, Viewed 31 July 2020, <<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2061>> (both activists were released on bail after interrogation); ‘Kuwait: Prominent advocate of Bedoon rights, Dr. Ebtehal Al-Khateeb, targeted by twitter campaign’, “GCHR”, 23 June 2019, <<https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2157>>.

<sup>65</sup> In April 2017, for instance, the government announced that descendants of former Bidun soldiers will once again be allowed to join the armed forces. Several thousand applications followed. In March 2018, the parliament approved the respective law. On the debate in the parliament and the diverse factions, see: ‘Mašrū’ taġnīd “bidūn” al-Kuwayt bayn al-barlamān wa-l-ḥukūma’, *Al-‘Arabī*, 9 Feb. 2018, Viewed 9 August 2019.

<sup>66</sup> For more details on the draft legislation see, Elgayar, ““Without” Protection”; Al, ‘Kuwait: Rising Signs of Despair’; Salam et al. (eds.), *Kuwait – Take Concrete Steps*. – Maybe as a reaction to the new challenge, Kuwaiti pro-Bidun activists initiated a new electronic forum which started to send their podcasts in December 2019. For instance, Ebtehal al-Khatib and Ghanim al-Najjar have participated in airing their statements on @bidon waraq. The emblem shows the two words in Arabic (*bidūn waraq*, “without papers”) crossed out.

<sup>67</sup> Elgayar, ““Without” Protection”.

an opportunity to grab power.<sup>68</sup> In September 2020, members of the Kuwaiti parliament and other observers expressed concerns about signs of a “deep state”.<sup>69</sup> One month later, Amnesty International reported how the GCC countries, among them Kuwait, have used the COVID-19 epidemic as a new pretext to further suppress the right to freedom of expression, starting in March 2020 with the first wave of the virus’ spreading in the Gulf countries.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the international media outlets have directed their attention to the policy of “Kuwaitization” of the labour force, which included the risk of forced expulsion of thousands of “expats” (expatriate labour forces), in particular the most vulnerable labourers from South Asia/South East Asia. Although some Kuwaiti MPs reportedly called on the Ministry of Trade to replace expats with Kuwaitis (children of Kuwaiti mothers or Bidun),<sup>71</sup> it is not yet clear if the new emir<sup>72</sup> will be able and willing to solve the long-lasting issue. Against the background of former experiences, and under conditions of widespread fear and restrictive spaces for civil movements, a fair solution in the near future does not seem in sight, unless more Kuwaiti citizens openly support the Bidun cause and demonstrate their willingness to waive a part of their privileges.

On 4 November 2014, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees launched the campaign #IBelong, with the aim of ending statelessness<sup>73</sup> in ten years.<sup>74</sup> Though it remains to be seen whether any action of the global plan will be realized, in the current situation of hyper-nationalism and indifference towards the fate of “Others”, this seems to be rather unlikely, and one may ask whether this is just another chimera such as the eight so-called “UN Millennium Development Goals”.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kenneth Roth, ‘How Authoritarians Are Exploiting the COVID-19 Crisis to Grab Power’, 3 April 2020, Viewed 8 April 2020, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/how-authoritarians-are-exploiting-covid-19-crisis-grab-power>>.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Statements published on the Twitter account @Q8Citizens on 7 Sept. 2020.

<sup>70</sup> AI, ‘Covid-19 is New Pretext for old Tactics of Repression in GCC’, Public Statement 15 Oct. 2020, Viewed 21 Nov. 2020, MDE 04/3136/2020.

<sup>71</sup> Tawfiq Nasrallah, ‘Kuwait to reject any request to hire expats in public sector’, *Gulf News*, 18 Oct. 2020, Viewed 21 Nov. 2020.

<sup>72</sup> On 29 September 2020, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah (r. 2006-2020) passed away in the United States. The late emir’s brother, Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, was named as the new emir. Cf. Bader Al-Saif, ‘Kuwait’s Emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, Has Died’, “Carnegie Middle East Center”, 30 Sept. 2020, Viewed 13 Oct. 2020, <<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82828>>. The new Emir and the new Crown Prince are in their 80s.

<sup>73</sup> The number of stateless persons worldwide were estimated in 2018 to be about 12 million (i.e. those who are registered as stateless); in October 2020 the @institute\_si estimated more than 15 million stateless people around the world (as mentioned on @kuwbedmov with a link to the full blog).

<sup>74</sup> UNHCR, ‘Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014-2024’, <<https://www.unhcr.org/statelesscampaign2014/Global-Action-Plan-eng.pdf>>.

<sup>75</sup> See <<https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>>.

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