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RUHEAD/USINT BAGHDAD 734
RUQMBE/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 5595
RUEHGC/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 2455
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 1663
RUQMOD/AMEMBASSY DOHA 2580
RUEHJL/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 509
RUQMR/AMEMBASSY JIDDA 6351
RUDIC/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3514
RUQML/AMEMBASSY MANAMA 3942
RUQMMT/AMEMBASSY MUSCAT 2018
RUQNYA/USLO RIYADH 372
RUQNNS/AMEMBASSY SANA 1371
RUFNP/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2239
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E.O. 12065: GDS 6/17/85 (SUTHERLAND, PETER A.) OR-M
TAGS: SOPH, PGOV, PEPR, PINR, PINS, XF, KU
SUEJ: POLITICAL REASSESSMENT: ORIENTATION AND INFLUENCE OF THE
MASS MEDIA

REFS: A) STATE 38873, B) KUWAIT 1443, C) KUWAIT 2807,
D) KUWAIT 1471, E) KUWAIT 692, F) KUWAIT 1711, G) KUWAIT 1943

1. (C = ENTIRE TEXT).

2. SUMMARY. THE MASS MEDIA IN KUWAIT AS CONSTITUTED AT PRESENT
IS NO POTENTIAL THREAT TO THE SECURITY AND STABILITY OF THE
COUNTRY AND ITS GOVERNMENT EXCEPT PERHAPS UNINTENTIONALLY
THROUGH INACCURATE REPORTING. THE BROADCAST MEDIA ARE ENTIRELY
CONTROLLED BY THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION. ALL PRINTED PERIODICALS
APART FROM GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, ARE OWNED, MANAGED, AND
EDITED BY LOYAL KUWAITI CITIZENS, AND ARE SUBJECT TO STRICT BUT
POST-PUBLICATION CONTROL BY THE GOVERNMENT. ONE SEES A PAR
BROADER RANGE OF POLITICAL SPECULATION AND COMMENTARY IN THE
KUWAITI PRESS THAN IN THAT OF ALMOST EVERY OTHER ARAB COUNTRY,
BUT IT DWELLS FAR MORE HEAVILY ON ARAB WORLD THAN ON KUWAITI
ISSUES. FOR THIS REASON KUWAITI PERIODICALS ARE READ AND QUOTED WIDELY IN THE AREA; BUT THE THREAT OF SUSPENSION OF PUBLICATION, AND, UNDER RECENT AMENDMENTS TO THE PRESS LAW, IMPRISONMENT OF OFFENDING EDITORS, EFFECTIVELY PREVENTS THE PRESS FROM PRINTING COMMENTARY WHICH MIGHT SERIOUSLY DAMAGE KUWAITI RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORING STATES, OR BROADCAST DOUBTS ABOUT THE INTEGRITY OR WISDOM OF THE RULING FAMILY. THE PUBLIC HAS SHOWN LITTLE INTEREST IN PROTESTING GOVERNMENT CLAMPDOWNS ON THE PRESS WHEN THEY HAVE OCCURRED, AND THE GOVERNMENT, FOR ITS PART, HAS DEMONSTRATED A CONSIDERABLE DEGREE OF TOLERANCE. IT PERMITS USE OF THE DAILY PAPERS AS AN ESCAPE VALVE FOR POPULAR SENTIMENT, AS RECENTLY AMONG THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY IN REGARD TO ITS RESENTMENT OF EGYPT'S SIGNING THE PEACE TREATY WITH ISRAEL. THE GOVERNMENT ALSO FLOATS CONTENTIOUS TRIAL BALLOONS IN THE PRESS, AS IN ITS RECENT STIMULATION OF DEBATE ABOUT RESTORING THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THE KUWAITI PRESS IS MORE THAN READY TO INDULGE IN DEBATE ABOUT, OR APPEALS FOR, CHANGES IN THE GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM IN THE COUNTRY, BUT ITS KUWAITI OWNERS AND EDITORS FOR THE MOST PART HAVE NO QUARREL WITH THE MAIN POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THEY SHARE THE VERY WIDELY-HELD KUWAITI CONSENSUS THAT THE DEMONSTRATED SUCCESS OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM IN PROVIDING DOMESTIC PEACE AND PROSPERITY DESERVES CONTINUED SUPPORT. END SUMMARY.

3. THE MEDIA: KUWAIT OWNED, GOVERNMENT CONTROLLED: KUWAIT RADIO AND TELEVISION ARE STATE-OPERATED INSTITUTIONS WITH POLICIES INSEPARABLE FROM THOSE OF THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION WHICH IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MEDIA IN KUWAIT. A STRICT PRESS LAW GOVERNS OPERATIONS OF THE PRINTED MEDIA, EXPRESSLY FORBIDDING THE PRESS TO ATTACK FOREIGN HEADS OF STATE OR TO PRINT MATERIAL PAID FOR BY FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS. BEYOND THESE PROSCRIPTIONS THERE EXISTS AN UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PRESS RISK SUSPENSION OF PUBLICATION, AND, BY RECENT AMENDMENT OF THE PRESS LAW, JAIL FOR OFFENDING EDITORS, IF IT PRINTS MATERIAL DAMAGING TO THE SECURITY OF THE STATE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS SHOWN CONSIDERABLE RESTRAINT IN SANCTIONING INFRINGEMENTS OF THESE GUIDELINES; DURING LATE 1976 AND 1977 THERE WERE ONLY SCATTERED INSTANCES OF PAPERS SUSPENDED BRIEFLY. NO ONE HAS BEEN JAILED, BUT A COUPLE OF EXPATRIATE JOURNALISTS HAVE BEEN DEPORTED, MOST RECENTLY AWNI SADIQ, A PALESTINIAN EMPLOYED BY AL-WATAN. THE KUWAIT PUBLIC, FOR ITS PART, HAS SHOWN LITTLE INTEREST IN PROTESTING ACTIONS BY THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION TO ENFORCE PRESS DECISIONS.
4. THERE ARE GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, INCLUDING THE INFLUENTIAL AL-ARABI WHICH HAPPENS TO BE EDITED BY A WELL-KNOWN EGYPTIAN, BUT THE PRIVATE KUWAITI PRESS IS ALMOST ENTIRELY OWNED AND EDITED BY KUWAITI CITIZENS. MUCH OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF OF THESE PERIODICALS IS EXPATRIATE ARAB — PALESTINIAN, EGYPTIAN, SYRIAN OR LEBANESE — AND PERIODICAL CONTENT OFTEN REFLECTS THE INTERESTS OF THEIR EXPATRIATE COMMUNITIES. IN THEORY, THOUGH NOT IN PRACTICE, THIS SITUATION COULD RESULT IN TWO SORTS OF DEVELOPMENTS: THE USE OF THE KUWAITI PRESS FOR THE STIMULATION OR CONTEST OF CONTROVERSIES BETWEEN COMPETING STATES OR Factions WITHIN THE ARAB WORLD; OR THE AIRING OF GRIEVANCES NURTURED AMONG THE EXPATRIATE COMMUNITIES HERE AGAINST THE KUWAIT GOVERNMENT.

5. THE FORMER POSSIBILITY WOULD HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED IN AUGUST 1976, COINCIDENT WITH SUSPENSION OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, WHEN THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED STRICT PENALTIES FOR PRINTING OF MATERIAL PAID FOR BY OTHER STATES. VICIOUS INTER-ARAB EMOTIONS HAD ARisen AT THAT TIME OVER THE CHAOTIC CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON, AND THEIR SPILLING
OVER INTO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEBATES AND INTO CONTROVERSIAL PRESS COMMENTARY SEEMED TO THREATEN TO INVOLVE KUWAIT AGAINST ITS WILL IN INTER-ARAB DISPUTES, WHILE NO ONE IS UNDER THE ILLUSION THAT LOCAL JOURNALISTS NOW NEVER ACCEPT GIFTS FROM OUTSIDERS, THE PARTISAN VIRULENCE OF THE PRESS IN MID-1976 HAS DISAPPEARED.

6. WITH RESPECT TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT EXPATRIATE COMMUNITY GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT MIGHT BE AIREDF IN THE LOCAL PRESS, ONE SUSPECTS, SIMPLY, THAT SUCH ISSUES — REAL THOUGH THEY ARE — BOTH LACK ENOUGH HEAT TO GENERATE PRESSURE AND ALSO ARE OF LITTLE GENUINE CONCERN TO KUWAITI OWNERS AND EDITORS. ONE CAN ALWAYS AND EASILY GET AN EARFUL OF COMPLAINTS BY LOCAL PALESTINIANS THAT THEY ARE DISADVANTAGED BY KUWAITI LAWS OR PRACTICES, BUT SUCH COMMENTARY RARELY REACHED THE PRINTED PAGE.

7. PALESTINIAN PRESS — THE PRESS AS AN ESCAPTE VALVE: PERHAPS IN PART AS COMPENSATION FOR THIS LACK OF OUTLET FOR THEIR COMPLAINTS, PALESTINIAN OR PRO-PALESTINIAN OPINION ON MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENTS RECEIVES VERY FREE REIN IN THE KUWAITI PRESS. RECENT EXTREME CRITICISM OF PRESIDENT SADAT, TOLERATED DESPITE THE GENERAL INJUNCTION ON ATTACKS AGAINST FOREIGN HEADS OF STATE, HAS BEEN PERMITTED, EXPRESSLY, AS A FORM OF ESCAPE VALVE — A WAY FOR THE LARGE PALESTINIANS COMMUNITY TO BLOW OFF STEAM WITH MINIMUM DAMAGE DONE (REF B). AND, WITH RATHER STRICT IF VAGUE LIMITS PLACED ON INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING AND ON COMMENTARY CRITICAL OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS, THE PRESS DWELLS HEAVILY ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND ESPECIALLY ON MIDDLE EAST MATTERS. IN A SURVEY TAKEN A FEW MONTHS AGO 94 OUT OF 99 EDITORIALS IN KUWAITI ARABIC DAILIES PROVED TO BE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS ISSUES. OF 150 SPECIAL ARTICLES PUBLISHED DURING THE SAME PERIOD, ONLY 60 DEALT WITH DOMESTIC ISSUES. MOST "THINK PIECES" (EDITORIALS, COMMENTARIES AND ANALYSES) ARE WRITTEN BY KUWAITIS, NOT EXPATRIATES, AND IF THEY TEND TO TAKE A STRIDENTLY PRO-PALESTINIAN LINE, THAT IS ENTIRELY CONSONANT WITH OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT POLICY, AND tile FELT INTERESTS OF KUWAITI OWNERS AND EDITORS IN SUSTAINING THE GOOD WILL OF THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY WITHIN AND OUTSIDE KUWAIT.
8. OTHER FOREIGN AFFAIRS ISSUES SPRING UP FROM TIME TO TIME TO TEST THE GOVERNMENT'S PRESS POLICY. A RECENT EXAMPLE IS THE OUTBREAK OF IRANIAN ARAB DEMONSTRATIONS IN KUWAIT, REPORTEDLY IN SUPPORT OF APPEALS FOR AUTONOMY. THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT TOOK STRONG OFFENSE AT REPORTING AND COMMENTARY IN THE KUWAITI PRESS WHICH USED THE TERM "ARABISTAN" IN LIEU OF THE IRANIAN-APPROVED "KUHISTAN", AND THE KUWAITI GOVERNMENT QUICKLY INSTRUCTED THE LOCAL PRESS TO CHANGE ITS TERMINOLOGY (REF C). THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER INSTANCES IN WHICH INTER-ARAB DISPUTES HAVE AVOIDED NOTICE ALTOGETHER IN THE LOCAL PRESS, PRESUMABLY AS A RESULT OF "GUIDANCE" FROM THE INFORMATION MINISTRY, ALWAYS ALERT TO AVOID ACCUSATION THAT THE KUWAITI PRESS HAS TAKEN A PARTISAN POSITION.

9. DOMESTIC AFFAIRS - THE GOSSIP SOCIETY:
FROM THE STANDPOINT OF ITS POTENTIAL WITH RESPECT TO STABILITY...
AND SECURITY OF THE STATE, THE PRACTICE OF THE KUWAITI PRESS REGARDING DOMESTIC POLITICS IS PERHAPS MOST RELEVANT. FIRST OF ALL, KUWAITIS DO NOT DEPEND ON THE PRESS FOR THEIR LOCAL NEWS. THEIRS IS A "GOSSIP SOCIETY", IN WHICH WORD OF MOUTH CARRIES SIGNIFICANT NEWS THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY ALMOST FASTER THAN IT COULD BE BROADCAST IN THEIR OFFICES OR "DIWANIIYAS" KUWAITIS TALK VERY FREELY, "NOT FOR PUBLICATION", ABOUT THE RULING FAMILY, CORRUPTION IN HIGH PLACES, OR PROPOSALS FOR REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS.

11. DEMOCRACY DEBATED:

12. THE RESULT WAS A FLOWERING OF PUBLISHED KUWAITI OPINION. VARYING AS TO EDITORIAL POLICY, THE KUWAITI DAILIES RAN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS, COMMENTARY AND GUEST ARTICLES ABOUT THE PROPER KIND OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTION THE COUNTRY SHOULD HAVE (REF E). IT WAS A PERFECT OPPORTUNITY FOR THE REGIME TO SHOW ITS INTEREST IN A FREE PRESS AND IN PUBLIC DEBATE ABOUT DEMOCRACY, AND ALL CONCERNED ACQUITTED THEMSELVES "WELL"; NOT A SINGLE ARTICLE SUGGESTED THAT AMIRS ARE OUT OF DATE, BUT THERE WERE PLENTY OF ARTICLES WHICH CRITICIZED THE PRESENT SYSTEM FOR NOT TRUSTING TO THE "ONE MAN -- ONE VOTE" THEORY TO SUSTAIN THE REGIME IN POWER. THESE ARE THOSE WHO SAY THE GOVERNMENT WAS SHREWED TO LIFT THE LID ON CRITICISM THIS WAY: THE RESULT WAS NOT A FLOOD OF HOSTILE, ANTI-REGIME OPINION, BUT, IN FACT, A RATHER BALANCED MIX OF COMMENTARY, LEADING ONE TO CONCLUDE THAT KUWAITIS ARE OF VERY MIXED MINDS AS TO WHETHER ALL KUWAITIS SHOULD HAVE THE VOTE AND WHETHER THE LEGISLATURE SHOULD DOMINATE GOVERNMENT.


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15. CONCLUSION: AS KUWAIT GROWS, AND ITS POPULATION IS ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING IN THE WORLD, THE CLOSELY KNIT, GOSSIPY NATURE OF LIFE HERE IS CHANGING. THERE MAY COME A TIME WHEN WORD-OF-MOUTH DOES NOT SERVE AS A SATISFACTORY SUBSTITUTE FOR AMPLE PRESS COVERAGE, AND WHEN, ACCORDINGLY, KUWAITIS WILL TAIZ A STRONGER INTEREST THAN THEY DO NOW IN FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN COMMUNITY LIFE, BUT THAT TIME
IS NOT YET HERE. THE OWNERS AND EDITORS OF THE MEDIA IN KUWAIT ARE JUST AS INTERESTED AS THE RULING FAMILY IN PROTECTING KUWAIT FROM HARMFUL PUBLICITY. THE PUBLIC WILL NOT PROTEST IF THE GOVERNMENT PUNISHES A NEWSPAPER. OTHER THAN THE RARE POSSIBILITY OF SERIOUS UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES ARISING FROM AN INACCURATE PRESS REPORT, IT IS SAFE TO SAY THAT, IF THERE IS NOW A THREAT TO THE SECURITY AND STABILITY OF KUWAIT, THAT THREAT DOES NOT ARISE FROM OR DRAW SUPPORT FROM THE MASS MEDIA.