

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Kuwait

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Media in Kuwait enjoy relative freedom, clouded by isolated events of prosecution of journalists especially in the delicate field of Islamic arguments. Such prosecutions are always carried out according to applicable law, they always raise public debate, and are reported by international media and human rights organizations.

Population:	1,687,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 4,860 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Emirat
Main languages:	Arabic
Main religions:	Islam
Literacy:	79% (1995)
Online:	5,02% (March 2000)

According to a 1997 independent report, the International Press Institute World Review 1997, (available at www.freemedia.at/archive97/kuwait.htm) Kuwait is one of the most liberal countries in the Persian Gulf.

Internet access remains under government control, but without any censorship of contents. Kuwait does not figure in a black list of "web-enemy" countries released by Reporters Sans Frontières (available through <http://www.rsfr.fr/uk/indexuk.html>). Kuwait is absent also from a recent Human Rights Watch report on Internet censorship in the Middle East (available at www.hrw.org/advocacy/internet/mena/index.htm).

With regards to libraries in particular, intellectual freedom is unlimited. They do not suffer any form of censorship whatsoever.

Individual rights protected by the constitution are extensive and include personal liberty and equality before the law, freedom to hold beliefs and express opinions, and freedom of the press. According to Article 37 of the 1991 Kuwaiti Constitution: "Freedom of the press, printing and publishing shall be guaranteed in accordance with the conditions and manner specified by law."

In 1986 the government took a number of measures to repress political dissent. New censorship regulations formed a part of these measures. The Ministry of Information requires all publications to submit copy to the ministry in advance for approval and forbids criticism of the ruler and his family, other Arab leaders, or Islam, as well as the acceptance of foreign funding. After the Gulf war, in April 1991 the six opposition groups joined in calling for a free press. In the martial law period in Kuwait after the Gulf War, many alleged collaborators were either unfairly imprisoned, tortured or killed. In January 1992, the government lifted censorship, but journalists continued to experience various restrictions.

The 1961 Press and Publishing Law establishes fines and prison terms for the publication of banned material, which includes reports critical of the government. In practice, this provision has been used only rarely. There has been some cases though in recent years: On 4 October 1999, the Court of Appeal sentenced Dr al-Baghdadi, professor and chair of Kuwait University's political science department, to one month in prison for an article he wrote for the student magazine *Al-Shoula* (The Flame) in 1996. Al-Baghdadi had contended that the Prophet had failed to convert the non-believers during his time in Mecca, an argument that angered local clerics. In May, he was given a six-month suspended sentence for blasphemy, in accordance with the 1961 Press and Publications Law.

The Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) is theoretically independent but in practice is an arm of the Ministry of Information. Newspapers are generally privately owned and consist of seven dailies, five in Arabic and two in English (the *Arab Times* and *Kuwait Times*), as well as a number of weeklies. The largest daily is *Al Qabas* (Firebrand), which is independent and had a circulation of about 120,000 before the war. Two smaller dailies, *Al Anba* (News) and *Ar Ray al Amm* (Public Opinion), each with a pre-war circulation of 80,000, are more conservative and support the government. With regard to other information media, the Ministry of Information operates the three stations of Radio Kuwait and the Kuwait Television station.

A new draft of press law is now under revision and expected to be adopted soon. Current law is suspended and freedom of expression guaranteed until adoption of the new law.

More information on freedom of expression in Kuwait

Taghreed AlQudsi-Ghabra: "Information control in Kuwait: dialectic to democracy", in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, Summer 1995.