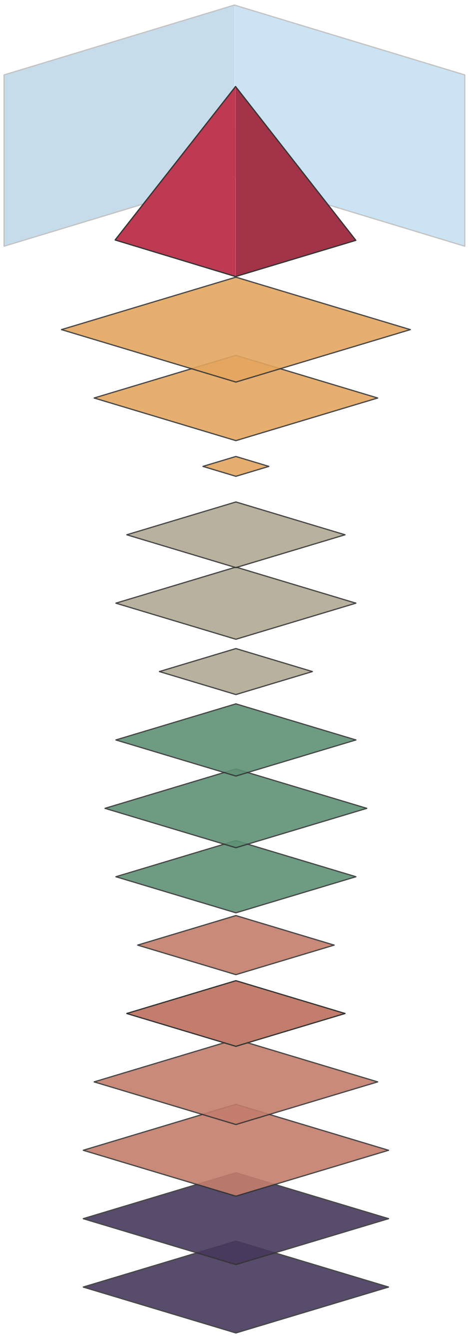
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

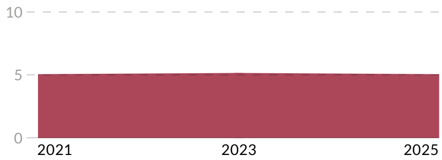
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

KUWAIT



5.10 ↘0.10
CRIMINALITY SCORE

95th of 193 countries ↘11
26th of 46 Asian countries ↘1
10th of 14 Western Asian countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS 5.60 ↘0.10

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	1.50	↘0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	5.00	↘1.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	5.50	↘0.50
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	3.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	5.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	6.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	5.50	↘0.50
HEROIN TRADE	4.50	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	5.00	↗0.50
CANNABIS TRADE	6.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	7.00	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	7.00	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	7.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS 4.60 ↘0.10

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.00	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	3.50	↘0.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6.50	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

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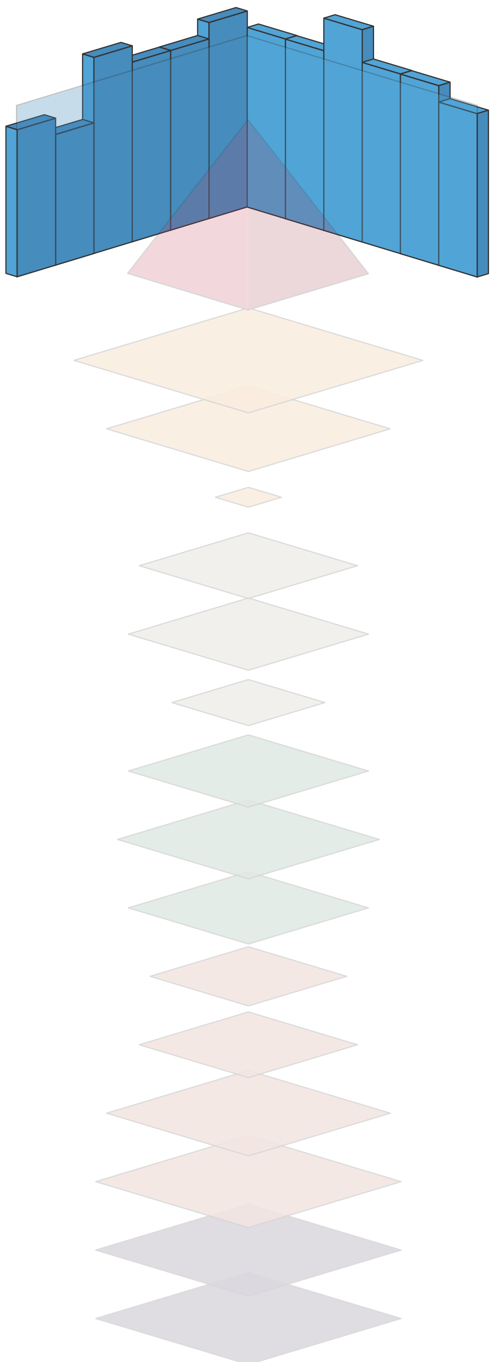
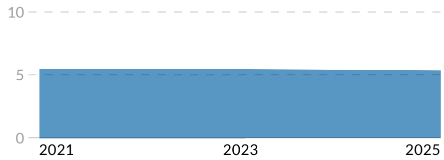
KUWAIT



5.42 ↘0.13 RESILIENCE SCORE

60th of 193 countries ↘4
11th of 46 Asian countries ↘2
4th of 14 Western Asian countries ↘1



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4.50	↘0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	4.00	↘0.50
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	6.00	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	5.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	5.50	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	6.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.50	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	5.50	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	6.50	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	5.50	0.00
PREVENTION	5.50	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	5.00	↘0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking is a significant and deeply embedded issue in Kuwait, shaped by a combination of legal, social and economic factors. As a destination country, Kuwait receives large numbers of migrant workers from South and South East Asia, Africa and Western Asia, primarily for employment in domestic work, construction, sanitation and nursing. The country's sponsorship system, known as the Kafala system, plays a central role in enabling human trafficking. This system grants disproportionate control to employers over migrant workers, often leading to exploitation and abuse. Many migrants are subjected to forced labour or sexual exploitation, with passports withheld and working conditions forced on them. The prevalence of fraudulent recruitment agencies and the complicity of some state actors exacerbate the problem. Criminal networks span both source countries and Kuwait, involving private entities and corrupt government officials. Workers frequently incur large debts to secure employment, placing them in situations of debt bondage upon arrival. Kuwait's high demand for low-skilled labour and legal protections for employers facilitate these abuses. Online platforms are used to advertise and trade domestic workers, adding a digital dimension to the trafficking market.

Human smuggling is closely linked to human trafficking in Kuwait. Many people smuggled into the country, especially from South and South East Asia, end up in exploitative labour situations. Smugglers often rely on fraudulently obtained visas and work permits, and in cases where documents are unavailable, covert entry through land borders, particularly the Al-Abdali crossing, is pursued. Online platforms and social media further facilitate smuggling operations. Actors include private recruitment agencies, criminal networks and complicit state-embedded people. These dynamics are sustained by Kuwait's wealth and demand for inexpensive labour, which incentivizes smuggling despite the legal and security risks involved. Extortion and protection racketeering, on the other hand, appear to be limited in Kuwait and are typically not associated with organized crime groups. Most of these cases tend to be opportunistic and individual rather than systematic.

TRADE

Arms trafficking in Kuwait remains a notable criminal market, yet with limited domestic impact. While there is concern over increased circulation of light and small arms, these appear to be isolated incidents rather than indicators of a consolidated illicit market. The Kuwaiti government views the potential for arms proliferation seriously and maintains tight control measures. Most publicized cases involve the possession of small arms by people rather than trafficking by organized criminal groups. Regional smuggling routes often bypass Kuwait, diminishing the country's role in the broader regional arms trafficking landscape.

The trade in counterfeit goods is a notable criminal market in Kuwait, with authorities seizing large volumes of fake electrical products, clothing and luxury items in recent years. Government efforts, including enhanced copyright protections and the introduction of a reporting platform for intellectual property violations, have contributed to enforcement successes. These measures have led to Kuwait's removal from international watchlists related to intellectual property protection. Despite these efforts, the demand and profitability associated with inexpensive counterfeit products continue to sustain the market.

Kuwait's illicit trade in excise goods, while not extensive, presents notable risks. Although the country has not implemented the Gulf Cooperation Council's standardized excise tax, smuggling of products like tobacco and alcohol continues. The lower cost of tobacco in Kuwait compared to neighbouring states has made it a source country for illicit exports. Recently, Kuwait recorded the third highest number of tobacco-related customs seizures globally, with 97% intercepted at export. Alcohol, though illegal, is present in both imported and home-brewed forms. Porous borders, especially with Iraq, further enable these illicit flows.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Kuwait are an area of concern, with the country acting as a significant importer of illegally sourced agarwood. Kuwait also imports charcoal from Somalia, which is criminalized under international sanctions. There are also instances of illegal logging for firewood within Kuwait. Local enforcement has taken some action, but gaps in regulation and oversight persist. Re-exportation of illegal flora products has been documented, suggesting that Kuwait serves not only as a destination but also as a transit hub. Fauna crimes in Kuwait centre on the illicit pet trade. Although official reports claim that the country has maintained zero wildlife trafficking cases since 2016, external sources present a different picture. Kuwait is reportedly among the top five countries where online platforms advertise exotic pets such as cheetahs, apes and rare birds. Social media platforms have been used for illegal wildlife trading. Discrepancies between official and third-party data suggest underreporting or limited enforcement. The primary drivers of this market are demand for prestige pets and the ease of digital transactions. Non-renewable resource crimes are present, with smuggling of refined oil products, such as subsidized diesel, to neighbouring countries like Iran and Lebanon occurring through land and sea routes. This trade exploits price differentials arising from Kuwait's continued fuel subsidies. Kuwait's compact geography strengthens its border control, but smuggling persists through private and foreign actors. Additionally, there have been isolated cases of gold smuggling to India, further underscoring the multifaceted nature of this market.

DRUGS

Heroin trafficking in Kuwait is closely linked to other drug markets and arms trafficking. Recent law enforcement operations have uncovered large quantities of various narcotics alongside illegal weapons, highlighting the interconnected nature of drug and arms trafficking networks. Additionally, cocaine consumption in Kuwait has risen markedly in recent years. The increasing consumption signifies that Kuwaiti society is among the target population and markets worldwide. Reports indicate that the drug is sold primarily through social media and local networks.

Cannabis is the most widely consumed illicit drug in Kuwait. Its affordability and proximity to producing countries like Lebanon facilitate its availability. Cannabis trafficking includes both international networks and local cultivation. A recent seizure disrupted a European-Kuwaiti trafficking route, leading to arrests and the confiscation of cannabis and hashish worth millions of dollars. Synthetic drug trafficking is the most prevalent drug market in Kuwait. Captagon and shabu are the most prevalent substances, with seizures both domestically and abroad indicating significant demand. Kuwaiti authorities have carried out multiple high-profile operations in recent years, seizing large volumes of synthetic drugs and arresting people linked to international networks. Though Kuwait's market is smaller than that of some neighbours, its rising consumption and strategic location make it a target for traffickers.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes have surged in Kuwait, spurred by rapid digitization and limited cybersecurity awareness. In recent years, the country recorded a threefold increase in cybercrime incidents. Victims include individuals as well as major public and private institutions, which suffered ransomware attacks that disrupted essential services. Financial and governmental sectors are especially vulnerable, with distributed denial of service attacks rising sharply. The proliferation of cybercrimes is linked to low public awareness, outdated legislation and inadequate enforcement. Malicious actors exploit weaknesses in personal and institutional cybersecurity systems. Some attacks are suspected to be state linked, adding a geopolitical dimension to cybercrime in Kuwait.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Kuwait are prevalent, with cyber-enabled fraud among the most frequently encountered. These include credit card scams, market manipulation and online fraud, particularly phishing and scams involving non-delivery of purchased items. These patterns reflect broader vulnerabilities in the country's digital and financial systems.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

There is no evidence to suggest the presence of mafia-style groups in Kuwait in the conventional sense of hierarchical and organized criminal syndicates. However, Kuwait hosts several loosely organized criminal networks that are active in various illicit markets, particularly human trafficking, human smuggling and drug trafficking. These networks do not operate under a rigid hierarchy, but function opportunistically, adapting their structures to the market. They often exploit pervasive corruption to evade law enforcement scrutiny and prosecution. Corruption among state-embedded actors contributes to the functioning of organized crime in Kuwait. Public officials have reportedly engaged in activities such as accepting bribes and facilitating the sale of work permits, which criminal networks systematically exploit to conduct illicit operations with minimal legal repercussions. Despite the existence of anti-corruption laws, enforcement is weak and impunity for public officials remains a pervasive issue. High-level control over key sectors of the economy by members of the ruling family and the elite has fostered monopolistic practices and informal power concentrations. Additionally, several corruption cases have emerged in connection with Kuwait's substantial natural resource revenues, particularly in the oil sector, which constitutes the bulk of state income. Foreign criminal actors are also present in Kuwait, though their influence on state institutions and broader society is limited. These actors are predominantly involved in the drug trade, counterfeit markets and cyber-dependent as well as cyber-enabled financial crimes. Private-sector actors play a central role in Kuwait's criminal ecosystem, particularly within the human trafficking and smuggling markets. The Kafala sponsorship system creates an environment whereby legal employers and fake companies can exercise excessive control over migrant labourers, often resulting in exploitative or coercive labour conditions. Some private recruitment agencies are reported to function as fronts for trafficking operations, using ostensibly legitimate structures to facilitate irregular migration and forced labour. Furthermore, private-sector actors have been implicated in money laundering activities related to other criminal markets.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Kuwait's political leadership and governance framework is shaped by its identity as a constitutional hereditary emirate. While the country has historically maintained a relatively unique political system in the Gulf – with an elected parliament that exercises a degree of legislative oversight – the dissolution of the parliament in 2024 marked a significant deviation from constitutional norms. This move, framed as necessary to overcome prolonged gridlock, has removed a key platform for holding the executive accountable. Though the Emir has pledged to prioritize rooting out corruption and ending political paralysis, the centralization of authority has raised concerns over the erosion of democratic checks and balances. While Kuwait has taken steps to uphold legal principles, civil liberties remain constrained, with ongoing issues such as arbitrary detention, political imprisonment and limitations on freedom of expression. Human rights concerns also extend to discriminatory practices affecting non-citizen workers and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Nonetheless, organized crime groups do not exert influence over government institutions or services, and some forms of criminality, such as cybercrime, are prioritized by the state. However, others – such as human smuggling and trafficking – receive limited institutional attention due to their perceived economic utility.

Efforts to increase government transparency and accountability have yielded mixed results. The operational capacity of the anti-corruption authority, Nazaha, is limited, lacking powers to conduct surveillance, execute warrants, or enforce compliance. The State Audit Bureau also plays a partial oversight role over government revenue and expenditure, although public transparency remains insufficient. In January 2024, amendments to Kuwait's anti-corruption law introduced protections for whistle-blowers and extended liability to private legal entities implicated in corruption. Nonetheless, enforcement remains inconsistent. The suspension of parliament has also curtailed legislative scrutiny of government actions, undermining one of the few effective accountability mechanisms. High-profile corruption cases include allegations of embezzlement involving senior political figures, and while some officials have been cleared, the lack of consequences in such cases has prompted criticism. Broader systemic issues persist, including nepotism, corruption in public procurement and a lack of incentives for transparency. Kuwait's Right to Information law remains weak, with limited provisions for appeal and numerous overly broad exceptions, reinforcing a culture of opacity.

International cooperation remains a strong element of Kuwait's resilience framework. The country has ratified major international conventions related to corruption, organized crime, drug trafficking and human rights, including the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its three protocols. Kuwait actively engages with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, INTERPOL and the International Organization for Migration, among others. These partnerships support law enforcement efforts, extradition processes and anti-trafficking initiatives. Kuwait's National Central Bureau coordinates INTERPOL-related operations, while joint patrols and information-sharing agreements with neighbouring states aim to address smuggling activities, particularly along borders with Iraq and Iran. The country is also a participant in regional cybersecurity frameworks such as the Gulf Cooperation Council's Cybersecurity Agreement and the Arab Information and Communication Technologies Organization. Despite recent political disruptions, these international engagements remain unaffected, and international counterparts continue to maintain cooperative ties with Kuwait.

Kuwait has enacted several national laws targeting organized crime, cybercrime and human trafficking. Legislation criminalizes labour and sex trafficking, with provisions for lengthy prison sentences. However, enforcement gaps persist. Migrant labour laws, particularly the employer-based sponsorship system, contribute to structural vulnerabilities that enable exploitation. Domestic workers face increased risks of forced labour and sexual exploitation due to legal provisions that tie their residency status to their employers and the absence of explicit prohibitions against practices like passport confiscation. Although Kuwait has implemented irregular migration policies such as amnesty periods for undocumented people, critics argue these efforts focus more on population control than addressing root causes. Cybersecurity regulations are more robust, with the National Cybersecurity Agency managing protections for vital infrastructure and government networks, alongside laws permitting the seizure of cybercrime-related assets. Nevertheless, the government continues to face challenges in fully implementing its national legal frameworks, particularly when offenders are well-connected citizens.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Kuwait's judiciary includes multiple tiers, from the Supreme Court to the Public Prosecutor's Office, but its independence is undermined by the final authority of the Emir in judicial appointments. Judges who are Kuwaiti citizens are appointed for life, whereas non-citizen judges serve limited terms. The Supreme Judicial Council, tasked with oversight, is composed of members previously approved by the Emir. These structural elements facilitate executive influence over judicial processes, as evidenced by past rulings aligned with government interests. Nonetheless, there have also been instances of judicial decisions opposing government actions in the past. A landmark bribery case led to the sentencing of judges, lawyers and business figures, highlighting systemic corruption but also some capacity for accountability. Kuwait's penitentiary system remains strained due to overcrowding, with the Central Prison operating beyond its intended capacity. Despite these challenges, basic services including food, water, sanitation and medical care are typically provided at adequate levels. However, multiple credible reports surfaced alleging sexual and physical abuse by prison staff. In response, authorities launched investigations that resulted in disciplinary measures and, in some cases, terminations.

Kuwait's law enforcement infrastructure includes multiple specialized units under the Ministry of Interior, as well as cyber and border security departments. These agencies maintain partnerships with international counterparts through platforms such as INTERPOL and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Despite operational capacity and international linkages, several challenges persist. There are also reports of mistreatment by security forces, particularly against non-citizens and vulnerable groups. Instances of arbitrary arrest and excessive force are compounded by weak national policies on use of force and the absence of independent monitoring mechanisms. Corruption within law enforcement is also a concern, especially in cases involving personal relationships with police officials. Overall, the law enforcement apparatus demonstrates operational strength but suffers from transparency and accountability deficits that hinder public trust.

Kuwait's geographic and economic profile – marked by a small territory and substantial resources – supports a relatively secure territorial integrity framework. However, the country remains vulnerable to illicit flows, particularly along its borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Regional instability and conflict have facilitated human trafficking and smuggling operations into Kuwaiti territory. In response, the government has invested in advanced border security, including biometric systems designed to prevent re-entry of deportees. Nonetheless, smugglers continue to develop sophisticated evasion tactics, such as fingerprint-altering procedures. The government has also strengthened its military and border security apparatus, with international arms procurements aimed at enhancing territorial defence. While these measures contribute to resilience, ongoing challenges suggest the need for further institutional coordination.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Kuwait's anti-money laundering framework is grounded in its 2013 legislation and overseen by the Financial Intelligence Unit, which works in collaboration with international bodies. Kuwait is a member of the Egmont Group and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), reflecting a commitment to international standards. The country's 2024 FATF mutual evaluation report noted that Kuwait possesses an adequate legal framework but suffers from weak enforcement, especially concerning asset freezing, beneficial ownership transparency and digital currency regulation. Recent high-profile financial crime cases have highlighted weaknesses in oversight and enforcement, drawing attention to vulnerabilities within Kuwait's financial system. Furthermore, money laundering cases surged in 2023, more than tripling from the previous year, reflecting both rising criminal activity and increased scrutiny.

Kuwait has taken steps to improve its economic regulatory environment, including recent amendments to commercial and public procurement laws aimed at attracting foreign investment. These reforms have simplified registration and operational procedures, addressing some of the barriers historically faced by foreign entities. Nevertheless, structural challenges remain. Political gridlock, entrenched patronage networks, and persistent concerns over corruption and transparency continue to hinder effective economic planning and deter investor confidence.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Kuwait provides limited but growing support mechanisms for victims of organized crime, particularly among vulnerable migrant populations. The government-run shelter offers comprehensive services, including medical care, legal assistance and access to officials for repatriation support. Referrals originate from a range of sources, including embassies, NGOs and international organizations. Nevertheless, services for male trafficking victims remain critically insufficient, and victims typically rely on embassies and external organizations for support. Legal assistance is provided, but no long-term support structures are in place. Victims often hesitate to report abuse due to the risk of detention or deportation, lengthy legal proceedings and high costs. There are both public and private entities providing addiction treatments, which is a growing issue in the country. While there are laws in place to protect whistleblowers in Kuwait, the effectiveness of these laws and the level of protection offered to whistleblowers varies. In January 2024, the Kuwaiti government made efforts to address corruption and to provide a safe environment for whistleblowers through amendments under anti-corruption regulation, but some reports indicate that whistleblowers still face retaliation and difficulties in reporting corruption.

Kuwait's preventive efforts against organized crime include training programmes for civil servants, public awareness campaigns and international cooperation. Anti-trafficking brochures and public service announcements are distributed in multiple languages to inform migrant workers of their rights. However, awareness of trafficking among the public and employers remains limited. The employer-based sponsorship system continues to expose workers to exploitation, and recruitment agencies remain a vector for exploitative labour and sexual abuse. Although the government launched a national action plan on trafficking and supported initiatives to promote ethical recruitment, key reforms have yet to be implemented. Preventive efforts have expanded to cybercrime, with initiatives enhancing government cybersecurity through fibre-optic connectivity and encryption protocols. Drug prevention campaigns are conducted annually, and the government collaborates with international organizations on addiction awareness and response strategies.

Civil society in Kuwait operates within a tightly controlled environment. The legal framework allows for the existence of NGOs but imposes extensive restrictions on registration, funding and activities. NGOs must meet stringent criteria, including citizenship requirements and alignment with government-defined cultural norms. Informal social spaces like the diwaniya offer some latitude for political and social discourse, but formal activism is closely monitored. The media landscape is similarly restricted. Although Kuwait is perceived as one of the more open Gulf states, censorship laws curtail freedom of expression, and journalists risk prosecution under cybercrime legislation. Book bans, media licence revocations and the imprisonment or exile of journalists contribute to a climate of self-censorship. Government bodies wield extensive authority over media regulation, and sensitive topics – such as migrant rights and corruption – are often suppressed.

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