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## DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER

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### DAILY ROUTINE

My internship responsibilities at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) were divided between three different departments, so my precise schedule varied from day to day. Overall, I spent roughly 60 percent of my time in the Student Life Office, with the remaining 40 percent divided between serving as a consultant in the Writing Center and as a teaching assistant in the Intensive English Program. In Student Life, my primary responsibility was to assist in the planning and organization of the 4th Annual Awards Night. The idea behind the event was to honor the achievements of AUK students in and out of the classroom as a way to both reward students for their efforts and encourage others to participate in campus life. Nearly 300 students, staff, and family members turned out for the event, which was held in the AUK Auditorium.



*Your correspondent with kafiyya and 'qal (the rope circling the head), May 2008"*

Kuwait University and had come to AUK to develop their language abilities. All classes at AUK are taught in English, so the IEP program is a way of easing the harsh transition to the language proficiency required for undergraduate classes at a Western-style university.

Tutoring in the Writing Center allowed me to focus more intensively on helping individual students revise their writing assignments. Writing Center consulting sessions lasted for 30 minutes during which time I was able to answer questions and offer advice about student writing. Many students needed significant help to even form a coherent sentence in English, while others exhibited extraordinarily sophisticated writing ability. For example, one student came in seeking my advice on how to trim her twenty page paper on Russian literature to meet the 12 page limit set by her professor. The Writing Center

is staffed by a terrific group of students, and the friendships I made with the other consultants will continue well beyond my time in Kuwait.

On a related note, I would encourage future interns to take greater advantage of AUK's outstanding faculty, as it was only at the end of my stay that I discovered that several professors might have been willing to work with me on some of my research interests.

## **STUDENT LIFE**

As an employee in the Office of Student Life, I had a fascinating vantage point from which to observe the challenges that non-residential colleges face in promoting student activities. At Dartmouth, the administration takes a very hands-off approach to clubs and organizations. Most money is distributed through groups such as Student Assembly and COSO, and some organizations like The Dartmouth and The Dartmouth Review are financially independent of the college. Because more than 90 percent of Dartmouth students live on campus, the administration feels less pressure to take ownership of programming initiatives that encourage social life on campus. Dartmouth's geographic isolation compounds this phenomenon, as students have few social outlets outside of campus.

The American University in Kuwait faces a very different challenge. On-campus housing does not exist at the current campus, and nearly all students are firmly tied to family social networks. Once classes end each day, many students may simply return home to study and socialize with their families. Yet despite this crucial difference, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the university has been quite successful at creating a social environment for its students. While classes are segregated by gender, young men and women can freely socialize on campus. Even late in the evening, students can be found lounging in the corridors of AUK, deep in conversation. Indeed, the vibrant and liberal campus atmosphere is seen by many students as a place of refuge where they can pursue social relationships uninhibited by the prying eyes of parents and relatives.

Despite only having three full-time employees, the Student Life Office is a beehive of activity. With responsibility for everything from intercollegiate athletics to discipline, there's never a dull moment and it was easy to see why being a student worker in the office was one of the most coveted positions on campus. Staff members routinely work long hours overseeing both student and university-directed activities.

## **ELECTIONS**

Outside my internship responsibilities, one of the more rewarding aspects of my time in Kuwait was having the opportunity to witness an entire election campaign from start to finish. On March 19, just before my arrival, Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah dissolved parliament, citing concerns for national unity, and called for new elections to be held at the end of May.

Just a brief background on Kuwait's political system: the Sabah family is different from other ruling families in that it acquired its position by an informal agreement among the country's merchants rather than by conquest. Although the monarchy was established in the mid-18th Century, the Emir approved a formal constitution in 1962 that limited his power relative to a newly formed parliament. Parliament is responsible for setting the Emir's salary, yet, under Kuwait's constitution, the Emir has the authority to dissolve parliament at his discretion, so long as new elections are held within 60 days. Thus,

final authority rests with the Emir and the executive branch and not with the legislative institutions of the state. Unlike most parliamentary systems, the Emir, not parliament, appoints the prime minister who then appoints a cabinet. It was this very point that was at the heart of this spring's imbroglio.

Members of Parliament had become accustomed to subjecting high-ranking ministry appointees to public questioning sessions before parliament. These sessions, referred to as “grillings” in Kuwaiti political jargon, often focused less on substantive issues than on humiliating a particular individual and forcing his or her resignation. Parliament’s fixation on “grillings” came at the expense of action on key legislation aimed at making Kuwait more economically competitive within the rapidly developing Gulf region. It was a series of embarrassing controversies involving these so-called “grillings” that precipitated the Emir’s decision to call for new elections. Despite sky-rocketing oil prices, Kuwait’s economy remains stagnant—a phenomenon that is all the more striking in relation to the economic miracles underway in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In light of these circumstances, many Kuwaitis see parliament as an obstacle rather than an instrument of national reform.



*Panel discussion protesting gender separation, Kuwait, Spring 2008. The main slogan behind the speakers reads, “My right to Choose.”*

Under the constitution, the person of the Emir remains inviolable and parliament’s behavior had threatened his core prerogative, namely the right to appoint the executive branch. Among the Kuwaitis I talked to, opinion uniformly favored the Emir’s decision to dissolve the chamber, yet attitudes varied over whether new elections would resolve the country’s outstanding political problems. Despite the current troubles, the nation’s relatively democratic institutions remain a source of pride for Kuwaitis, and most are confident that reform will come eventually.

My position at AUK afforded me a fascinating window into the political behavior of Kuwaiti young people during the election season. Even students who weren’t old enough to vote in the election found ways to engage in the process by volunteering for candidates, attending campaign rallies, and writing blogs and even news articles. While the issue of gender segregation, which has been discussed in past newsletters, served as a major focal point for activism, AUK students passionately debated a wide variety of topics from strategies for economic liberalization to the continued presence of the American military in the Gulf region.

## **ELECTION DAY AND THE AFTERMATH**

Parliament had recently reduced the number of legislative districts from 25 to 5 in an effort to make them more competitive and reduce the ability of candidates to buy votes. Each district is represented by 10 MPs, and each citizen can vote for up to four candidates. Prospective MPs competed under the new rules for the first time in 2008.

One of my friends at the university was kind enough to take me to a male polling station in the third electoral district. In 2006, women were given the right to vote in Kuwaiti elections, although the genders cast their ballots in separate polling places. The polling station I visited was surrounded by armed policemen and featured a lighted billboard with the names and pictures of the candidates for that district displayed on a single list. Outside, hundreds of men dressed in their traditional dishdasha and white keffiyeh congregated in the street. Most appeared to have already voted and were merely talking politics. Several men wielding stickers and other campaign paraphernalia approached my friend as we moved through the crowd in a last minute plea to win his support for a particular candidate, usually a male relative.

In the May 21 poll, tribal candidates swept 23 seats in parliament, Islamists 11 seats, with liberals and their political allies winning 11 seats. These results reflected a minor gain for Islamist candidates, particularly Shias, and it appears that the Salafi Alliance made gains at the expense of the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood. Many new faces remain from the 2006 parliament, although 22 of the newly elected MPs have never served in parliament until now. Despite the fact that women make up well over 50 percent of the Kuwaiti electorate, none of the 27 women who competed in the election won a seat.

One of the most contentious issues facing the new parliament will be how to encourage private investment, while diminishing the importance of the public sector. Over 90 percent of Kuwaiti citizens work for the government, and many oppose initiatives that might force them to look for work in the private sector. Part of the reason that change has come slowly is that ordinary Kuwaitis have little incentive to reform a system in which they don't pay taxes but still receive cradle-to-grave benefits. Attempts to eliminate government subsidies will probably fail in the face of rising food prices and inflation at a record 9.5 percent.

## **FAILAKA ISLAND AND THE 1991 GULF WAR**

One of the highlights of my trip was a short excursion to Failaka Island located about 20 kilometers from Kuwait City. The island housed a military outpost of Alexander the Great and is the oldest inhabited site in Kuwait with ruins that date human inhabitation of the island back to the Bronze Age. Unfortunately, I was not able to see the island's Greek ruins as they are currently under excavation. Most of Failaka's civilian population fled the island during the first Gulf War, and most have not returned. The island's bullet-riddled buildings now stand deserted: a quiet memorial to the ravage's of Saddam's army.

Coming to Kuwait, I was interested in how the 1991 Gulf War manifested itself in the country's historical consciousness. My own conception of that war was primarily derived from the American side of the conflict: CNN images of U.S. tanks sweeping through the desert, silhouetted against a backdrop of burning oil wells. Yet the aspect of the war that is often forgotten in the West is the impact of the Iraqi occupation on ordinary Kuwaitis. One of my friends at AUK, who was 5 years old at the time of the invasion, recalls the experience of being struck in the head by the butt of an Iraqi soldier's AK-47. He fled with his mother to Saudi Arabia but was stopped at the border, as women are not allowed to drive in the Kingdom. They waited in police custody for several hours until an uncle arrived to shuttle them to a relative's house.

Most Kuwaitis I spoke with expressed a great deal of gratitude for America's role in liberating their country, an episode which helps explain the overwhelmingly pro-American attitudes I encountered at AUK. Aside from Failaka Island, most of the physical damage wrought by the war was repaired long ago, yet the episode serves as a reminder to many Kuwaitis of the dangers faced by this small nation surrounded by powerful neighbors.