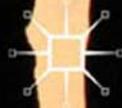
The image features a silhouette of a woman in a dark, long-sleeved abaya, standing with her hands on her hips and looking out from a doorway. The background is a bright, hazy desert landscape with a low wall and some distant structures. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and browns.

Islamic Feminism in Kuwait

The Politics and Paradoxes

Alessandra L. González



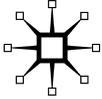
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Introduction

Many people, particularly since September 11, 2001, seem to think that Islam is inherently oppressive to women. But what do Muslim women in majority Muslim countries think about these issues? Do they consider themselves oppressed by their religion? And why do so many of them still wear the veil? This book tackles and untangles several commonly misunderstood paradoxes current in majority Muslim countries today. A case study of Kuwaiti elites and college students illustrates these paradoxes at the cutting edge of a contemporary women's suffrage movement. Using data from in-depth interviews with Kuwaiti cultural elites, we begin to unravel the logic that makes Islamic feminism a thriving approach to understanding the sociological importance of community, politics, and religion in majority Muslim countries. This book is a sociological window into Islamic feminism and serves as a model to understand social reform for women's rights in other majority Muslim contexts. It explores the subject of women's political participation in Kuwait as a means to understanding larger social reform issues. It is an updated search for examples of a reconciliation between Islam and feminism that comes out of an in-depth look at the evolving political roles for women in Kuwait.¹

One of the distinctive theoretical contributions of this study is to highlight the idea of a feminism rooted in sources of authority that are legitimate to the actors involved and to the societies with which they interact. In the case of politically active Kuwaiti Muslim women, the dynamics and boundaries for their version of an indigenous women's rights movement are situated amongst a variety of schools of Islamic thought, particularly those of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the Shia sources, and a variety of Liberal secular references from women's political participation in the United States and Europe.

Through ethnographic interviews and survey research of Kuwaiti elites and college students, one finds several interesting paradoxes about Islam, women, and politics in Kuwait:

- Muslim women are not jealous of Western feminists.
- Islamists are winning elections—with the help of women.

- Intelligent Muslim women are choosing to wear the veil.
- Veiled women are succeeding in fields of business, education, and politics.
- Men are not opposed to, but in fact *enabling*, Islamic feminism.
- Arab youth support both modern standards for gender equality and respect their traditional religious culture.
- Islamic feminists are finding ways to negotiate for progressive women's rights within the conservative constraints of their culture.

Far from being standardized to an antiquated text or interpretation, Kuwaiti elites are reconciling feminism with Islam in a variety of ways. Their ability to negotiate between traditional values and modern realities is a contextual process—and one that illustrates the possibilities for an indigenous resolution to global problems of gender inequality and economic disparity in the Middle East. A key sociological approach presented in this book is to understand the sociological sources of legitimate authority within Islamic contexts, namely, religious texts, the community, and authority figures. Islamic feminists are most successful when they present their arguments for women's rights as legitimately sanctioned from these indigenous and religious sources. The chapters in this book are divided to address each of these paradoxes in further detail.

A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

The sociological theory of legitimate authority put forward in this book acknowledges the influence of authority figures to maintain social control and the logic of optimizing one's benefit and minimizing negative sanctions.² An extensive history of the important sources of legitimate authority in Islamic tradition includes religious texts (including the *Sharia* and *Hadith*), the Muslim community (*ummah*), and authority figures (including *imam* preachers, Islamic scholars, and the political head of state). However, a historical and juridical focus on legitimate sources of authority in Islam is not the main focus of this book. Instead, a sociological theory of legitimate authority acknowledges the importance of multiple sources and dimensions of authority distilled into these three nodes of authority (texts, community, and religious or political leaders) but focuses on the logic and argument of Islamic feminists working within conservative cultural constraints to fight for progressive women's social and political

rights. A theory of legitimate authority explains the seeming paradox of Islamic feminism. The theory states that for marginalized agents in traditional, conservative, and sacralized societies, change must be legitimated by an indigenous source of authority if it is to be accepted and effectual in the local community. In the next few chapters, we will see this theory come to life through the experiences of women's rights activists in Kuwait.

There are two points to this theory: one involves the standard for what or who is an *authority* and the other the standard for who or what is defined as *legitimate*. The standard for the two parts of the theory are culturally specific and can be redefined to the particular conditions of the social phenomenon under study. In this book, the social phenomenon of an inherently traditional, conservative, and religion-based progressive feminist movement is encapsulated by Muslim elites in the majority Muslim context of Kuwaiti society. Islamic feminists argue for the expansion of women's rights in the public sphere by appealing to indigenous sources of authority, namely, sacred texts, theological arguments based on the life of the Prophet Mohammed, and the rulings of contemporary religious leaders, as well as the nonreligious Kuwaiti source of political legitimacy—their national Constitution. By equating the Constitution with sacred texts as a source of political authority, Islamic feminists have touch points to work with both secular women's rights activists as well as non-progressive Islamists who limit their sources of authority to religious sources. The sociological theory of legitimate authority is discussed and reengaged throughout the book.

UNIQUE FINDINGS IN THIS STUDY

The findings of this study have much to say not only to the academic literature but also to the broader audience of readers interested in the topic of Islamic feminism. Among some of the more unique findings are:

- Women's rights activists in Kuwait who are deeply concerned about social inequalities (for example, unequal access to government benefits and discrimination in the judicial system) are divided by their religious and ideological approaches.
- Ideological differences are indeed about secular versus theocratic worldviews, but when it comes to women's political rights, they are more salient to political process and supporter mobilization.

- Through academic research, personal narratives, interviews, and field observation, this study provides deeper insights and nuances to understand the gendered differences of approach and incorporation of political ideologies with regard to women's political rights in a majority Muslim context.

Finally, this book is about men and women in a majority Muslim society who operate within communal norms and restrictions and at the same time *rise above* averages—what I will refer to as Muslim “elites.” One of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate the possibilities for the empowerment of men and women in developing contexts within their respective cultural constraints.

WHAT WE THOUGHT WE KNEW ABOUT ISLAM AND GENDER

Before considering the present study of Islam and gender in Kuwait, it is important to review what we thought we knew about Islam and gender based on studies by scholars both inside and outside the Middle East. Out of a postmodern pursuit of indigenous women's voices, some Muslim women of the Middle East had the opportunity to break through feminist paradigms on a global scale—seen in international policy institutions such as the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. At the academic level, several sociologists and anthropologists have used their disciplinary methods to document some of the common agenda items and human concerns, such as the importance of the stability of the family and protection of personal security in times of conflict, shared by both Western and Middle Eastern feminists.³

There have also been attempts to group Muslim women's rights activists with Christian feminists as a way to emphasize interfaith commonalities.⁴ These theoretical groupings of Christian and Muslim feminists fit into the “culture wars” paradigm espoused by scholars such as James Davison Hunter⁵ and Samuel Huntington.⁶ Huntington's “clash of civilizations” argument furthers the notion that instead of women being unequal simply because of global economic inequality, Muslim women could arguably be at a disadvantage because of their cultural, perhaps particularly Islamic, constraints. Some scholars⁷ began to argue against the particularity of Islamic culture as a source of oppression for women and instead distinguished patriarchal constraints within traditional and conservative Muslim societies while pointing out the individual agency of Muslim women within

those cultural constraints.⁸ Later, some scholars began to look inside Islamic history and culture to highlight sources of argument *for* the expansion of women's rights. Some took a legalistic approach⁹ pointing to sources of Shariah and Hadith as the basis for such arguments. Others took a social science approach of distinguishing culture from theological arguments.¹⁰

Far from being a universal symbol of submission and oppression, the Muslim veil began to take on a modern, empowering meaning of "privacy and resistance" among some Muslim female scholars.¹¹ Since then, the current literature on Islam and feminism includes feminist reinterpretations of Qur'anic texts¹² and points out the double benefits of literacy and community that women gain by participating in Qur'anic classes.¹³ There has also been a recent emphasis on the particularity of cultural context and location in studies of Muslim women,¹⁴ which I continue to follow in this study of elites in Kuwait. By focusing on elites, and not representative data, I am also furthering the point that distinctions in Islamist politics occur by variation in social class. By "cultural elites" I mean those who have access to higher education, may have either studied or traveled outside their country of origin, or have come from a household with economic means that enable them to further outstanding educational and professional pursuits. Such a focus on cultural leaders is merited for the power that these elites hold to influence their societies and complement empirical studies that emphasize aggregate trends and demographics.¹⁵ Additional research of contemporary Islamic feminists includes studies of the effectuality of female pietist movements in Egypt and Lebanon,¹⁶ and a treatment of the convergences and differences of secular and religious feminists.¹⁷

WHAT EXACTLY DO WE MEAN BY "ISLAMIC FEMINISM"?

The term "Islamic feminism" has come to include just about anything people want it to mean. Feminists with a Liberal, secular agenda have embraced the term as a sort of annexation of women's rights activists with traditional dress and residual religious sensibilities. But Liberal and secular feminists may not completely incorporate the essentially pious arguments of women's rights activists that argue for their rights *within* Islam. However, many Islamists, such as Shiite Islamist activists in Iran and Sunni Islamists in Egypt, may tout a slogan of "Islam is the Solution" to their society's problems, including the grievances of inequality of many women, but are not very clear on the details of what a comprehensive Islamist solution would look like.

In this book, I define Islamic feminism as a movement that seeks to further a progressive agenda for women's rights within an Islamic framework. Islamic feminists are characterized by the use of Islamic arguments to justify and promote progressive women's rights. Note that this term can include both men and women, elites and nonelites. In the introduction to her book *Feminism in Islam*, Badran writes:

Islamic feminists have built upon and extended the Islamic modernist thinking that has been an integral component of Muslims' secular feminism and moved it into a whole new space. Islamic feminists are providing the new intellectual fuel necessary to push forward feminist goals in Muslim societies in Africa and Asia and in Muslim communities in the West, in an effort to move closer to achieving a transformed *umma*.¹⁸

The present study makes both a theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion and goes further in-depth into the Islamic feminist paradigm. Interviews with male and female Kuwaiti women's rights activists highlight both the intellectual fuel behind Islamic feminist arguments as well as the particularities of the feminist goals that previous scholars have only theorized for contemporary Muslim women's rights activists. And yet I am also expanding the paradigm to include various viewpoints in and around an Islamic feminist paradigm. That is, I interviewed men as well as women, young people as well as seasoned activists, conservative Salafists as well as secular Liberal Muslims on the future of Islamic feminism in Kuwait. By "Liberal" Muslims, I take the definition from the context as it is used among the elites in Kuwait, who would associate a politically "Liberal" ideology with one that is secular (one who believes religion and politics should remain separate) and is more interested in defending individual liberties than conserving cultural traditions. By "Conservative" I mean also what is largely interpreted in Kuwait as politically Islamist (that is, one who considers Islamic beliefs and traditions should direct politics, including at times a belief that the Shariah should be equal to if not above the Constitution as a legal authority), and that conservative Islamic traditions of the community should be respected above "aberrant" individual preferences. As one Kuwaiti Islamist activist describes the differences with regard to the debate about granting women the right to vote and run for political office in 2005:

Though I encouraged Islamist politicians to speak and accept publicly women's political rights, they responded by saying that: "We know we are the most to benefit (from women's political rights). But we will continue to speak publicly about what we feel is the position that benefits the whole society (that of opposing women's political rights)."

The Liberals responded by saying: “We know we won’t benefit (from the conservative votes of women who have gained their political rights), but on principle, we will continue to fight for women’s political rights.”¹⁹

Understanding what being “pro-women” means in this multiplicity of perspectives is essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of Islamic feminism in one of the conservative and traditional societies of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as recognizing the importance of establishing legitimate sources of authority on which activists ground their pro-women arguments and agendas.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN IN KUWAIT

For those who might be less familiar with the events leading up to a contemporary situation for women’s political participation in Kuwait, I offer a brief survey here. There are many more sources of historical depth that would serve for additional reference,²⁰ but to contextualize the remainder of the topics in the current study, I outline a brief series of historical events that affected Kuwaiti society and have bearing on the current social and political roles for women. There are many excellent resources that recount the history of pre-oil Arabia that cover this period in much more detail than I aim to here. My aim is to emphasize the roots of modern social networks and divisions among Kuwaitis that impact women’s rights.

Women in Kuwait have been affected to a large extent by the economic and topographic realities of the Arabian Peninsula. Many Kuwaitis in particular had indigenous roots in the Peninsula as bedouins, nomads who had to deal with the dry and harsh climate of the desert. Many other Arabs were merchants and tradesmen and lived along the coastal towns of the Peninsula, either to the western side and traded across the Red Sea or along the eastern coast where the present Gulf States are located, strategically across from what is modern-day Iran. This twofold distinction of rural bedouin background and urban coastal background (*hadar*) comprises one of the main ethnic markers of Kuwaitis today.

Seventh Century: Rise and Spread of Islam

Tribal and ethnic divisions among Muslims grew from years of trading and invading in an attempt to gain control of the major trade ports with the East. After the rise of Islam in the seventh century and since its spread to the present day, religious divisions gave birth

to further sectarian divisions, most notably across the Gulf with Shia Iran and in the West with the Maliki schools of Islam predominant in North Africa.²¹

Religious sectarianism also played an important role in the divisions among Gulf Arabs, as followers of Shia Islam concentrated their political aspirations along the Persian side of the Gulf. On the Arabian Peninsula, Sunni Islam was largely dominated by a form of strict fundamentalism, known as Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabism, or *Salafism*, arose in the eighteenth century when ‘Abd al-Wahhab spread this version of Islam through a political alliance with the al-Saud tribes in taking leadership for what is modern Saudi Arabia.²² Wahhabi Islam was well suited for the inherently conservative mores of life in the desert. The segregation of women from unrelated males, the deference to ruling tribes as political and spiritual leaders for the entire group, and a literal interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, were all guidelines for an Islam that would provide for and protect the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj) that Muslim believers all over the world were required to make. Even today, one can perceive the influence that Saudi Arabia has over the Arabian Peninsula both politically and culturally precisely because it is the protector of many holy sites in Islam, particularly of Mecca and Medina, and the guardian of the *Kabbah*, toward which Muslims pray five times a day.

The complex fabric of sectarian, tribal, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences among Kuwaitis offers both a strength and a challenge for women’s rights activists in the region. With such a plurality of backgrounds, a patriotic appeal to fight for women’s rights as a nation of Kuwaitis is a very effective strategy—one that is often espoused by youth and women’s rights activists of all political and religious persuasions. And yet social divisions are apparent in practical ways, such as when it is time to vote. Despite popular pro-women and patriotic sentiments, many times old tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and class divisions are reproduced at the ballot box. In the first few elections where women could participate (2006 and 2008), conservative voting patterns resulted in few votes for women candidates.²³

Twentieth Century: Discovery of Oil

Another turning point in Kuwait’s social and economic development that ushered in a new era for the region and affected women’s lives was the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the subsequent deluge of foreign investment. Assiri and Crystal²⁴ both provide a more detailed account of this transition and its subsequent effects on Kuwait’s

foreign policy. Al-Mughni²⁵ also provides a historical trajectory for Kuwaiti women, beginning with the nomadic tribes of the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula²⁶ to the specific tribes that settled in Kuwait, and the social organization around the emerging pearl diving industry that separated Kuwaitis into merchants, divers, and bedouin nomads. Subsequent pacts with the British changed the organic evolution of the emerging Kuwaiti society by cementing the power of certain families as the gatekeepers for foreign investment in the country.²⁷ From the 1960s, substantive social changes began to take place as oil revenues provided the funds to quickly develop Kuwait's economy and, notably, education, which included granting university access to women.

1961 Independence

Independence from Britain in 1961 gave Kuwaitis a new narrative for public activism. Women who wanted to become informed and active in politics could appeal to a nationalist narrative—which is still a theme in the politics of today. With an emerging independent national identity, men and women of all backgrounds—bedouin, merchant, Sunni, or Shia—could come together as Kuwaitis. González and Al-Kazi further lay out the sociological reasons as to why life for Kuwaiti women continued to expand out of private spaces into public places. Increasing opportunities for women in education and at the workplace influenced the way they renegotiated boundaries in public spaces, including whether or not they wore the Islamic veil.

1990 Iraqi Invasion and Aftereffects

During the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, women began to show their strength as they contributed to the war effort. With women working to keep their families together—and using their knowledge to bravely supply artillery, reconnaissance, and moral support—the possibilities for women opened up in the public eye. One former female parliamentary candidate speaks of how this turbulent time in her country's history opened the doors for women to become involved in the nation's politics:

Throughout the invasion of Kuwait, there were big changes for women, both inside and outside of Kuwait. A lot of women started to get involved in politics. Before the invasion, Kuwaiti women were very relaxed, shopping . . . and even in business, or any kind of work, Kuwaiti

women were always considered as weak figures. And she was not very serious in work or in business. But after the second of August 1990, women in Kuwait, threw every... Christian Dior or Saint Laurent or every [designer dress]... and they just wore military jackets.

After the invasion (and of course, the liberation of Kuwait), all the world started to push Kuwait for real democracy, and to start to have women be involved in the political [scene].

At that time [there were] no groups for women in Kuwait, and... 17 years after the invasion, men (and even MPs²⁸) [did] not allow us to enter the [campaign tents] in the election time.

And if they said “come” [the women] came very shyly, and they put two or three chairs for women outside of the campaign [tent] and they know they can do this because we didn’t have the right to vote. That’s why they didn’t need us. And they didn’t want us to see what [they were doing]. And they did not allow us to go deep and share with them their meetings or any kind of discussion. Because until 2005, when we didn’t have any right to vote [it was] not necessary.²⁹

This former female Kuwaiti parliamentary candidate recounts a history of conflict that ironically brought women together in vision and politics for a time. She also highlights the radical shift in politics caused by the government act in 2005 to give women their political rights. While women had shown their bravery during wartime, they were still not considered political actors until 2005 when their political rights were granted.

September 11, 2001, and the Global War on Terror

The *jihadi* attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “Global War on Terror” led by the United States, created significant shifts in how governments and individual Muslims in majority Muslim countries viewed themselves and their place in global politics.

September 11 [was a] big time for the Americans, tragic too...

Now, Kuwait has a dilemma. (Problems come with each side.) They want on one side, to be very pro-American... They [the Kuwaiti government] want American... interest in the area, they want to have America in Iraq and the rest of the area, yet at the same time, they [face] an internal problem—all political Islamists [have] very strong parties. (The Kuwaiti National Assembly also has strong Islamist parties), and they are anti-American. [We] don’t know how [to] solve this problem.³⁰

The fact that jihadist Islamists awakened Islam to global consciousness in a very politicized lens put many political Islamists on the

defensive. Added to that was the discontent caused by the physical presence of the American military in Kuwait, which served as a base of operations for the war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq and against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Kuwaiti society became very affected by the aftereffects of September 11 and the “War on Terror.” Subsequent geopolitical interventions designed to weaken terrorist bases of operation affected the countries of the Arabian Peninsula in a very real way.

*2005 Election Law and 2006 Elections—
The First Female Candidates*

Women were granted the right to vote and run for political office in 2005. Political rights for women were first brought up for a vote in the Kuwaiti parliament in 1998 but were actually voted down—by both Islamists and Liberal (all male) politicians. Subsequently, the Kuwaiti government decided to use their authority to issue a decree in 2005 granting women their political rights. The first elections where women were able to vote and run for office were held in 2006 after an emergency election was announced following dissolution of the parliament. The dissolution and subsequent calls for elections left women candidates with about one month to prepare for their first nationwide election ever in Kuwaiti history. Many of the first set of female candidates felt that there was very little time to prepare viable campaigns and blamed dearth of preparedness and resources, not religious or ideological objections, for their lack of success. Though women did not win seats in their first elections, they did make a big mark on the political and social scene, forcing Islamist politicians as well as Liberal ones to acknowledge them on the campaign trail.³¹

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN KUWAIT

Throughout this modern period of fast social change and development, including the discovery of oil and the aftereffects of the Iraqi invasion, Kuwaiti society established a pattern and a rhythm for women’s rights. With each historical change and political development, major political players were able to reconsider their interpretation of Islam to meet the current challenge. This is the pragmatic and progressive framework that underlies modern women’s rights activism in Kuwait and enables many of the paradoxes associated with Islamic feminism in Kuwait.

In addition, it is important to recognize the intellectual roots of various contemporary feminist movements within Islamic contexts that have influenced the women's political and social movements in Kuwait. These include the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the Shia, and the politically Liberal or secular Muslims. First of all, Kuwaiti Muslim society comprises about 70 percent Sunni Muslims and about 30 percent Shia Muslims.³² Among the Sunni Muslim schools of thought, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) school of thought has its roots in Egypt, with all the complexities of engagement with a secular government that was until recently led by Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose intellectual and political foundation sprung from the writings of Hassan al-Banna³³ and later Sayyid Qutb,³⁴ provided an outlet for a disgruntled middle class whose economic and political frustrations did not benefit from the elite Liberals in charge. Liberal Egyptian feminist forerunners such as Hoda Sharaawi also may have put off moderate and conservative women activists by disavowing traditional customs, such as throwing Muslim veils off into the sea. A Liberal and largely secular brand of feminist activism may never have taken a solid hold on the hearts and minds of most of Egyptian society. Nonetheless these Muslim women reformers provided pioneering models for women's activism in conservative Islamic societies such as Kuwait's.

Islamic Feminists of the Muslim Brotherhood

Contemporary women activists out of an Islamist mold, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's Muslim Women's Association founder Zaynab al Ghazali,³⁵ and writer and scholar Dr. Heba Raouf Ezzat,³⁶ are among those leading the discussions within the masses of Islamic activists and politicians who most recently marched to depose the long-standing secular regime of Hosni Mubarak. In Egypt, this particular brand of Islamic feminism is marked by oppositionist tendencies and is comprised of women from the working, upwardly mobile, and educated middle class. Saba Mahmood³⁷ depicts the grassroots organization of these women in Qur'anic study circles and highlights their ability to fortify the modern Egyptian woman with an education and a reference to her faith. Islamist women from within the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought have been determined activists in recent political campaigns outside of Egypt as well. In Kuwait, as we will see in later chapters, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the Kuwaiti version of the Muslim Brotherhood, also referred to by its Arabic acronym as "HADAS,"³⁸ is comprised

of many young people, who see themselves not only as religious conservatives but also as political pragmatists. Some of the young women of HADAS I met with were from working middle-class backgrounds and were mothers and college students with jobs outside the home. And yet they believed that politics was a means to an end for women's social rights, not an end in itself. Now, the question for women activists within the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought is largely the same for the Muslim Brotherhood in general. With a slogan so vague and broad as "Islam is the Solution," what will it mean in actuality as Islamists move forward to compete for legitimacy within a new Egyptian government? What are the implications of continued women's participation in a future government with Islamic political affiliation? For Kuwaiti society, the question might be, to what end will women continue to participate and will they themselves ever put forward a female Islamist political candidate? Some of these questions about the future of Islamist women in politics can be better contextualized by observing and hearing from some of the women of HADAS themselves, as we do in this book. We see that as progressive actors within a conservative cultural context, they deliberate the importance of religion in politics and yet selectively push the traditional boundaries they work within.

Islamic Feminists and Salafi Islamists

Also among the Sunni Islamists in Kuwait are the Salafi Islamists, whose intellectual and social roots stem from the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. The Salafis are known to be the most strict of the politically engaged Islamists, particularly with regard to women's public participation in society. For the Salafis, politics is subservient to religion and only exists to serve religious ends. For them, there is no separate space between mosque and state. They do not distinguish between public and private roles for women; they abide by norms that keep men the functioning stewards of God's creation outside of the home and women as the stewards of the private sphere of life, in the home. For Salafis, women are integral to religious revival, but women's active participation in politics is to be marginal, at best. Carine Lahoud-Tatar's work on Salafism in Kuwait offers a more detailed look into this particular school of thought. For the present study, I asked Salafi Islamist politicians of their goals for incorporating women's votes after they were forced to accept the Kuwaiti Government's decision to allow women the right to vote and run for public office in 2005, and what steps they were prepared to take to continue to fight for their vision of women's rights.

Consistent with their conservative Islamic ideology, they expressed their concern that with so much social breakdown of the traditional family, they see their group as a last bulwark to keep Kuwaiti society from the decay of a liberalizing, secular, and in their view, “Western” model of society. The question for the women who support such Salafi candidates and work to expand this vision is—how will Kuwaiti society remain economically and politically competitive when the rest of the world is working to incorporate and provide equal opportunities for its women (half of its labor force) in the public sphere?

Shia Islamic Feminists

About 30 percent of Kuwaitis identify with a Shia Muslim school of thought,³⁹ whose intellectual roots go back centuries to the early developments of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Mohammad but whose cultivation is most recently anchored by religious scholars in Shia Iran. In Kuwaiti society, there are two branches of Shia Islam that draw most significant adherents, particularly those with references to scholars in Qom, Iran, and Najaf in present-day Iraq. Both were traditional places of Shia study and scholarship, and continue to serve as places of reference for slightly differing interpretations of Muslim texts and traditions, particularly with regard to women’s political and social rights. The Shia of the Qoms school of thought are thought to be more lenient and liberal on some women’s rights issues, such as women’s political rights, whereas the Najaf school is perceived to be more strict or conservative on some women’s rights issues.⁴⁰ A large number of Shia in Kuwait have integrated themselves through business and trade to be among the merchant upper class of Kuwaiti society. A legacy of wealth and intellectual development have allowed Shia in Kuwait to be a relatively successful minority group in society and equal participants in the government. Thus, the Shia representation in the parliament often splits between the Liberal secular politicians (such as female parliamentarians Dr. Rola Dashti and Dr. Massouma Al-Mubarak), who have religious roots in Shia Islam but who do not bring their religious views into their political agenda, and the Shia conservative parliamentarians, such as those of the National Islamic Alliance.

Islamic Feminists and Political Liberals

Among the intellectual schools of thought that most influence the women’s rights movement in Kuwait are politically Liberal women’s rights activists. We can say that the roots of the Liberal political activists