Abaya and Yoga Pants: Women's Activism in Kuwait

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Abstract

Women's activism in Kuwait has historically intersected with nation building and re-gime perpetuation projects. The government has attempted to combine instances of mo-dernity with growing political demands from the tribal and Islamist sectors, exploiting women's activism as part of its regime survival strategy.

In Kuwait, Islam does not only shape the position of women in society, but also the political discourse and it is a main *instrumentum regni* for power legitimization. Secular activism has co-existed, challenged and collaborated with Islamist women's committees and Islamic feminist groups, emphasizing the porous boundaries between secular and religious agency.

The present article investigates the relations between women's militancy, Islam and modernity in contemporary Kuwait by means of a historical analysis, relying on data

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gathered through ethnographic enquiry and participant observation conducted in Kuwait between September 2012 and May 2013, and between January and May 2015.

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1. Introduction

Approaching the relation between women and Islam is a complex task, even more so after 9/11 and the rhetoric of saving Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2013, 785). Postcolonial and orientalist suggestions, populated by veils and harems (Göle 1997; Mernissi 2001; 1997), in a mist of exoticism and prejudices, have tended to appropriate women's voices (Lazreg 1994; Carillo Rowe and Malhotra 2013) while silencing the most divergent and innovative contributions to the subject. A thorough understanding of the relations between women and Islam, and the very position of women in Islam, should go beyond the simplistic polarization that has been opposing the West and the Orient, freedom and oppression, democracy and fundamentalism, in endless dichotomies and supposed clashes between civilizations.

Arab women scholars, under the influence of postcolonial theories and endogenous feminist drive, have contributed alternative and critical approaches to women's activism (Badran 1996; Abu-Lughod 1998; Sabbagh 1996; Hafez 2011), the position of women in Islam (Ahmed 1992; Mahmood 2005; Mernissi 1987) and gendered relations with the state (Kandiyoti 1988; 1991). The *nexus* between women and the nation in Muslim countries, mediated by kinship and family structures, thus offers a more contextualized perspective on the gendered construction of citizenship as a key feature of local projects of modernity.

Kuwait, as a case study, allows for the examination of a conservative Muslim society within an extremely affluent despite small emirate, whose rulers, in an attempt at exploiting women's activism for the perpetuation of the regime, have alternatively spon-

sored or censored different forms of women's political action[2]. Alternating institutional-ization and de-institutionalization of their political and social practices, ultimately women have resorted to street politics through demonstrations and campaigns, along with their male counterpart.

The present article investigates critically the multiple relations among women's militancy for reform and social change, Islam and modernity in contemporary Kuwait. Through a historical *excursus*, three overlapping forms of women's activism are examined: a secular, Western-inspired feminism, championed in the early days of women's groups and associations; an initially State-sponsored emergence of Islamist groups and committees; and the advent of a local form of Islamic feminism, combining the instances of both secular/liberal and religious/traditional women's activism. The plurality of approaches to feminism and women's emancipation accounts for both local and wider instances, intersecting with modernity and international influences.

The present article relies on data gathered through ethnographic enquiry, participant observation and interviews[3] conducted in Kuwait between September 2012 and May 2013, and between January and May 2015. Secondary and background sources have also been employed. Research participants were selected from a range of backgrounds, social classes, age groups, political orientations and religious affiliations. Their real names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

2. Women, Islam and the state in Kuwait

The cleavages regulating the social and political life in Kuwait (Longva 1993) have historically been reproduced in the main women's associations and groups (al Mughni 1993), hindering the formation of a true transversal women's movement. However, these groups have increasingly constituted spaces for the practice of citizenship and venues for the enfranchisement of women in society. Modernity and the rapid pace of economic and social transformation have furthermore highlighted the need to intersect

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[2] The Kuwaiti model of politics has been defined as a *flexible pluralistic corporatism*, whereby the state validates and sponsors specific groups to the detriment of others (Ghabra 1997, 61) in order to ensure stability and its own persistence.

[3] The earlier interviews were conducted with Samyah Alfoory.

«cultural authenticity and foreign contamination» (Masud and Salvatore 2009, 91). In terms of women's activism, local and indigenous forms of engagement have emerged, emphasizing the porous boundaries between secular and religious agency (Ali 2013), and between liberalism and conservatism in a Muslim society, and the urgency to decolonize the gender discourse in relation to Western feminism and paradigms of involvement (Yuval-Davis 1993). As a result, the use of the term 'feminist' is still controversial, so that women activists prefer to consider themselves as «agents of social change»[4], «patriots»[5] or «defenders»[6]. Similarly, Arabic lacks a universal translation for 'feminist': *nasawiya* defines the more general «female», while a similar if more specific term in use is *mu'ayid lil nasawiya*, or «supporter of feminism»[7].

Over time and in the course of the different historical periods, Kuwaiti women have embraced different forms of activism, rooted either in Islam through the interpretation of its sacred sources, or in liberalism and secularism. As religion in Kuwait shapes not only the position of women in society, but society at large, it represents the main paradigm in the social, cultural and political life, a normative framework (Masud and Salvatore 2009). Religion is also a main *instrumentum regni* for the rulers as a source of legitimization of power. Secular forms of activism have co-existed, confronted and collaborated with Islamist women's committees and Islamic feminist groups, alternatively channelling emancipation and enfranchisement through critical confrontation with or within the realm of religion. As in other conservative Muslim countries, secular women's agency is not less confronted with Islam as a paradigm and mobilizing framework than Islamist women organizations are. The negotiation of women's rights has either taken place within the conservative system of government and within Islam, or has been confronted with them in terms of bargains, mediations and *résistance* (Bennani-Chraïbi and Filleule 2003).

As the role of women in Kuwaiti society is paradigmatic of the overall tension between tradition and modernity, on the one hand, and opposing political and sectarian influences, on the other, an analysis of women's activism is illustrative, through the con-

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[4] Interview with Dana, 6th May, 2015.
[5] Interview with Haya, 22nd February, 2015.
[6] Interview with Mariam, 23rd March, 2015.
[7] Personal communication with Mona, 21st September 2015, Kuwait.

struction of gender relations, of the wider power and cultural mechanisms of nation-building in the country. According to Tétreault and al-Mughni,

> the conflation of tradition with Islam deploys the power of religion and the interests of the mosque on the side of a monarchy interested in keeping Kuwaiti society embedded in the dynastic realm rather than allowing it to evolve toward an egalitarian modernism that would threaten its authority (Tétreault and al-Mughni 2009, 162).

3. Historical roots of women's activism in Kuwait

Historically, women in Kuwait have experienced a relative degree of freedom of movement and autonomy since before the discovery of oil and, thus, the beginning of modernization. Men were abroad or at sea for months on end, trading or pearl diving. Women, therefore, took care of their households and families, and went to the *suq*[8] for purchasing or exchanging goods and food, thus acquiring central positions in their respective communities.

With the advent of oil, Kuwait was rapidly projected, since the mid-1940s, in a context of accelerated modernization, with the extension of state supported education and the opening of the job market for Kuwaiti women[9]. During the 1950s, the first male students were awarded scholarships to complete their education or specialize abroad. They would bring back to Kuwait tales and descriptions of a wider world. Under their influence, women wrote articles for local newspapers and magazines, initially focusing on women's education, employment and the *hijab*[10]. In 1956 a group of Kuwaiti women burned their *abaya*[11] in protest against their exclusion from government scholarships to study abroad [Lulwa, 4th May 2015], problematizing the traditional role assigned to

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[8] Arabic word for the local market.

[9] Over time, the government has sponsored a growing presence of women in the job market, mainly in the public sector, in order to decrease the rate of expatriate workers. The inability to affect significantly the composition of the workforce, combined with pro-natality policies, have led to the adoption of regulations to keep women in the job market for a shorter period, with special provisions for working mothers, thereby liberating jobs for men and reducing the chances for women to attain leadership positions in the workplace. [Conversation with Asma, February 2nd 2015].

[10] Arabic word for veil or headscarf, covering the hair, ears and neck.

[11] The *abaya* is the long black cloak worn by Kuwaiti women.

women by religion and society, and marking the beginning of a new form of confrontation with modernity for the female segment of the population.

Women from the élite families began to travel to Lebanon or Egypt to complete their education, embracing progressive ideas as well as the perspective of new and more incisive social roles upon their return to Kuwait. In the 1960s the first liberal women's associations were founded, under government license. They promoted the image of a new woman, initially focusing on education, then shifting their interest on feminist requests such as the promotion of women's rights, culminating in 1971 with the formalization of a bill for the extension of the suffrage. The main liberal organization, the Arab Women's Development Society, failing to attract other women's groups in the promotion of a common platform for action, namely the more elitist Women's Cultural and Social Society, was ostracized and ultimately its license was revoked. Meanwhile the Parliament had been suspended and when new elections were scheduled in 1981, the political landscape of the country had changed.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, following the islamization of the country influenced by the Iranian revolution, the government «sought an alliance» with the islamists (Ghabra 1991) both to sanction the prevalence of values related to Islam, and to weaken the liberal and secular opposition (Manea 2011). At the level of civil society, the government sponsored the constitution of women's religious associations, with the emergence of Islamic women's organizations. These organizations focused on charity work and the spreading of Islamic values (al-Mughni 1993), reinforcing the role of women as enhanced by nationalist rhetoric in terms of dutiful wives, mothers and daughters. They also campaigned for women to wear the *hijab* or *niqab*[12], and the *abaya*. Similarly, men-led Islamic groups promoted the constitution of *ad hoc* women's committees in order to rally women's support during electoral campaigns, thus mobilizing women for their political and electoral gain, while *de facto* excluding them from representation and decision-making processes (al-Mughni 2010). The experience women gained within Islamic committees would prove, however, to be crucial during the resistance to the Iraqi invasion, and later on in the context of the campaign for the extension of the suffrage

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[12] The *niqab* is a black headscarf covering the nose, mouth and chin, thereby leaving only the eyes visible.

and the recent street protests, in terms of networking skills, human capital and the promotion of their own agency.

3.2. The Invasion

On August 2nd 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. During the seven-month occupation, women opposed the Iraqis and were subjected to torture, rape, injuries, and many became *shaheed* (martyrs) of the resistance. Men, primarily involved in underground resistance, hid or fled the country.

Resuming their *abayas*, women would disguise and carry food, medicines, clandestine papers, money, arms and ammunitions (Badran 1988a), reappropriating the traditional Kuwaiti women's modest dress that many of them had discarded, now employed for defensive and strategic aims. In order to protect their country and defend their nation, women opted for giving up their modern attire for the traditional black cloak, exploiting their personal choices and, in some cases, their personal relation with Islam. Interestingly, the use of the *abaya* empowered women in their actions in support of the resistance and in fostering self-consciousness and agency.

In the first days of the invasion, women organized anti-Iraqi protests:

> The women […] prepared to show publicly their complete non-acceptance of the invasion and the violence that had gone with it. With banners and flags, sometimes joined by other nationalities and many dressed in their black *abat*[13] […], the women of different districts organized themselves and walked out solidly in protest […], with their teenage daughters and younger children (Rejab 1996, 14-15).

Women, Kuwaiti and foreigners alike, joined the armed resistance and were trained by male relatives to use guns: «Every night now we sleep in Uncle's basement […]. I sleep with a loaded handgun under my pillow» (Alanizi 2006, 17).

During the invasion women's roles departed from the traditional ones assigned by the patriarchal state: women would thus exert those political and citizenship rights that

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[13] Plural for *abaya*.

were denied to them in everyday life[14], gendering the conflict and the resistance movement through a radicalization of their activism. For women, more specifically, occupation and resistance, together with the defeat of Iraqi rule over Kuwait, entailed a *dual liberation* (Badran 1988b), both from the Iraqi occupiers and, albeit temporarily, from patriarchal rule, forging a consciousness of their own rights and role in society. In a time when class, religious and kinship cleavages were overcome by the resistance needs, a transversal solidarity was forged among women. This convergence would subsequently shape women's requests for political liberalization and democratization of the rule of law, reiterated in the suffrage campaign and street protests. However, the temporary rupture of the social norms and values regulating gender roles and social standards during the invasion was to be renounced after liberation, with a full restoration of the *status quo*. The experience of the resistance to the invasion, thus, represented for Kuwaiti women a pivotal moment in shaping their agency. They found that they could not simply go back to their previous roles, and would eventually resume their requests.

3.3. The campaign for the extension of the suffrage

Following the liberation, women's participation and agency were relegated in *niches of autonomy* (Lewellen 2003) to women's organizations and groups. Despite their efforts during the resistance were publicly recognized, the post-liberation period entailed the restoration of the *status quo* in terms of women's political and civil rights. A campaign for the extension of the suffrage gained momentum in the 1990s, with its peak in 1999, when an *Amiri* decree [15] was rejected by the Parliament, despite heavy campaigning and lobbying carried out by women's groups:

> I was in the National Assembly waiting for the vote, and we had worked with [other] women's groups […] and lobbied parliamentarians, and we were sure it was gonna pass because we had the majority. And while we were there a gentleman who was supposed to vote with us abstained, and we lost by one vote. […] I re-

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[14] The gendered construction of citizenship and identity in the Middle East is mediated by a plurality of actors and institutions. Through differentiated identities and conflicting loyalties, the Middle East has experienced a *masculinization of citizenship*, reinforced and perpetuated by political and religious discourses. Citizenship is thus shaped by family, community and kinship in an absolute permeability between public and private realms, between single and plural, personal and religious.

[15] A decree emanating by the emir («amir» in Arabic), the local ruler.

member this rage coming over me. […] In the audience there were men and women and the reaction by some of the men was astounding to me. They were so happy that we didn't get our rights, and they were gloating. And I couldn't understand that. I was raised to believe that Islam and Arab culture really honoured women [Lulwa, 4th May 2015].

Despite the vote was finally granted to women in 2005, the campaign for the extension of the suffrage was sustained until 2009, when the first four women were elected. Since 2009, women have not been elected to the Parliament nor have they been appointed members of Cabinet on a continuous basis. However, at the beginning of the new millennium women's activism shifted from political rights to broader reform and democratization requests, transposing women's instances to a new level and further promoting their engagement and visibility in society.

4. The new millennium

4.1.   Activism for reform and democratization
Since the beginning of the new millennium, the younger generation has taken women's activism to the streets and re-appropriated the cultural and social arenas with new forms of endogenous practices. Youth and women have thus mobilized to promote reform and democratization.

The 2006 orange youth-led reform movement *Nabiha Khams* («We want it to be five», in local Kuwaiti Arabic) focused on electoral redistricting to contrast vote-buying and corruption. The movement gained consensus through demonstrations and rallies, resorting to disrupt the Parliamentary sessions discussing alternative redistricting plans (Gause 2013), lobbying on Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers. The activists would announce demonstrations through text messages, email and blogs (Gause 2013), instigating the politicization of the Internet. The *Nabiha Khams* increased women's visibility and their militancy, and enhanced the active participation of young men and women as organizers and leaders, some of whom had been active during the protests for the extension of the suffrage.

Another important moment for youth and women's activism was the *Irhal* («Leave», in local Arabic) campaign in 2009, directed at the Prime Minister (Diwan 2014), requesting his resignation over corruption allegations [Zahra, April 23rd 2013; Farah, May 6th 2013.]. Women participated in sit-ins in front of the Parliament and Ministries in the late hours, along with fellow unrelated men protestors, breaking taboos and disrupting the basic configuration of gendered social interaction: «We women were out there until two am but got lot of respect [for it], this brought people together. Here started the role of women [in the protests], staying in the cold, taking decisions» [Farah, May 6th 2013]. The campaign marked the beginning of a wave of protests in Kuwait, and the elaboration of new ways to voice dissent.

Both the *Nabiha Khams* and the *Irhal* campaigns saw the extension of political debate to more informal venues of participation (Alhamad 2008), or what has been regarded as *informal activism* (Khatib and Lust 2014), while activists took to the streets during the Arab Spring-inspired protests in the following years.

4.2 Arab Spring and Kharamat Watan

Between October and December 2012 a series of massive street protests, under the name of *Karamat Watan* (A Nation's Dignity) took place. Expressing their outrage at the dissolution of the Parliament (*Majlis Al Umma*) and at a sudden change in the electoral law, activists from different backgrounds, social classes and religious affiliations organized the largest protests in Kuwait's history. Previous marches had occurred in 2011, fueled by accounts of corruption scandals involving members of the Cabinet, as well as protests in support of the *bidūn* (stateless) community[16]. The protests also led to an election boycott in December 2012[17].

Women as reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989), biologically and symbolically, acted and interacted in the streets to gain public recognition in an epistemological framework that ranged from liberal/progressive and cosmopolitan to Islamic and Islamist, and everything that stands in between the two extremes: «We were

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[16] For a thorough examination of the stateless and their political mobilization in Kuwait, see Kareem 2012.

[17] The elections boycott resulted in a significant modification in the composition of the new Parliament (Diwan 2014).

willing to put aside our differences […] for the cause» [Zahra, April 23rd 2013]. Recalling similar patterns that occurred during the resistance, a transversal movement was thus forged among women for the common good.

The hegemonic patriarchal theorizations about women's role in society and the dichotomous construction and reproduction of gender roles were thus challenged by protesters to reform the country and its institutions in the framework of the maintenance of the structures of power (*status quo ante*). New citizenship attempts were forged by a quest for national identity and its re-definition. Women's active participation, moreover, can be inscribed in a broader post-colonial discourse of modernity, as the attempt to define citizenship projects, other than a new construction of the feminine identity and self, in a critical relation with religion: «I am a feminist, but not an extreme feminist, like forcing equality. In our religion the man is the man [although] I'm good enough. […] Religion empowers me. I use the sacred texts to counter the treatment of women as slaves in the name of religion» [Zahra, April 23rd 2013].

During the *Karamat Watan* demonstrations, women negotiated spaces, protest locations and the organizational aspects of the marches [Farah, 6th May 2013], coordinating medical assistance and activating emergency networks. They were also in contact with international human rights organizations and major information networks [Mariam, 23rd March 2015] to ensure independent coverage of the events. They did not fear the violence of the police and special forces, and protected men during the marches with their bodies and the *abayas* they had yet again resumed, in a reversal of gender roles, as men are traditionally considered «the protectors of women» in Islam (Stowasser 1988, 30). Fatma, an Islamic feminist grown up in a very conservative household, thus comments on her protest attire: «We would wear the *abaya*, to make sure the security forces saw we are women and respect us [by not hitting us], even if we were not used to. Under it, we wear yoga pants and trainers, in case we had to run. Some of us wear stilettos» [Fatma, 15th May 2013].

Women intervened in the protests with husbands, daughters, sisters and mothers[18], reproducing, together with their instrumental use of the *abaya*, activism patterns they had previously devised during the Invasion.

Zahra, a university student and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, maintains that the protests «have made our [religious] community grow». Clarifying her motivation, she affirms: «activism is not my cup of tea, but I have to do something. … I feel I am asked by God [as] Kuwait can be and do more» [Zahra, April 23rd 2013].

The mobilization of younger women, beyond the participation and adherence to women's groups and committees, was facilitated by their engagement in different contexts such as school and university elections, membership in human rights organizations, campaigns for the rights of the *bidūn* (stateless), and contacts with the Kuwaiti diaspora[19]. Social media played a major role enhancing women's participation and the articulation of their demands [Fatma, 15th May 2013; Aisha, 20th April 2013].

The Arab Spring and locally inspired events such as *Karamat Watan* have enhanced women's activism and mobilized a younger generation. As Fatma points out: «the protests and the Arab Spring changed the way we look at ourselves. We see ourselves more powerful [now] » [Fatma, 15th May 2013].

4.2.   Cultural citizenship: between censorship and emancipation

With the advent of street protests and the diffusion of social media, alternative venues of engagement have been found, and women's visibility has been further enhanced. The location of political debate has thus shifted from women's associations and committees to the streets, both physically and virtually (Kinnimont 2013), and, more recently, to cultural forms of engagement and *reappropriation* (Buscemi 2015). I therefore maintain that political and social confrontation has resorted to the cultural domain, bypassing institutional and organizational requirements. As dedicated activists have become more cautious in voicing their dissent, «new faces» [Farah, 6th May 2013], mainly youth and women, have nonetheless been expressing their agency in oppositional, albeit subdued, terms.

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[18] Interviews with Zahra, Kuwait, April 23rd, 2013, with Aisha, 20th April, 2013 and with Fatma, 15th May, 2013.
[19] The diaspora is mostly composed of government scholarship students.

Everyday cultural practices are increasingly taking the form of practices of emancipation and social change, referred to by sociologist Asef Bayat as *social nonmovements* (Bayat 2009), undermining the dominant cultural narratives and pushing the boundaries of citizenship (Buscemi forthcoming). This tendency has increased as a result of the government repression following the protests, through the criminalization of activists and dissenters, women and men alike, and increased censorship over freedom of speech and expression (Human Rights Watch 2016).

As I am writing this article, in the past weeks the social media have been dominated by the news that a woman activist, advocating the separation between Islam and the State, has been charged with blasphemy. On March 8th 2016, Sheikha Al-Jassem, a philosophy professor at Kuwait University[20], released an interview on Kuwaiti television channel *Al-Shahed* on the rise of Islamic extremism and religious radicalization, explaining her views on the politicization of religion and, in particular, the politicization of Islam in Kuwait:

> Religion often becomes a tool to oppress people. […] The *niqab* entered Kuwait only after the invasion. […] just as they dressed us in *niqab* after the liberation, they are now imposing segregation and calling it tradition. It has never been part of our tradition. […] Our source of authority is supposed to be the constitution. Anyone who believes that the Quran, or the *shari'a*, or the interpretations of these religious texts are above the constitution is betraying the State of Kuwait[21].

For her remarks, Sheikha Al-Jassem was harshly criticized. Her words caused indignation in the social media, and she was targeted by personal threats and defamation. A legal complaint was filed against her and Islamists asked for her dismissal from Kuwait University. However, the incident prompted a broader discussion about the relations between Constitution and *shari'a*[22], and Islam and the State in the Gulf.

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[20] The major public university in Kuwait.

[21] The video was posted on the social media and is available on the websites of human rights organizations and research centres. See MEMRI.

[22] *Shari'a* is intended here as Islamic law.

5. Final remarks

Women's activism in Kuwait has historically intersected with projects of nation building, regime consolidation and perpetuation. The government has attempted to combine modernity and modernization instances with growing political demands from the tribal and Islamist sectors of the population. As a result, women, as «potent symbols of identity and visions of societies and nations» (Abu-Lughod 1998, 3), have been profoundly affected by the exploitation of their activism as part of the regime survival (Manea 2011). However, their militancy in its three main components, namely liberal, Islamist and Islamic feminist, has navigated the past sixty years adjusting to the contradictory demands emanating from the government, and has promoted women's rights and broader democratization and social change instances. Women's groups have occasionally cooperated for common goals, mainly in the face of external military threats, the extension of the suffrage and street protests. They have thus overcome the respective differences in terms of approaches to women's role in society and forms of activism, operating a temporary transversal movement, the lack of which has been one of the main reasons in delaying the attainment of other major achievements for women in Kuwait.

The advent of the Arab Spring has profoundly influenced the country, both in the reactions of its civil society and in the repression operated by the government, with a substantial regression in the country's freedom of speech and expression records. The most recent symbolic bargain youth and women have attained is a shift to more subdued toned in exchange for maintaining their visibility and pursuing their democratization goals.

The women's movement in Kuwait has been marked by a recent de-institutionalization with regard to well-established and mainly state-sponsored local women's organizations, which have both proved unable to adjust to the growing demands and expectations from the younger generations and established activists alike. Some of these organizations have also maintained rigid hierarchical structures and class barriers. Women from different backgrounds and experiences have opted for a new engagement in civil society, adapting their strategies to pursue social change purposes and self-fulfilment. Hana, co-founder of a creative platform, clarifies her personal motiva-

tions: «it really started out of frustration from all of us… We needed to do something» [Hana, 8th February 2015].

Women in Kuwait have thus *de facto* traded the political articulation of their dissent with a renewed engagement in cultural issues, thereby politicized:

> when we started our project we realized that you [can] change people through culture […]. I mean, politics is one thing ... cause if you want to really fix the root of the problem, it's culture. Because culture is the way people think, and culture is what drives [everything]... [it] is the catalyst of any, any country [*Ibidem*].

As plummeting oil prices and regional instability pose growing threats to the persistence of the regime, renewed forms of engagement articulated within the civil society signal a mounting disconnection between activists and the leadership, and more importantly between the government and women. The social, political and cultural innovation of these routes of emancipation will bring transformative effects whose outputs are not immediately foreseeable.

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