

KUWAIT'S PRE-INDEPENDENCE PRESS: 1928-1961

Dr. Badran A. R. Badran*

The Early Attempts: 1928-1937

In Kuwait, Journalism has had a relatively short history. The first Kuwaiti publication of any kind was started in February 1928 by Kuwait's first dedicated journalist; Abdul-Aziz Al-Reshaid. He started an 80-page monthly magazine which he called "Majallat al-Kuwait" (Kuwait Magazine). The writer introduced his magazine as a "religious, historical, literary, ethical and linguistics monthly", a general-interest publication by today's standards.⁽¹⁾

Al-Reshaid was a social reformer, a writer and a religious man who was determined to modernize and change his society. His perceptions of the influence of the printed word in a tribal, traditional society can be traced back to his exposure to Egyptian and Iraqi publications abroad. Al-Reshaid's enlightened ideas were fiercely criticised by a few ultra-religious conservative and mullahs who rejected change and innovation in the Arabian Peninsula. One of these was Abdul Aziz Al-'Ajli who lived in Saudi Arabia and launched indiscriminate attacks against books, magazines, libraries and even schools which, he said, were all prohibited by Islam.⁽²⁾

Although the reformists were outnumbered by conservatives, they nevertheless persisted in their efforts to bring about change in their societies. Among these were two writers, Hashem al-Rifa'i and Sager al-Shabib, who both resorted to publishing their ideas and literature in the Iraqi press. The former had even managed to obtain a license for starting a private magazine in Baghdad. Others, such as Yusuf Al-Jina'i, chose to open a public library in 1923 to which many people contributed both papers and books.

One of the major circulating magazines at that time was the Egyptian "Al-Manaar" which was published by the religious figure Rashid Rida. This magazine reportedly stirred its readers and generated a lot of debate in the

*Yarmouk University — Irbid, Jordan

Kuwaiti society. Its modern treatment of religious and social issues was regarded by some as a suspicious departure from traditional dogma and doctrine. Those who subscribed to *Al-Manaar* did so secretly and they carefully passed it over to others. *Majallat Al-Kuwait* contained several references to Rida's magazine including a few articles which were reprinted in full.

By 1928, Al-Reshaid had decided to initiate his journalistic project but he was faced with a major problem—there was no printing press with Arabic type in Kuwait. He thus decided to collect the items for the magazine in Kuwait and then travel to Egypt on a monthly basis to print it there. The plan proved to be a difficult task, both financially and professionally, but Al-Reshaid persisted and managed to print it in Cairo and transported it to Kuwait. *Majallat Al-Kuwait* was full of book reviews, biographies, news items, investigative reporting, political commentary and discussions of philosophical and religious issues.

Al-Reshaid classified the magazine's content into eleven categories:

1. Islamic Theology.
2. Interpretation of the Quran and the Shari'a.
3. Moral Issues.
4. Social Commentary.
5. Literature and Arts in Kuwait and the Gulf.
6. Biographies.
7. Letters to the Publisher.
8. Language and the local Kuwaiti Dialect.
9. History of Kuwait and the Gulf.
10. Book Reviews.

It should be stated that Al-Reshaid considered the category "History" to include past as well as present events. Therefore, many of Al-Reshaid's "historical" articles would today be classified as "current events". In addition, *Majallat Al-Kuwait* contained the first known commercial advertisement in the Kuwaiti press paid for by Abdul-Hamid Zahran of the National Library of Baghdad.(1)

To insure the continuity of the magazine, Al-Reshaid sent letters to many prominent literary figures in the Arabian Peninsula asking them to contribute articles and criticism. These letters suggest that Al-Reshaid regarded his journalistic project as a collective effort by all the educated elite in the region to fight for common progress and reform. The bulk of his correspondence went to writers in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. One of his

friends, Ibrahim bin Mohammad, expressed his hope that **Majallat Al-Kuwait** would awaken the sleeper, remind the negligent, and incite the idle" in its role as a cultural avantgarde.(2)

From the same correspondence, there is evidence that pre-publication censorship was imposed on the magazine when Kuwait's ruler, Shaikh Ahmad Al-Sabah, appointed a prominent Kuwaiti judge to supervise the publication. There is no evidence, however, that the judge, Yusif Bin Issa Al-Jina'i, had used this right to discourage the writer from dealing openly with domestic issues. In fact, the ruler's choice of Al-Jina'i as a censor is indicative of his support for Al-Reshaid's endeavour. In fact, the former was a well-respected judge who was described by Al-Reshaid himself as "Kuwait's reformist whose banner joins the country's men of arts and sciences."(3) One example of Al-Jina'i endorsement of the publisher's line was permission to publish a criticism of the wrongdoing of a Kuwaiti judge and his call for reforms in the judicial process.

Other sources of support for Kuwait's first journalist-publisher were the Emirate's Heir Apparent, Shaikh Abdullah Al-Sabah, and the local merchants. Shaikh Abdullah reportedly paid a sum of money to support the publication. He also followed the steps of the Emir in subscribing in ten issues of the magazine. Other Kuwaiti personalities to subscribe included Saleh Al-Mullah, Saleh Al-Rashed, Shamlan bin Seif Al Roumi and the Al-khaled family.(1) Al-Reshaid praised Shaikh Abdullah for his regular inquiry about the magazine's topics and its progress.

Majallat Al-Kuwait ceased publication in 1930 after its editor went on a religious mission to Indonesia. Al-Reshaid's private letters indicate that the king of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Saud, had asked him to head a religious mission to preach the teachings of Islam in Indonesia. There, he opened a school where, in addition to religious teachings, he also taught his disciples the Arabic Language.(2)

On the Indonesian island of Java, Al-Reshaid met with an Iraqi traveller who shared his journalistic instincts. Yunis Bahri, as well as Al-Reshaid decided to launch a monthly magazine in Arabic to "disseminate Arab culture" in South Asia. The title of the periodical was "**Al-Kuwait & Al-Irakli**" (sic), a clear combination of the origins of birth men. The first issue came out in September 1931. The magazine was introduced as a "religious, literary, ethical, historical illustrated monthly." It was jointly edited by the two men who wrote on a variety of subjects ranging from political developments in the Arabian Peninsula and alleged Bolshevic infiltration in the yemen to articles depicting the lifestyle of Moslems in



Indonesia and other parts of the world. The magazine also published news items from the international press with reference to their sources.

During the early 1930's, no other Kuwaiti publication was being published. It is believed, however, that opposition to foreign publications was easing up gradually. Other reasons for the limited circulations were widespread illiteracy and poor transportation routes with other countries. Al-Reshaid mentioned two Iraqi publications which were familiar to Kuwaiti readers at the time in addition to Al-Manaar. These were Al-Saraha and Al-Mar'a al-Jadidah. Al-Mu'ayyid was an Egyptian magazine also cited by Al-Reshaid.(3)

According to Al-Ansari, Al-Kuwait & Al-Irakiy continued to be published for six years until Al-Reshaid's death in 1937. During these years, the magazine reportedly showed the craftsmanship and dedication of its creator. It resembled both in content and format Al-Reshaid's previous work, only this time there was more political commentary and photographs were being used more often. There was also some evidence that Al-Reshaid's excellent relation with King Saud manifested itself in his writings. Specifically, he wrote in Al-Kuwait & Al-Irakiy articles urging Moslems to carry out their duty of pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Al-Ansari, a desire to increase the number of pilgrims to Mecca was one of the reasons behind Al-Reshaid's mission to Indonesia.(1) A random sample of the magazine's articles shows that he also wrote on security in the Hijaz and Yemen, the Imam of Yemen and his relations with the Soviets, Egypt's literary figure Taha Hussein, proofs of God's existence, Libya's resistance, leader Omar Al-Mukhtar, Islam and modernization, a tour in the latin Quarter in Java, Indonesia, ways of paying Islam's Alms giving or Zakat and religious hypocrites in the Arabian Peninsula. (2)

AL-Reshaid launched a third publication in Java in March 1933. It was entitled Attauhid and was temporarily published as a monthly journal dedicated to "religious, moral and literary" topics. In an editorial, its publisher declared his intention to continue the message of Majallat Al-Kuwait and to fight against newly-found religious sects such as Qadianism, considered by Al-Reshaid as an atheist and reversionist group.(3) It is not clear whether Attauhid and its predecessor were being published simultaneously or that Al-Kuwait & Al-Irakiy had ceased publication in 1933.

The Barren Years: 1983-1946

Despite an impressive improvement in education, transportation, government infrastructure and the economy, the period from 1938 to 1946

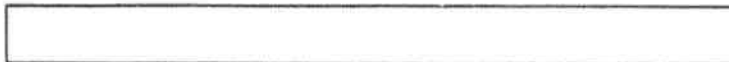
did not witness any repetitions of Al-Reshaid's effort. The discovery of oil in Burgan, south of Kuwait Bay in 1938 could be considered the most notable of these achievements, Drilling for oil continued after World War II, and in June 1946, the first shipment of oil was exported.(4) A period of popular unrest in Kuwait and other Gulf states was also beginning to unfold. In Kuwait, the complaints were centered on such issues as educational reforms and a re-shuffle of administrative positions. Without a local paper to voice their complaints, the reformists wrote instead to several Arab newspapers, specially the Iraqi press, and asked for Arab support. They demanded that more schools be opened in Kuwait and that more students be sent abroad to complete their higher education. Moreover, they demanded access to the ruler, Shaikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and to be given an opportunity to express their grievances in their country. Although anti-reformists used the same media to object to those liberal demands, the Iraqi press left no doubt as to which party they supported. As a case in point, the Iraqi daily *Al-Istiqal* stated in an editorial: "Iraq . . . wants the Kuwaiti people to join the renaissance movement which started in most Arab countries".(5)

The press campaign was very effective to the extent that Shaikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah had decided to visit Iraq during the same year to attempt to stop it himself. As he returned, it was evident that he had failed to convince the Iraqi of his intentions to pass a few reforms. Unable to silence the Iraqi media, he issued a decree banning all Iraqi publications in Kuwait because of their "anti-Kuwait position." (1) The Iraqi press was particularly active during this period as Rugh notes:

... during this phase (1932-1936) there were periods of vigorous, open political discussion, and the press arranged itself along a broad political spectrum. Parties and individuals, competing for power in a relatively unstable political environment, sought support from newspapers in promoting their interests (2)

In 1938, following these developments, a legislative assembly was elected and included 14 members. For the first time in Kuwait's history, the assembly was entitled by law to share powers with the Emir, thus setting the first precedent for the separation of legislative and executive functions. The legislative assembly was soon dissolved by the Emir after a series of confrontations between the members of the assembly, wealthy merchants and a few members of the executive branch. Before its dissolution, however, the assembly passed a law authorizing the operation of radio receivers in public places for the first time (3)

The educational sector continued to improve and expand rapidly during this period. With the establishment of "Majlis Al-Ma'aref" (Council Of



Education), the number of school teachers and students almost quadrupled in a decade. A team of teachers and experts arrived from Palestine to plan and supervise a new curriculum for Kuwait's schools that included the basic sciences and the arts. Educational missions were also being sent to Iraq, Egypt and Britain. Moreover, two early centres of Culture in Kuwait were expanding; Al-Jina'i's "Al-Ahliya" Library was transformed into a state-run public library by the education council and Khaled Al-'Adsani's Literary Club was attracting more members to attend its public lectures and its library. (4)

A combination of factors caused the continued absence of local journalism in Kuwait from 1938 through 1946. First, non-formal communication channels were widespread and suitable to a traditional society like Kuwait. These channels included the Friday meetings at the mosques, the group assembly place or "Diwaniyah", the public tea-houses, the marketplace and, finally, the hunting, fishing and pearl-diving communities, all of which were settings which encouraged maximum interaction and thus interpersonal communication was prevalent. Second, the high illiteracy rate of the population may have discouraged any entrepreneurs from venturing into an insecure business such as newspaper publishing. Kuwaiti merchants are generally known to favour secure and lasting investments.

Moreover, the lack of qualified journalists with the technical experience to write, edit and print a publication was particularly evident during that period. During the early forties, the few Arab journalists who came to Kuwait seeking employment were generally employed as teachers or translators. Also, the policy of the state had attached great importance to literacy and education, while paying less attention to the growth of the mass media. A final factor is that Arab publications from Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Syria were gradually being admitted to the country. These periodicals were especially needed by the growing community of Arab expatriates and the increasing number of educated Kuwaiti citizens.

The second beginning: 1946-1961

By December 1946, a group of Kuwaiti students in Egypt had decided to found a newsletter to inform their families and fellow citizens about their lives in Egypt. The group was headed by Abdul Aziz Hussein who remained its editor for four years. Later Abdullah Zakaria Al-Ansari took charge of the newsletter which was called *Al-Bi'thah*. The publication gradually developed into a magazine format and expanded in size to about eighty pages.

The need to have a printed publication serving as a link between the students and their country was asserted by **Al-Bi'thah's** editor in an editorial. However, the magazine's *raison d'être* had to adjust to the pressing demands of a few talented Kuwaiti writers and poets who would have liked to have a literary magazine instead. Although some of Kuwait's most renowned writers and personalities began to contribute generously to the publication, the magazine did not become a specialized magazine. It nevertheless contained valuable information about Kuwait itself — a clear indication that the magazine had a Kuwaiti readership and actually print contributions from Kuwait.

Major topics of debate as reflected by **Al-Bi'thah** continued to center around the general development of the Kuwaiti society, its economy and the development of the arts in general. The magazine contained a relatively high number of poems, biographies, short stories and philosophical debates. Following is a list of articles which appeared in the August 1954 issue:(1)

1. Our Sad Realities by Al-Ansari.
2. Abu Delama (a literary profile).
3. On Sufism.
4. On the Anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution.
5. Natural Education (translated).
6. Ibn Hani Al-Andalusi (a literary profile).
7. On the Arab Bank for Building and Construction.
8. Private Cinemas in Kuwait.
9. Qatar (a historical presentation of a Gulf Emirate).
10. The Arab Woman Today.
11. Contemporary Libyan Literature.
12. An interview.
13. Press Digest.
14. Readings in Comparative Literature.
15. Sport.
16. News from the Kuwaiti Mission in Egypt.

In addition to its original staff's production, the magazine published articles for Egyptian and other Arab writers in Cairo and Kuwait. It is not clear why the magazine was discontinued in 1954. Some claim that the semiofficial subsidy which financed the operation for nine years was not extended for a longer period. Others cite the increasing cost of paper, printing and transportation to Kuwait. In addition, new Egyptian laws for publication and export may have made it more difficult for those involved in the magazine to pursue their plan.(1)



An attempt to launch yet another monthly magazine — this time from Kuwait itself — succeeded only for a limited time. **Kazima** was founded in July 1948 by Ahmad Al-Saqqaf but was discontinued nine months later, evidently for financial reasons. this short-lived publication was the first Kuwaiti publication to state that it is a Pan-Arab magazine with an interest in the affairs of the Arab World.(2) A similar efforts by Hamad Al-Rejaib and Ahmad Al-'Udwani in June 1950 to start a cultural magazine was aborted after only three months. **Al-Ba'th** was printed in Kuwait and Lebanon before it ceased publication for strictly economic reasons.(3).

During the late 1940's and early 1950's, many Arab journalists and politicians were gaining popularity by advocating Pan-Arab ideals. Arab unity and the fight against British and French colonialism were the two most celebrated news topics constantly under scrutiny by the Arab press. Moreover, the establishment of Israel in the Arab land of Palestine and the dispersal of Palestinians which followed it became the cause celebre of the Arab World. A new tide of Arab nationalism contributed to the success of the coup d'etat which overthrew the monarchy in Egypt and brought Gamal Abdul Nasser to power in 1952. Nasser's espousal of these nationalistic slogans and ideas added strength to this inter-Arab movement as Nasser used the mass media effectively to propagate and disseminate political messages throughout the Arab World.

What one must draw from these political developments is that Kuwait was part of this changing environment. In addition to these revolutionary broadcasts and printed messages, more Kuwaiti graduates were returning from such ideological centres as Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad and thus giving indigenous impetus to a process of rapid change in their society. Finally, the growing number of Arab expatriates and their gradual interaction with kuwaiti citizens all contributd to provide an atmosphere of change and diversity in Kuwait.

A manifestation of these currents came in November 1952 with the establishment of the cultural Pan-Arab club. The club's founding members were former **Kazima** editor Al-Saqqaf, Ahmad Al-Khatib, an M.D. and graduate of the American University of Beirut, and yusif Al-Ghanim, a businessman, and others. The group appealed to Kuwaitis to join the club in order to "secure the interests of the Arab Nation", by improving political awareness among the people.

Soon after the foundation of the club, a magazine was published to promote and explain the policies of the club. **Al-Iman** was being edited by the three founding members and a fourth, Yusif Al-Mishari. **Al-Iman** was being

sent regularly to Beirut to be printed in a format similar to that of **Al-Ra'ed**, but in a slightly smaller size. Although this publication, like its predecessors, was supported and subsidized by the education council, it was nonetheless discontinued after only three years, in June 1955.(1).

The style, language and content of **Al-Iman** differed substantially from all the earlier publications. It was clearly political in its treatment of Arab and local issues. Its editors were mostly university graduates who improved on the previously common "literary journalism" style of novelists and writers. Although its editors preserved the "essay" form of earlier Kuwaiti and Arab publications, their articles were shorter in size, more objective and generally more straight-forward in their anatomy of social issues. Among these, **Al-Iman** has dealt with such issues as the high cost of living, the living conditions of the Kuwaiti poor, the exploitation of the country's resources by non-Arab foreigners, the problem of Palestine and other local and regional issues. One of **Al-Iman's** editors, Dr Al-Khatib, maintained his nationalistic outlook and later became a leader of the opposition in parliament.

Immediately after the publication of **Al-Iman**, another specialized monthly magazine was launched on August 1953. The religious **Al-Irshad** society decided to publish an official bulletin which was named after the society. According to an editorial which appeared in the first issue, its purpose was to "continue to propagate and spread the teachings of Islam" in the same fashion of other Arab publications such as **Al-Basa'er** in Algiers, **Al-Da'wah** and **Al-Muslimun** in Egypt and **Al-Ukhuwah Al-Islamiyyah** in Baghdad. **Al-Irshad** was edited by Abddul Aziz Al Mutawa who was a leading religious figure. (1)

A surge in the number of publications occurred immediately following the arrival in Kuwait of privately-owned printers such as Muqahwi's press and Al-Asriyah press in 1954. Modern equipment, including offset machines and colour printers were also imported in 1957 and 1958. Meanwhile, more transient publications appeared including two weekly magazines, **Al-Fajr** and **Akhbar Al-Ushbu'** which lasted for three and twelve months, respectively. (2) An oil magazine was also published by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) on February 1957. It was called **Risalat Al-Naft**. According to Kuwait's historian Abdul-Razaq Al-Basir, this magazine was originally proposed by the present ruler of Kuwait, Shaikh Jaber Ahmad Al-Sabah who was then the director of the council of finance and industry.

The first weekly newspaper in Kuwait appeared on December 5, 1957 and was started by Khaled Khalaf, a lawyer. It was introduced as a "free Arab paper" and was characterized by a genuine interest in Arab affairs.

Al-Sha'b came out initially in eight pages which were increased to twelve pages after five weeks of its start. **Al-Sha'b** did not fare better than its predecessors and was terminated on January 9, 1959.(3)

An official interest in becoming a member of the circle of private Kuwaiti publishers induced the authorities in 1954 to establish a government agency to initiate and supervise governmental publications. It was called the Printing and Publishing Department. In 1956, the department started the Kuwait Government Press which printed government stationery, school books, calendars, yearbooks as well as Kuwait's official gazette, **Al-Kuwait Al Youm** which is still being published today. (1) In December 1958, the printing and Publishing department published Kuwait's most successful monthly magazine, **Al-'Arabi**. In the beginning an editor, Ahmad Zaki, who was an Egyptian Scientist and a Man of letters, was hired to supervise the publication. It specialized in non-political features and general interest subjects, as well as an elaborate editorial and a lengthy illustrated report of Arab cities and places of interest.(2) Throughout the Arab World, **Al-'Arabi** became one of the most popular Arab magazines as its circulation surpassed that of both political and entertainment magazines alike.

The latter part of the fifties and the early sixties saw the emergence of three more publications; **Humat Al-Watan** which was launched in October 1960 by the Kuwaiti Army, **Al-ra'ed al-'Arabi** published in november 1960 and **Tablb al-Mujtama'** published by the Council of Public Health in December 1960.

CONCLUSION

The period from 1928 to 1937 was marked by the appearance of the first three Kuwaiti publications due exclusively to the efforts of one man, Abdul Aziz Al-Reshaid. Before that, Kuwaitis read Arab publications published in Cairo, Baghdad and Beirut. Al-Reshaid was one of the few intellectuals to demand reforms in Kuwait's semiprivate society. His call for the admission of various Arab publications to Kuwait as a necessary step to modernize the society was received with strong opposition. Although threatened with his life, Al-Reshaid persisted in his efforts to utilize the power of the printed word in his crusade for modernization.

It should be stated that, unlike the early Arab press, the first Kuwaiti publications were both privately owned and independent of the government. The high birth and mortality rates of the Kuwaiti publications, specially between 1946 and 1961, is attributed to an economic reason and in other cases to the lack of printing facilities in Kuwait.

The earlier publications, such as **Al-Bi'thah**, were supported and written

by amateur journalists who were also novelists, writers and reformists. Kuwait's political press in the pre-independence era was initiated by alumni of Arab universities who studied in Arab capitals during periods of heightened Pan-Arabism and nationalism. Political editorials and news items collected from several Kuwaiti publications show not only the political maturity of some Kuwaiti editors but also a journalistic adolescence that was indispensable for the growth of the Kuwaiti press in the sixties and seventies.

The pre-independence period is also marked by the government's decision to become a major entrepreneur in the publishing and press business. Its initial policy to aid newly-born publications was maintained throughout this period. This happened as the significance and potential of the press, including articles by Kuwaitis in the Arab press and the emerging electronic media, in the process of social and political change was gradually being realized. Finally, it should be clear that the success of the Kuwaiti press in the seventies and eighties was due to a large extent to the efforts of Kuwait's pioneering journalists who laid a strong foundation for the country's future press.

NOTES

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