



## **Dartmouth-AUKuwait Internship Program**

### **Intern Newsletter – Spring 2018**

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### **Learning from Challenges in Kuwait**

During my ten weeks at American University of Kuwait (AUK), I immersed myself in Kuwaiti culture, traveled to Mumbai and Beirut, and made lasting friendships. While I had previously traveled throughout the Western Hemisphere and Europe, my internship at AUK brought me to the Gulf region for the first time. My stay in Germany in particular led me to view the Gulf region as misunderstood, as I had seen how Arab and Turkish immigrants were mistreated and stereotyped by Germans while I was in high school there. In addition to my work at AUK, I viewed my internship as an opportunity to gain insight into a society that is often misrepresented in the West.

During the first few weeks, I focused on my internships. One of my first assignments unfolded unexpectedly. As in America, there are certain topics that are considered culturally sensitive in Kuwait. Since public life is generally conservative in Kuwait, Kuwaitis and foreign residents avoid many issues and perspectives that are openly discussed by most Americans. This prudence applies to literature as well as public conversations. At AUK, I was tasked with screening short story and poetry submissions to a campus literary magazine for content that was too controversial and offensive. My supervisor chuckled as he gave me the assignment, as he didn't expect me, an American from a cozy liberal arts college, to be able to distinguish between what would and would not be acceptable to publish. I immediately felt like I was censoring, but I actually found the work to be incredibly valuable, especially after some university administrators decided to consider some of my suggestions on ways to control content without edging on censorship. By encouraging authors to write freely — but still flagging content that might be sensitive for their awareness and adding disclaimers that the authors do not represent the university — led to authors maintaining their creativity, as they could make decisions on their own controversial content. This decision by AUK displayed a willingness to experiment with new policies and expanded individual discretion, and it confirmed my suspicions that many American and German stereotypes of Arabs as having a pervasive unwillingness to change were mistaken.

Kuwait's proximity to the Mediterranean and South Asia enabled me to travel easily to Lebanon and India. The Middle East is more diverse than I had initially assumed. Lebanon and Kuwait, for example, are quite different societies. In Beirut, I visited the Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque, a handful of churches, and the Beirut Souk, among many other fascinating places. The quite public convergence of Islam and Christianity was an interesting contrast to Kuwait, where Christians have a smaller — but still quite vibrant — community. My visit to India was equally as fascinating as, I had never been to such a populous place. From the small emirate of Kuwait, I arrived in Mumbai, a city with four times Kuwait's population. While Lebanon is a junction of

religions and cultures, in Mumbai, modernity meets colonization, as the scars of imperialism still mar many aspects of the city. Throughout my travels, I contrasted Mumbai and Kuwait, which itself was a “protectorate” under British rule until 1961. Many of the economic and societal differences between the two rendered the terrible impact of imperialism on Indian society starkly clear.

I faced some tough challenges in Kuwait. As a gay man, I found many aspects of life in Kuwait difficult. With the not entirely abstract threat of legal consequences—the prohibition against “debauchery” in the Kuwait criminal code targets male homosexuality, and cross-dressing is also criminalized—I obscured my personal life from every friend I made. This necessary barrier between my new friends and myself was especially taxing, but it eased my anxieties. In some ways, I was primed with this fear: my family and friends had barraged me with articles, government reports, and State Department papers on Kuwait’s mistreatment of LGBT people in the months leading up to my internship. While I never felt comfortable disclosing that part of my identity to anyone while in Kuwait, I found some people who were vocally supportive of LGBT people. While there were certainly students at AUK who expressed open disdain for queer people, many others were more neutral. To those in this latter group, LGBT issues were simply best kept private. They were not opposed to queer people, but rather felt that sexual orientation had no place in public life. Western media often does not do justice to covering LGBT issues outside of North America and Europe, as they too often point to public opinion polls, radical pundits, or especially conservative politicians. There is no doubt that queer people are mistreated in Kuwait, but the cause is not wholly lost. My own experience was negative, as were many of the experiences of queer people I met while there, but there did seem to be a slow societal shift towards greater acceptance. Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned in Kuwait was that every situation — even one where a legal code is used to target a community — has nuance.



*Devon Kurtz in Kuwait City with  
Liberation Tower in the Background,  
May 2018.*