

World Watch Research

Kuwait:

# Background Information

September 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

September 2024

© Open Doors International

[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

## Contents

Copyright and sources .....	1
Map of country .....	2
Recent history .....	2
Political and legal landscape .....	4
Religious landscape.....	6
Economic landscape.....	8
Social and cultural landscape.....	9
Technological landscape .....	11
Security situation .....	12
Christian origins .....	12
Church spectrum today.....	13
Further useful reports.....	13
External Links .....	14

## Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

## Map of country



Kuwait: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
4,349,000	629,000	14.5

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

Kuwait became independent from Britain in 1961, with the Emir always belonging to the Al-Sabah family, which has ruled Kuwait since the mid-18th century. Oil was discovered in the 1930s which fundamentally changed Kuwait ever since. The Gulf war (1990-1991) saw Kuwait invaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq and subsequently liberated by a coalition of forces led by the USA. Kuwait has become an even stronger US ally since then. In 1963, Kuwait was the first Gulf state to establish an elected parliament (BBC country profile). The Kuwaiti parliament is one of the strongest parliaments in the region, which has frequently led to political upheaval between elected (opposition) members and the authoritarian government.

In 2011, the Arab Spring uprisings inspired some protests in Kuwait but to little effect. However, the emir-appointed prime minister and his cabinet resigned in December 2011 due to alleged corruption. In October 2012, parliament was dissolved once more due to on-going tensions between government forces and the opposition composed of Islamic, tribal and secular factions. In the following decade, fueled by a younger, less tribal generation wanting reforms, the incongruity of having a strong parliament on the one hand and an authoritarian government led by the royal family on the other has become more and more obvious: The government has been rife with financial scandals, leading to increasing demands for accountability, with the royal family seemingly unwilling to give up their privileges ([POMED, 24 October 2022](#)). The Kuwaiti population responded by electing a greater number of opposition members to parliament in the most recent elections.

In an unprecedented step to solve the ongoing political crisis, the Emir approved a cabinet including three opposition lawmakers in December 2021 ([The Arab Weekly, 28 December 2021](#)). However, this did not solve the political deadlock and the cabinet resigned in April 2022. In a last bid to bring a solution, the Emir ultimately decided to dissolve parliament again and elections were held in September 2022, which saw the opposition with 33 seats taking the majority in the 50 seat parliament. Consequently, more unprecedented steps were taken by the government to allow more parliamentary independency ([Carnegie Endowment, 22 November 2022](#)). However, in March 2023 the Constitutional Court annulled the September 2022 election, stating government irregularities in dissolving the parliament and reinstated the 2020 parliament. Citing "the will of the people", the government responded by dissolving this parliament once more in May 2023, triggering new elections which again delivered a majority of parliamentary seats to the opposition. A fifth government in less than one year was installed in June 2023, with the political bickering continuing ([Al-Jazeera, 19 June 2023](#)).

In December 2023, Emir Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah passed away and was succeeded by his 83 year old half-brother Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who de facto already ruled the country. Although Sheikh Mishal is known to be a Reformist and averse to nepotism, no significant policy changes were to be expected ([Al-Jazeera, 20 December 2023](#)). The new Emir added a new chapter to the ongoing political saga by dissolving the parliament once more in February 2024 after parliament refused to remove alleged disrespectful remarks about the Emir's inaugural speech from the minutes ([Asharg Al-Aswat, 16 February 2024](#)). Another round of elections took place in April 2024, but the following government was short-lived: On 10 May 2024, the Emir suspended the parliament for maximum four years. In contrast with earlier suspensions in 1976 and 1986, this move is not considered to be an authoritarian power grab, but rather a much needed pause to bring political calm and stability and ultimately reforms ([Arab Reform Initiative, 3 June 2024](#)).

A significant number of MPs are aligned with Islamist groups, who appear to be gaining more influence. 17 MPs signed a "value pledge" before the 2022 elections, calling for gender segregation in education, among other things ([Fair Observer, 7 October 2022](#)). Their growing influence will probably hinder social reforms, including attempts to abolish the Penal Code's notorious Article 153, which treats so called 'honor killings' as a misdemeanor punishable by a fine. Despite the approval of the Family Protection Law in 2020, domestic violence, including honor killings, remains a serious issue ([The New Arab, 19 January 2023](#)).

In February 2018, a [diplomatic row erupted](#) between Kuwait and the Philippines, after a Philippine domestic worker was found dead in a freezer, revealing the tip of the iceberg of domestic worker abuse

(The Washington Post, 3 April 2018). In reaction, Philippine President Duterte imposed a travel ban for Philippine migrants to Kuwait. After both governments came to an agreement about worker rights in May 2018, the travel ban was lifted. The solutions include the right for Philippine domestic workers to keep their passport during employment, even when taking a day off. Under the *kafala* system, domestic workers had to hand over their passport to their employers to prevent them from potentially running away. A Kuwaiti blogger pointed out that employers invest [thousands of dollars](#) to employ such workers and publicly criticized this new arrangement and was subsequently accused of having a 'slavery mentality' (World Gulf, 23 July 2018). Despite the changes and another travel ban in 2020, at least three other Filipino domestic workers have been killed by their employers since 2018 ([Arab News, 28 January 2023](#)). For instance: In September 2023, a Kuwaiti teen received a 15 year prison sentence for the rape and murder of a Filipino domestic worker ([SCMP, 15 September 2023](#)). Abuse of domestic workers is a big problem in Kuwait but it is difficult to discern to what extent an employee's Christian faith adds to their vulnerability.

## Political and legal landscape

Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy whose head of state is the Emir of the al-Sabah family and was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an [elected parliament](#). In May 2005 parliament gave women the right to vote and stand as candidates in elections for the 50-seat National Assembly. However, it took until the 2016 elections before the first female MP was elected. Two women were elected in the 2022 elections, with one retaining her seat in the 2023 and 2024 elections.

The current political upheaval between parliament and government has a long history behind it, which even saw parliament being unconstitutionally dissolved for years on end, namely between 1976 and 1981, and again between 1986 and 1992. The Emir's response to parliament's wishes to question a cabinet minister, often a member of the royal family, has usually been to appoint someone else or to dissolve parliament, rather than being held accountable. Hence, to the frustration of the Kuwaiti citizens, accusations of corruption and mishandling of funds are not being addressed. In addition, while the age of cabinet ministers is often high, the majority of the MPs are younger than 45 years old, indicating a generation gap as well ([MDC, 11 April 2021](#)). In contrast to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, are publicly active and a significant number of MPs are aligned with them.

Kuwait tries to keep a neutral position at the international level and did not join Saudi Arabia and the UAE in boycotting Qatar. It had an active role in the reconciliation of the Qatari crisis (2017-2021): Emir Sheikh al-Sabah [stated](#) in October 2019 that "it is not acceptable to have a dispute among our brotherly GCC states" (Al-Jazeera, 29 October 2019). Its neutral position is also pragmatic, as Kuwait has a significant Shia minority (30%), while Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood enjoy support as well and have seats in parliament. Hence, normalizing ties with Israel (as carried out by the UAE and Bahrain via the Abraham Accords) would most probably jeopardize stability in the country.

Compared to other countries in the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait generally ranks better in civil liberties and freedom of the press and Kuwaitis are proud of their tradition of active political participation. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World Index 2024](#) ranks Kuwait "partly free", making it an exception in the wider region.

However, Human Right Watch ([HRW 2024 Kuwait country chapter](#)) states:

- "Kuwaiti authorities used provisions in the penal code and national security and cybercrime laws to restrict free speech and prosecute Kuwaitis and non-nationals, particularly for comments made on social media." Those laws "criminalize speech deemed insulting to religion, the emir, or foreign leaders."
- "Authorities have discriminated against the Bidun, a group of about 100,000 stateless people who claim Kuwaiti nationality, since Kuwait's independence in 1961. The government rejects their claims and refers to them as "illegal residents." The government has failed to create a transparent process to determine their citizenship claims or provide them with a path to nationality while creating obstacles for Bidun to obtain civil documentation, receive social services, and access their rights to health, education, and work." (The term [Bidun](#) or Bidoon is not the same as Bedouin, which refers to a much larger social-cultural category of desert-dwelling, nomadic pastoralists in the region, although there is some overlap - Minority Rights Group International, accessed 14 March 2024).
- "Two-thirds of Kuwait's population are migrant workers, who remain vulnerable to abuse, largely due to the kafala (sponsorship) system, which ties migrants' visas to their employers and requires that migrants get their employers' consent to leave employment or change jobs."

Indigenous and expatriate Christians enjoy some protection under the Constitution, but are also limited by it. Middle East Concern states ([MEC Kuwait report](#), accessed 28 August 2024):

- "The constitution of Kuwait enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a main source of legislation. However, the constitution also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion. It guarantees State protection of freedom of religious practice, 'in accordance with established customs', provided that religious practice 'does not conflict with public policy or morals'. Public defamation of an officially recognized religious group or of their practices is a criminal offence. Nationality laws preclude the naturalization of non-Muslims."

### **Gender perspective**

Kuwait's legal landscape has long been restrictive towards women and girls. Kuwait's personal status law applies to Sunni Muslims (who make up the majority of Kuwaitis) and discriminates against women with respect to marriage, divorce and child custody. Women need the permission of their male guardians to marry and work, and are legally obliged to obey their husbands. The personal status rules that apply to Shia Muslims also discriminate against women ([HRW 2024 Kuwait country chapter](#)). Women from a Muslim background are restricted by law from marrying a non-Muslim, making it challenging for female converts to establish a Christian family.

Legislation fails to adequately address domestic violence, violence against women or marital rape. A 2019 study revealed that several female survivors of domestic violence were sent back to their abusers upon reporting abuse ([HRW 2021 Kuwait country chapter](#)). A [new law](#) introduced in September 2020 on domestic violence has been widely welcomed as a positive development, although it fails to address all areas of abuse (Kuwait Times, 24 November 2022). Escaping abusive marriages is also problematic; under Sharia law a man has the right to divorce his wife by *talaq* whereas a woman must

file for divorce through the courts on specified grounds, often a lengthy and complicated process (Personal Status Act, 1984, Art 27).

## Religious landscape

Kuwait: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	629,000	14.5
Muslim	3,404,000	78.3
Hindu	216,000	5.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	23,100	0.5
Atheist	2,200	0.1
Agnostic	57,700	1.3
Other	17,400	0.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Kuwait](#)):

- The majority of the 1.5 million Kuwaiti citizens (70%) are Sunni Muslims. However, a significant majority (30%) is Shia, which makes the Sunni Kuwaiti government careful in its dealings with Iran.
- The overall majority of Christians are expatriates.
- In addition to a very small number of Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity, Kuwait has a small community of indigenous (non-convert) Christians who probably number just under 300 and originate from Turkish Christians who settled in Kuwait early in the twentieth century (see below: *Church spectrum*).
- Per data from the Public Authority for Civil information (PACI) released in June 2023, approximately 62.7% of the expatriate population is Muslim, 24.5% Christian, and 12.8% from other religions.

According to Middle East Concern states ([MEC Kuwait report](#), accessed 28 August 2024):

- "It is estimated that up to 26% of the expatriate population is Christian."

- "Expatriate Christians enjoy comparative freedom in Kuwait, provided that their activities are restricted to designated compounds and, in particular, that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Most churches find their current facilities inadequate, and church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages. Requests made in recent years for additional building or land have been refused. Some churches are frustrated by the limited number of visas available for clergy and staff."
- "The small number of indigenous Kuwaiti Christians (i.e. from Christian background) generally enjoy good standing in society. In 2018, a Parliamentary Committee proposed a change to legislation to allow for non-Muslims to be eligible for Kuwaiti citizenship, but that proposal did not progress."
- "Kuwaiti nationals or other Muslims who choose to leave Islam are likely to face strong family and societal pressure. In extreme cases those who leave Islam can face violent responses from family members. Those considered apostates could also face imprisonment under the defamation provisions, and sanctions such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody under personal status laws overseen by Shari'a courts."

Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 30 November 2020) ranks Kuwait as having "grave violations" and notes that the Constitution limits Freedom of Religion and Belief:

- "The Constitution guarantees freedom of religious practice, nevertheless it specifies that such practice must not contravene public order or morals and must work in accordance with established customs (Article 35). The government does not recognize Bahai, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh groups which are not included in the Islamic principle of Abrahamic faiths (ahl al-kitab: Muslims, Jews, Christians). It also denied the recognition of several Christian groups. The recognition by the state often take years for approval and is not transparent."
- During recent years, human rights activists and others have been convicted for spreading atheism and secularism.

Although Kuwait has accepted some of the major United Nations conventions on human rights (e.g. Kuwait entered the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1996) non-Islamic religions face much opposition. In 2012, a member of Parliament [announced](#) a bill to put a halt on non-Islamic places of worship being built (Arabian Business, 19 February 2012). The bill was not approved but churches still have to operate carefully. Proselytizing Muslims is both illegal and socially unacceptable and churches tend to apply self-censorship to avoid this. Criticizing Islam or the Islamic Prophet Muhammed will lead to public prosecution. Even the suggestion that the Kuwaiti Constitution should have priority over the Quran in state affairs can [lead to charges](#) and outbursts of public hatred (BBC News, 14 April 2016).

Despite the government's restrictive policies, the heavy pressure on Christians is not coming from the state authorities in the first instance: Christians have most to fear from members of Kuwait's conservative society. There is a clear dichotomy in the country between Kuwaitis (by definition Muslim, except for its tiny minority of Kuwaiti Christians) and the many migrant workers, even more so if the latter are Christian. As a result, due to the already existing societal abuse and discrimination, Christians frequently exercise self-restraint for safety reasons.



## Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Kuwait](#) (accessed 28 August 2024) and [World Bank data for Kuwait](#) (accessed 28 August 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$50,800 (2023 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 2.0%, with youth unemployment at 25.5% (2021), indicating the need for the creation of economic opportunities for the younger generation.
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** No data available, but probably low. The Kuwaiti government is known to take care of all citizens, except for the stateless Bidoon.

According to the World Bank's [Macro Poverty Outlook 2024 Kuwait](#) (April 2024):

- **Economy:** "In 2023, economic growth significantly decelerated mainly due to OPEC+'s production quota cuts, and a global slowdown, resulting in an overall GDP decline of -0.1 percent."
- **Fiscal deficit:** "The fiscal account recorded a deficit of 6.8 percent of GDP (excluding investment income and the Future Generation Fund transfers), due to a 27 percent drop in revenue and a 55 percent surge in expenditures, primarily from increased salaries, grants, and subsidies spending in the first three quarters of FY2023-24."
- **Inflation:** "Tight monetary policy, coupled with slow economic growth and substantial government subsidies for food and energy, contributed to a containment of inflationary pressures to 3.6 percent in 2023, with a further decline to 3.3 percent observed in January 2024."
- **Economic outlook:** "Economic growth is expected to recover to 2.8 percent in 2024, supported by expansionary fiscal policies, higher oil production, and increased output from Al Zour refinery. Oil output is expected to grow by 3.6 percent, as OPEC+ announces extension by mid-2024 of additional voluntary cuts (135 tb/d for Kuwait), with global oil prices remaining robust."
- **Non-oil economic growth:** "The non-oil sector is projected to grow by 2.1 percent, but still relatively elevated interest rates may restrain domestic consumption, preventing the economy from achieving its full potential. Moreover, ongoing political uncertainties may delay the implementation of new infrastructure projects and slow the pace of reform initiatives."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region](#) report (accessed 26 July 2024) puts the Kuwaiti economy in the high income category .
- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Kuwait](#)) shows improvement in the economic indicators following the COVID-19 crisis. Both the "Economy" and "Human Flight and Brain Drain" indicators continued to fall and remained low, while "Economic inequality" improved after some years of decline and remained on a moderate level.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2024 Kuwait profile](#)) expects: Emir "Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, or his anointed successor, will retain ultimate executive authority throughout the 2024-28 forecast period. However, his confrontational approach towards Kuwait's restive parliamentary opposition will sustain friction between the executive and legislature in the medium-term. The emir's decision to dissolve parliament in January, coupled with a sluggish bureaucracy, will sustain policymaking gridlock and deter some investors, slowing the stream of public-private partnership deals. Growth will slow in 2024-28 as hydrocarbons output steadies

and oil prices fall, inflicting a negative knock-on effect on government spending."

- The Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI 2024, p.4](#)) states: "Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Kuwait faces a fiscal crisis. While the government has made substantial efforts to alter the organization of the market and improve conditions to attract foreign businesses, no economic diversification has resulted. Its ongoing high dependence on exporting oil leaves Kuwait vulnerable to fluctuations in the global market. Measures to cushion the economic fallout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic ... have shrunk the country's financial assets. To cushion the economic fallout, Kuwait has significantly tapped the reserves of its General Reserve Fund, since a conflict with the parliament over the renewal of a debt law prevented the government from borrowing on international debt markets. Only the unexpected rise of the international price of oil in the wake of Russia's full-fledged war against Ukraine resulted in an increase in much-needed revenues. However, in contrast to its neighbors, Kuwait has not been able to lower its dependence on oil. In a climate-constrained world demanding a fundamental shift toward low-carbon development, Kuwait faces an imminent economic risk, which would also affect its political standing." However, with assets valued at more than \$980 billion, the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute ranks the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) one of the wealthiest sovereign wealth funds in the world.

Oil and gas wealth has eliminated much poverty in Kuwait, although poverty among expatriate workers is probably under-reported. High oil prices led to significant growth until the global financial crisis came in 2008 and heavily affected the country's economic performance. Until now, its vast financial reserves have mitigated the budget deficits in recent years and high oil prices caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 helped to ease financial pressure.

Although probably not primarily faith-related, Christian expatriates also experience labor abuse, including low and non-paid salaries, confiscation of passports and other ways of unfair treatment. Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity are very likely to face economic pressure. There is high chance they will lose employment and economic benefits provided by the state.

### Gender perspective

Women are among the most economically vulnerable in Kuwait, in part due to reduced employment opportunities and patrilineal inheritance practices. Under Sharia rules of inheritance, daughters inherit half that of a son (Personal Status Act, 1984). The labor force participation rate for women stands at 47.8%, compared to 85.7% for men ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023](#)).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Kuwait](#) (accessed 28 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kuwaitis make up 30% of the population. The majority of the Kuwaiti population are from Arab descent. Other ethnicities include 'other Arab' (27%), Asian (40%) and African (1%) groups, among the wide variety of ethnicities that can be found within the expatriate community.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with English being widely spoken as well.
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 100% of the population lived in urban areas, with an annual urbanization rate of 1.35%.

- **Fertility rate:** 2.2 children born per woman (2024 est.)
- **Literacy rate:** 96.5% of the population can read and write; with a small difference between men (97.1%) and women (95.4%)
- **Education:** On average, Kuwaitis are expected to have 15 years of schooling, with a significant difference between men (13 years) and women (16 years).
- **Population/age:** The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up 23% of the population, making it another country in the wider region with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Around 92,000 stateless persons reside in Kuwait. They belong mostly to the Bidun or Bidoon, descendants of (minor) Bedouin tribes who were not registered after Kuwait became an independent country (see above: Political and legal landscape).
- **Life expectancy:** 79.6 years on average; women (81.1 years), men (78.1 years).

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Kuwait](#) (data updates as of 13 march 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Kuwait ranks #49 out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.847 on the Human Development Index.
- **Gender inequality:** with a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 1.014, men are slightly disadvantaged in comparison to women. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Under the official *kafala* sponsorship system, domestic workers had been tied to their employers, who confiscated their passport and often forced them to work excessive hours. This left them vulnerable to abuse and has since been adapted (see above: *Recent History*). According to Amnesty International: "For the second consecutive year, Kuwait continued its policy of denying visitor visas to families of migrant workers" ([Amnesty International Kuwait 2023](#)).

Although not primarily faith-related, Christians in Kuwait do experience discrimination or abuse. Skin color and ethnical background play a significant role in determining who is vulnerable for abuse: Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. In addition, high-skilled expatriates will face less difficulties than low-skilled migrants. In short, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African background will be most vulnerable in Kuwait.

### Gender perspective

Society in Kuwait continues to be Islamic, patriarchal, conservative and organized along tribal lines. Sharia law prescribes a wide range of rules for personal, family and community life. Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 30 November 2020), women face discrimination in law and practice. There are no laws against domestic violence or marital rape. According to the law, a male citizen of any religion transmits citizenship to their children. A Kuwaiti woman requires the permission of her father to marry. A Muslim man is allowed to marry Muslim, Jewish or Christian women; a female Muslim can only marry a Muslim man in accordance with Islamic law. The children have to be brought up in their father's faith and Islamic law is applied in marital disputes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of domestic violence increased. The situation for migrant workers also worsened, as migrants found themselves at heightened risk of abuse by employers due to lockdown restrictions at that time. Reports suggest women in Kuwait are still hesitant to report incidents of sexual abuse and are currently pushing for an application that allows victims of sexual harassment to safely report violations ([Kuwait Times, 11 August 2022](#)). The case of the five sisters making urgent pleas for help in Turkey to avoid being forcibly returned to their home country further reflects the ongoing struggle against domestic violence in Kuwait and calls for heightened efforts to safeguard vulnerable individuals ([Al-Monitor, 19 January 2023](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Kuwait](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 99.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 95.9% of the total population - female: 46.9% / male: 53.1%
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 182.2% of the total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom in the World Index 2024 Kuwait](#), the advancement of communication technology and the increased use of social media has not led to an increased level of freedom of speech. The report states:

- "Freedom of personal expression is curtailed by state surveillance and the criminalization of some forms of critical speech. The Cyber Crimes Law imposes prison sentences of up to 10 years as well as fines for online speech that criticizes the emir, judicial officials, religious figures, or foreign leaders. Users who criticize the government on social media tend to be harassed by online trolls and automated 'bot' accounts, some of which may be state sponsored. Activists and other individuals are occasionally summoned for questioning over their online comments, and some have been prosecuted. In March 2023, an unnamed Kuwaiti citizen received a three-year prison sentence for social media posts that insulted Saudi Arabia, dubbed a 'hostile act against a brotherly country'."

Reporters without Borders ([World Press Freedom 2024](#)) ranks Kuwait #131, up from #154 in 2023, but down from #105 in 2021. It describes the freedom of the press as highly restricted:

- **Freedom of expression:** "The government exercises a significant degree of control over information, and freedom of expression remains limited, although many members of Kuwait's opposition in exile were recently pardoned."
- **Media restrictions:** "Some media outlets – such as *Al-Watan TV* in 2015 – have been closed for "anti-government" comments."
- **Journalism:** "Since 2020, the law on the right to access information is supposed to safeguard the work of journalists in Kuwait. But in reality, the law is thwarted by censorship laws that prohibit journalists, bloggers and online activists from criticizing the government, the emir, the ruling family, its allies or religion. The same is true for the cybercrime law that took effect in January 2016."
- **Taboos:** Many subjects are taboo in Kuwait, and it is particularly difficult for journalists to tackle migrant worker rights, women's rights and corruption.

- **Prison sentences:** "While Kuwait is not known for murdering or imprisoning its journalists, some have recently been forced to flee the country to avoid serving prison sentences. Interrogations and short-term detentions have a chilling effect on the freedom to inform."

Like everyone else in Kuwait, Christians have to be careful when expressing their views (whether online or offline). Criticizing the Emir or Islam, or sharing material that can be perceived as proselytism can lead to deportation for expatriate Christians. The (non-convert) indigenous Kuwaiti Christian community is in a similar situation as expatriate Christians. However, Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity have to hide themselves and can only be active on the Internet anonymously.

## Security situation

The security situation in Kuwait is stable. In the aftermath of the Iraqi-Kuwait war in 1990-91, Kuwait's security forces received training from Western countries to counter criminal, terrorist and foreign threats confidently. Even amid the heightened tensions between the USA and Iran in recent years, Kuwait seemed unaffected, despite the fact that around 30% of the population is Shiite.

As with neighboring countries, Kuwaiti citizens have been among fighters of the Islamic State group (IS) abroad, but this has not led to any attack in the country itself.

Christians are in general safe from violence and crime, as the country is well policed and violent religious groups or others who might endanger public safety have been successfully suppressed.

## Christian origins

The earliest signs of Christian presence in Kuwait are the ruins of churches on the offshore islands Failaka and Akkaz. Archaeologists date these churches between the 5th and the 9th centuries. If this latter date is correct, Christianity survived the conquest by Islam longer than often assumed. (Islamic tradition - which is increasingly being subjected to historical scrutiny - sets the date of conquest very early at 633 AD.) The site in Failaka was a monastery with a church surrounded by a densely settled area and formed the focal part of a Nestorian community that lived on the island. The Kingdom of Hirah north of Kuwait had a large Nestorian population. By the 10th century these sites had been vacated and, from then on, there is no record of a Christian presence in Kuwait for almost a millennium. However, the country's position in the Arabic and Ottoman empires makes it highly likely that, at times, Christians from other parts of those empires lived and worked in Kuwait.

Only after the Sheikdom became a British protectorate in 1899, could mission work begin in Kuwait. Samuel Zwemer of the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America moved to Kuwait in 1903 and opened a Bible shop. The National Evangelical Church of Kuwait was organized that same year, though it did not have a building for worship until 1926. In 1910 the Mission also opened a clinic that developed into a hospital for men; a hospital for women followed.

After the discovery of oil in 1937, migrant workers from Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, India and Egypt came to Kuwait bringing with them a diversity of churches, including Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Church of South India and other denominations.

## Church spectrum today

Kuwait: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	201,000	32.0
Catholic	410,000	65.2
Protestant	12,600	2.0
Independent	6,900	1.1
Unaffiliated	3,300	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-4,600	-0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>629,200</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,200	1.6
Pentecostal-Charismatic	104,000	16.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The around 300 (non-convert) indigenous Christians stem from Turkish Christians who settled in Kuwait early in the twentieth century. Some of them worked together with the American Arabian Mission of Samuel Zwemer, which opened a bookshop (1903) and two hospitals (in 1913 and 1919) in Kuwait. Their National Evangelical Church (1931) is still in existence and is currently headed by a Kuwaiti Christian. Other churches followed in the 1950s and 1960s. Around the same time, the number of Christians began to rise with the influx of expatriate workers following Kuwait's oil-fueled 'Golden Era' (1946-1982).

*(Source: Ross R K, Tadros M and Johnson T M (eds.), *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Christianity in North Africa and West Africa*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p.182)*

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kuwait>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: POMED, 24 October 2022 - <https://pomed.org/publication/snapshot-kuwait-can-the-opposition-dominated-parliament-lead-to-reform/>
- Recent history: The Arab Weekly, 28 December 2021 - <https://the arabweekly.com/kuwait-includes-opposition-lawmakers-new-cabinet>
- Recent history: Carnegie Endowment, 22 November 2022 - <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88470>
- Recent history: Al-Jazeera, 19 June 2023 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/19/kuwait-forms-cabinet-with-new-oil-finance-and-defence-ministers>
- Recent history: Al-Jazeera, 20 December 2023 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/20/kuwait-new-emir-sheikh-meshal-takes-oath-of-office>
- Recent history: Asharg Al-Aswat, 16 February 2024 - <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/4857756-kuwait%E2%80%99s-emir-dissolves-national-assembly-over-disrespectful-language>
- Recent history: Arab Reform Initiative, 3 June 2024 - <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/with-parliamentary-suspension-kuwait-has-more-to-gain-than-lose/>
- Recent history: Fair Observer, 7 October 2022 - <https://www.fairobserver.com/politics/crisis-looms-as-islamists-make-gains-in-kuwait/>
- Recent history: The New Arab, 19 January 2023 - <https://www.newarab.com/features/thoubha-domestic-violence-fighter-app-kuwait>
- Recent history: diplomatic row erupted - [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/03/how-a-maid-found-dead-in-a-freezer-set-off-a-diplomatic-clash-between-the-philippines-and-kuwait/?utm\\_term=.2f4ea1628ab7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/03/how-a-maid-found-dead-in-a-freezer-set-off-a-diplomatic-clash-between-the-philippines-and-kuwait/?utm_term=.2f4ea1628ab7)
- Recent history: thousands of dollars - <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-blogger-under-fire-over-comments-on-filipinos-1.2255665>
- Recent history: Arab News, 28 January 2023 - <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2240296/world>
- Recent history: SCMP, 15 September 2023 - <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3234720/kuwaiti-teen-jailed-15-years-brutal-rape-and-murder-filipino-domestic-worker>
- Political and legal landscape: elected parliament - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14644252>
- Political and legal landscape: MDC, 11 April 2021 - <https://dayan.org/content/kuwait-new-government-political-system-crisis>
- Political and legal landscape: stated - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/kuwait-emir-gulf-dispute-longer-acceptable-tolerable-191029095032440.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World Index 2024 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: HRW 2024 Kuwait country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/kuwait>
- Political and legal landscape: Bidun - <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bidun/>
- Political and legal landscape: MEC Kuwait report - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/kuwait/>
- Political and legal landscape: HRW 2024 Kuwait country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/kuwait>
- Political and legal landscape: HRW 2021 Kuwait country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/kuwait>
- Political and legal landscape: new law - <https://www.kuwaittimes.com/kuwait-marks-international-day-for-elimination-of-violence-against-women/>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Kuwait - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: MEC Kuwait report - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: announced - <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/kuwaiti-mps-call-for-ban-on-construction-of-churches-445971.html>
- Religious landscape description: lead to charges - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36046706>
- Economic landscape: World Factbook Kuwait - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kuwait/>

- Economic landscape: World Bank data for Kuwait - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kuwait>
- Economic landscape: Macro Poverty Outlook 2024 Kuwait - <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-kwt.pdf>
- Economic landscape: World by Income and Region - <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- Economic landscape: FSI 2024 Kuwait - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Economic landscape: EIU 2024 Kuwait profile - <https://country.eiu.com/kuwait>
- Economic landscape: BTI 2024, p.4 - [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2024\\_KWT.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2024_KWT.pdf)
- Economic landscape: World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023 - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/kuwait>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Kuwait - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kuwait/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Kuwait - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/KWT>
- Social and cultural landscape: Amnesty International Kuwait 2023 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/kuwait/report-kuwait/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Kuwait Times, 11 August 2022 - <https://timeskuwaitnews.com/women-still-reluctant-to-report-incidents-of-sexual-harassment/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Al-Monitor, 19 January 2023 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/we-are-very-dangerous-situation-kuwaits-five-sisters-plead-help-stay-turkey>
- Technological landscape: DataReportal Digital 2024: Kuwait - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-kuwait>
- Technological landscape: Freedom in the World Index 2024 Kuwait - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2024>
- Technological landscape: World Press Freedom 2024 - <https://rsf.org/en/country/kuwait>