



SPECIAL REPORT

A Religious Fire Bell in the Night

By DOUG BANDOW on 5.31.12 @ 6:08AM

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KUWAIT CITY -- Many of America's biggest security threats emanate from its nominal allies, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Without them neither the Taliban nor al Qaeda would have been nearly so strong. These countries also are hostile to religious minorities. Other malefactors include Iraq, where the government is a creation of U.S. invasion, and Afghanistan, where the government survives only with allied military support.

Religious intolerance is on the rise even in Kuwait, perhaps America's best friend in the Arab world.

Until now Christians have worshipped freely in the Persian Gulf state. However, growing threats to religious minorities reflect public attitudes which could undermine the heretofore close U.S.-Kuwait relationship. Saudi Arabia long has promoted the worst forms of religious intolerance. Spiritual liberty simply doesn't exist. The country is essentially a totalitarian state. The government claims the right to decide the most fundamental questions involving every individual's conscience.

The State Department's latest report on religious freedom observed: "The laws and policies restrict religious freedom, and in practice, the government generally enforced these restrictions. Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice." At best non-Sunni Muslims can hope to be left alone when they worship privately. The group Open Doors placed Saudi Arabia on its "World Watch List," noting simply that "religious freedom does not exist in this heartland of Islam where citizens are only allowed to adhere to one religion."

Earlier this year the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom tagged the kingdom as a "country of particular concern." The Commission found that "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom continued despite improvements." A decade after 9/11, "the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms related to promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. The Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam."

Although Saudi Arabia is the most important Gulf State, it is uniquely intolerant. Most of its neighbors, like Kuwait, allow greater diversity of thought and action. That relative liberality does not go down well in Saudi Arabia.

The Wahhabist Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Asheikh oversees every Sunni Muslim cleric in Saudi Arabia. He recently stated that it is "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region."

This judgment came in response to a question from a Kuwaiti delegation of the Wahhabist "Revival of Islamic Heritage Society." Al-Asheikh cited the Hadith, an oral commentary on Mohammad's life, which includes the Prophet's injunction that "There are not to be two religions in the [Arabian] Peninsula." Al-Asheikh's opinion has not been publicized in Saudi Arabia, but his pronouncement already is law there. No Christian churches exist to be torn down.

This is not the case in the rest of the Persian Gulf. "Christian churches, Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines are found in Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, and Yemen," noted Irfan al-Alawi of the Gatestone Institute. In Kuwait there were three churches -- Catholic, Coptic, and Evangelical -- within two blocks of the hotel at which stayed. A few years back I interviewed ministers at all three.

In general their relations with the government were very good. The late Jerry Zandstra, then the senior minister at the National Evangelical Church, told me, "We've never had any serious interference at all." The government recently granted a permit to the Catholic Church to construct a new facility. Bishop Camillo Ballin, head of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, noted that he had "never experienced enmity" while acting in Kuwait.

Of course, not all is perfect. The State Department reported occasional problems and explained: "The constitution protects freedom of belief, although other laws and policies restrict the free practice of religion." Most important, religions "not sanctioned in the Qur'an," such as Buddhism and Hinduism, "could not build places of worship or other religious facilities," reported State, though worship in private homes was allowed.

When asked about Al-Asheikh's recommendation, Jamal Al-Shahab, Kuwait's Minister of Religious Endowments, responded that "the constitution of Kuwait guarantees its citizens [freedom of] religion and worship" and that "Demolishing churches and forbidding the members of the Christian community from worshipping contravenes the state's laws and regulations." The issue was not even mentioned when I visited in February to cover the National Assembly election. Government officials obviously were committed to a society that was both open and Muslim.

However, the election delivered a new Islamist majority in parliament. The Emir is head of state and chooses the government, but the 50 member National Assembly passes laws and interrogates ministers. Charges of corruption led to the resignation of the prime minister and dissolution of parliament. Western-leaning liberals were decimated while 34 Islamists were elected.

It's not the same as an Islamist takeover in, say, Pakistan, or even what might happen in Egypt. Kuwait is a small society in which most everyone seems to know or is otherwise connected with everyone. Many Islamists, including some who I met, were seen more as moderate government critics than intolerant crusaders.

Yet it didn't take long for the new majority to press for policies contrary to Kuwait's record of openness. The Islamist group -- formal parties do not exist -- proposed amending the constitution to make Sharia the source of law. The Emir said no, but he did accept legislation to impose the death penalty on Muslims for blasphemy (non-Muslims remained subject to a fine and imprisonment).

Worse, just a couple weeks after the election MP Osama Al-Monawer proposed drafting a law to turn Al-Asheikh's pronouncement into law.

Explained Al-Monawer: "Kuwait is an Islamic country where churches are not permitted to be built." An Islamist cleric in Kuwait, Sheikh Saleh Al-Ghanem, backed the parliamentarian, arguing that according to Mohammed no non-Islamic "religion may be practiced in the Arabian Peninsula." And Al-Asheikh endorsed the proposal, explaining that "Kuwait is part of the Arabian Peninsula, and [countries in] the Arabian Peninsula must demolish any churches" because "the Prophet instructed us that there is no place for two religions" in the Peninsula. If such a measure was enacted, Kuwait would suddenly look a lot like Saudi Arabia.

Al-Monawer's threat may have been triggered by the issuance of the construction permit to the Catholic Church. Rumors also circulated -- though they are impossible to confirm -- that a member of the ruling family had converted to Christianity. In any case, Al-Monawer's initiative was

greeted with substantial criticism. Kuwaiti religion minister Al-Shabab explained that "the constitution of Kuwait guarantees its citizens [freedom of] religion and worship, and Islam is well known as a tolerant religion.

Demolishing churches and forbidding the members of the Christian community from worshipping contravenes the state laws and regulation." Commentators ranging from political to academic to journalistic criticized the proposal on theological and legal grounds. Some also made the obvious point that Kuwait and other Islamic nations could hardly complain about Western strictures against Islam if Muslim nations were destroying Christian churches.

Under pressure Al-Monawer backed down slightly, limiting his proposal, advanced by the new Al-Adala or "Justice" Bloc in parliament, to a ban on the construction of any new facilities. A fellow MP explained that "Kuwait already has an excessive number of churches compared to the country's Christian minority." Kuwait would avoid the PR disaster of demolishing churches while sharply constricting the Christian community and rolling up the welcome mat for believers, who form an important part of the large foreign work community.

However, without government approval the measure was doomed. In March Al-Adala tabled the proposal, though Al-Monawer indicated that he wanted to question the religion minister over the new church permit. Another Bloc member, Mohammad Hayef, said the approval was "a mistake" which "will not go unnoticed."

Although Kuwaiti Christians reacted with relief to the legislation's apparent demise, they remained cautious. Bishop Ballin refused to be interviewed out of fear of speaking to the press. Bishop Paul Hinder, who heads the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, explained that the situation in Kuwait has "become critical." He added that Bishop Ballin was "in a particularly delicate situation. People should remember we are living here and have to proceed very carefully."

For now, at least, the threat of actual religious persecution in Kuwait has passed. The government deserves credit: the ruling family remains committed to a forward-looking and open country. Long noted for its

generally free press and fair elections, Kuwait remains a tolerant society as well.

Nevertheless, unsettling popular currents are running strongly through a population that remains very friendly to America. The fact that the most powerful parliamentary faction contemplated passing legislation to shut every Christian church -- and had the votes to do so -- offers a warning if Kuwait eventually becomes a full parliamentary democracy, as some Kuwaitis desire. If final political decisions in Kuwait were made by an elective prime minister rather than a hereditary emir, every Christian church in the country might have been demolished by now.

Kuwait remains Washington's best friend in the Persian Gulf. However, shared interests do not guarantee shared values. And a lack of shared values could end up threatening shared interests. As with Saudi Arabia.

The latest parliamentary election results should serve as Thomas Jefferson's famed "fire bell in the night." The Islamist tide in Kuwait is likely to recede, as it has done before. If not, however, Kuwait could turn into Saudi Arabia-lite. Americans can ill afford another nominal ally that promotes the forces of violent intolerance worldwide.