



## The Second Exodus: The Impact of Kuwait on the Palestinian People

Sarah Jarrar

*University of New Hampshire*, [smj1028@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:smj1028@wildcats.unh.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>

 Part of the [Arabic Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jarrar, Sarah (2020) "The Second Exodus: The Impact of Kuwait on the Palestinian People," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 46.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/46>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

# The Second Exodus: The Impact of Kuwait on the Palestinian People and Movement

Sarah Jarrar

*University of New Hampshire*

---

## **Abstract**

As a network of people spread across various nations, the experiential perspective of Palestinians in diaspora varies greatly. A particular place and time significant to the development of Palestinian diasporic functionalities was Kuwait from 1948 to the beginning of the Gulf war. As the discovery of commercial quantities of oil in Kuwait nearly coincided with the declaration of the Israeli state, the young Emirate required a labor force to match grandiose plans for development. As a result, Kuwait made itself a unique space for Palestinians and other migrants. But, due to the dominant role Palestinians in particular took in working and developing Kuwait, in conjunction with their prospect of settlement and "permanence" within the Emirate, the Kuwaiti government provided Palestinians privileges and rights as residents that were unprecedented in the Arab world at the time. Palestinians were supported in various endeavors, from establishing PLO administered schools to the formation of family-based Diwans. Through explaining individual experiences in Kuwait, along with analyzing Kuwaiti policies and regional politics, this discussion illustrates how Kuwaiti national development as a result of oil revenue inadvertently began to solidify Palestinian efforts developing a coherent diaspora, but then regressed as Kuwait approached the eve of Saddam Hussein's invasion.

*Keywords:* Palestine, Kuwait, Geopolitics, Diaspora

---

## **Introduction**

A defining characteristic of the Palestinians, both who live in Palestine and those in the diaspora, is the memory of exodus. Whether having moved internally into refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank, cities across the Middle East or to nations on different continents, forced movement is engrained into the Palestinian schema. Without a state, Palestinians left to various countries shifting themselves under a new government to rule them in exchange for safety and security. Some states have been better for Palestinians than others, but one moment in time in the Palestinian experience that is overlooked are the decades Palestinians migrated to the Gulf emirate of Kuwait. The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in Kuwait nearly coincided with the declaration of the Israeli state in 1948. Fittingly, the young Emirate needed a labor force to match grandiose plans for development. As a result, Kuwait made itself to be a unique state to live in for Palestinians and other migrants; but due to the dominant role Palestinians in particular took working in and developing Kuwait and their prospect for creating a sense of settlement and “permanence” within the emirate, Kuwait provided to the Palestinians privileges and rights as residence that was frankly unprecedented in the Arab world at the time. In attempting to understand the Palestinian experience in Kuwait, this study includes personal interviews with Palestinians who lived in Kuwait prior to the Gulf Crisis. Through explaining individual experiences in Kuwait, along with analyzing Kuwaiti policies and regional politics, I would like to explain how development as a result of oil revenue in Kuwait did not just benefit the Emirate economically, but also inadvertently created a space for the progression of the Palestinian movement and economy.

through support and funding. This progress was arguably handicapped and regressed by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which had the support from Yasser Arafat.

### **Interview Considerations**

An integral part of this study has been understanding the experience of Palestinians who migrated to and lived in Kuwait. These first had accounts allowed for a direct comparison between the academic, and rather detached in some instances, analysis of the Palestinian experience in Kuwait. It is important to note, as it will be reiterated throughout this study, that the views of the Palestinian in Kuwait did not always coincide with, and in several cases, contradict those of the individuals of the Palestinian leadership. Also, the interviews have demonstrated the diversity in experiences; differences in education and personal/ familial networks were two strong determinants in what type of life Palestinians led in living as a diaspora in Kuwait. The criteria for picking participants included the following: that the individual moved from Israel-Palestine to Kuwait or that they were born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, that they either lived with family or sent remittances to them, they have had work experience in Kuwait in any field or occupation, and that they were in Kuwait around or up until 1990. This criterion was formed to ensure that an interviewee could provide personal accounts and anecdotes, but also allowed for diverse answers that did not specify participants of a specific class, profession or education level. Participants were chosen through convenient points of contact, but through trying to find potential participants, it was discovered that many of those with the circle of contact only included the children of those individuals who migrated to Kuwait from Palestine.

In total, four interviews were completed in which all were of the children of these migrants. The participants that will be referenced include Muhammad Jarrar, who migrated

to Kuwait from Sanur (a village of the city Jenin in the West Bank) at the age of two in 1963. Muhammad spoke on behalf of himself, who lived in Kuwait until graduating high school and traveling to the United States to pursue of Bachelor's degree and his father, Ameen Jarrar, who lost his job in a tobacco factory in Haifa and had a failed café business which led him to the opportunities in Kuwait, and also his siblings, Selwa, Suheila, and Sameer (all of whom who have since passed). The second participant is Souhair Dibbeh, who was born in Kuwait to a father who migrated to Kuwait from Jaba'a (also a village of Jenin). Souhair also spoke on the behalf of her father, Abu Emad, worked his way up as the director of a privately-owned catering company and stayed in this position until Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Following is A'reefeh Jarrar, whose husband, Abu Raed, migrated to Kuwait in 1961, a prior to their marriage, and pursued various business ventures. Finally, Muneer Jarrar, the nephew of Muhammad Jarrar, was born in Kuwait and fled Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion while on a visit to see his father. Muneer spoke on behalf of his father, Mahmoud, who worked in Kuwait prior to the invasion and in Jordan after his family left the Gulf State in 1989. Mahmoud, Abu Emad and Abu Raed have since passed.

### **The First Exodus**

In British-Protectorate Kuwait, oil was discovered in commercial quantities in 1938, four years after the establishment of the Kuwait Oil Company by the Anglo-Persian Oil company. Discovery of oil required the quick recruitment of a labor force with expertise within the oil industry, and which also met industrial needs at large (Kuwait National Oil Company, 2019). It is due to this need, and the fact that Kuwait's that relatively small native population consisted of an even smaller underdeveloped workforce that Kuwait began to accept foreign laborers into the country. Many included non-Arab nationals, such as the Philippines,

Vietnam, India and Pakistan, but a significant proportion of foreign workers came from Arab states, a majority coming from Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. As a result of the revenues made from oil exports, Kuwait began its journey to quickly develop with the priority to display itself as modern, advanced addition to the Gulf's collection of oil states. Among Kuwait's various efforts to develop included the establishment of a social welfare system by the newly formed Development Planning and Welfare Board, the formation of the Kuwait Investment Board in 1962 to facilitate in foreign investments and aid, and the total reconstruction of domestic infrastructure (Brand, 1991).

Palestinians served as a unique group of migrants for Kuwait. Kuwait struck oil around a decade before the declaration of the establishment of the Israeli state. The central “push” factor that encouraged Palestinian migration to Kuwait were the 1948 and 1967 wars. If families decided to stay despite the conflict, the challenged faced was finding a steady source of income. Just as the need for labor grew in Kuwait, more individual Palestinians and their families in Israel-Palestine were finding themselves in a position in which employment and regular income was becoming harder to maintain. Such was the case for Ameen Jarrar, who's position at a British-owned tobacco factory ended as the British presence in Israel-Palestine began to diminish (Muhammad Jarrar, 2018). Palestinians as migrant group were virtually without a state of origin, unlike other migrants who had a state to return to and a passport that matched their nationality. Palestinians who migrated to Kuwait were prepared to settle themselves and their families, as they saw Kuwait as an opportunity to find a permanent home outside Palestine. For this newly formed Palestinian diaspora whose statelessness was the central to their identity, finding an economic base along with a geographical, physical place of settlement was crucial.

The movement of Palestinians to Kuwait based on educational background can be divided into two major phases. The early movement of Palestinians to the Emirate, which began in 1936 to the early 1950s, included members of the “Palestinian intelligentsia” which consisted of former bureaucrats, doctors, teachers, accountants, engineers, businessmen and army officers. This section of the Palestinians, considered to be one of the most qualified workforces in the region, filled the lucrative, higher management positions that Kuwait was in need of to build itself as an oil state (Shafeeq, 1988). Kuwait’s gap in labor and the safety and employment sought by this educated group of Palestinians was a match that would motivate Kuwait to support the Palestinians in various ways. This first group would also be seen as the support for the Palestinians that would follow, as “the presence of this elite echelon afforded the creation of a socio-economic safety-net in Kuwait” through their integration with not just the Kuwaiti domain, but also the greater Arab domain (Zelkovits, 2014, p. 86). The second group of migrants mostly consisted of was the “peasantry;” those who came from families that made modest earnings in agricultural work and ownership of small pieces of land (Zelkovits, 2014). The fathers of this study’s informants, Ameen, Abu Emad, Abu Raed, and Mahmoud all came from this socio-economic background. The peasantry started migrating to Kuwait in the early 1950s and continued through the next three decades; 1967 being the year that their entry rates grew significantly (Zelkovits, 2014).

It is important to discuss the legalities that Palestinians in both these groups had to navigate (and circumvent, in some instances) in order to enter Kuwait. In discussing the experience of the male family members migrating to Kuwait, all the participants mentioned a crucial component to the Palestinian migration process which although was more vital for the peasantry group, was a step that many Palestinians took to get to Kuwait. An individual

interested in moving to Kuwait needed to connect to a family member (immediate or distant), a fellow Palestinian, or a Kuwaiti sponsor residing in Kuwait. The family member or Palestinian that would be one's connection in Kuwait would have had their own Kuwaiti sponsor as Kuwait worked under the *Kalafa* system. This system requires that any non-Kuwaiti entering Kuwait must obtain sponsorship from a Kuwaiti national in order to gain legal status. This process consists of the Kuwaiti national signing documents under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor to confirm the employment of the arriving non-Kuwaiti migrant (Al-Nakib, 2014). If a sponsor or employemt could not be identified prior to arriving to Kuwait, a Palestinian migrant would have to illegally enter Kuwait. This was not uncommon. In the case of Ameen Jarrar, he had a distant cousin already in Kuwait who was able to find him work as an electrician with the national Ministry of Electricity and Water. Ameen did not secure this position until arriving to Kuwait. He illegally entered Kuwait through its border with Iraq. (Muhammad Jarrar, 2018). Once his position and housing were secure, Ameen returned to the West Bank to gather his wife and youngest son (who in fact was Muhammad) and brought them to Kuwait. Because of the need for laborers in Kuwait, as long as one had a employment settled in Kuwait, Palestinians were granted legal entry. Because the labor force need was so great, in 1958 visa requirements for Jordanian/Palestinians (as the West Bank was still a part of Jordan) were waived. Despite the relatively openness to accept Palestinian workers to Kuwait, this did not mean individual did not attempt to enter the country through illegal means like Ameen. For those who entered Kuwaiti illegally, they risked their lives through taking the dangerous journey through Jordan to Iraq, then once in Basra travel was on foot across the desert into Kuwait. Ghassan Kanafani wrote about this experience in his short yet profound piece *Rijal Fi-Al Shams* or

Men in the Sun; in which the protagonist Abul Khaizuran attempts to smuggle three other Palestinian men into Kuwait. Below is an excerpt that describes the urgency of Abu Qais, the elder of the three Palestinian men, to make it to this oasis that was Kuwait:

On the other side of this Shatt, just the other side, were all the things he had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait, what only in his mind as a dream and fantasy existed there. It was certainly something real, of stones, earth and water, and sky, not as it slumbered in his troubled mind. There must be lanes streets, men and women and children running about between the trees (Kanafani, 1962, 86).

Indeed, for many Palestinians Kuwait seemed, if not an oasis, a place in which normality and security resided, which was what several families were deprived for years between conflicts and uncertainty. For the informants, their given accounts regarding the early years of their parents lives in Kuwait are not free of worry, but they illustrated how their lives in Kuwait were positively distinct from any other Palestinian in diaspora in the Middle East. Although the purpose of this study is not to cross-compare the experience of Palestinians in diaspora across the Middle East, it is helpful to discuss why Kuwait was so attractive to Palestinians between 1948 and the late 1950s. Kuwait was a nation just letting go of British control, which assisted the Emirate in establishing its oil industry. This brought upon economic stability, which was accompanied by political stability under the rule of Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. As Palestinians would come to find, they would not experience the suppression and enclaves that existed for migrant workers in Saudi Arabian oil towns (Ghrawi, 2015), the religious conflict in Lebanon, and the conflict and weak economy in Egypt.

### **The Palestinian Experience in Kuwait Before 1985- The Family & Social Integration**

Once an individual arrived in Kuwait and settled, they quickly brought their families with them to start new lives. Shafeeq Ghabra discusses the major cultural shifts in Palestinian

familial dynamics as more Palestinians migrated to Kuwait. Due to the separation of family members, it was seen that in order to survive Palestinian cultural dynamics surrounding the family had to change. When two Palestinian individuals married, either in Palestine or Kuwait, both the families of the wife and husband would be incorporated into the family social fabric (when traditionally it is centered around the husband's family) (Ghabra, 1988). This served to keep families together, and it was not uncommon for extended family members to all live together and maintain a cohesion that served to sustain the greater Palestinian social fabric. All the participants discussed living with their extended family members at some point in time during their lives in Kuwait. Muhammad's family (which consisted of his mother, father (Ameen) and siblings) lived in the neighborhood of Khitan initially, then Hawally. And once married, his siblings moved to Salmiya and frequently visited one another. Muneer stayed in Salmiya with his aunts and cousins. All of Souhair's immediate family lived in Ahmadi, where she stayed even when married. A'reefeh lived with her brother-in-law and his family in Hawally (see figure 1.0 for map). These areas where inhabited predominately by Palestinians amongst other Arab immigrants. When asked about any sense of seclusion from Kuwaiti nationals based on where they lived, Participants noted that despite living in neighborhoods that contained a majority of migrant, there was no strict seclusion that separated Palestinians and other migrants from Kuwaiti nationals; housing in these areas was cheap and maintained the sense of community amongst various nationalities. Salmiya and Hawally were two of the central places in which rapid, major infrastructure development occurred. Not only did these areas include mixed communities of Kuwaitis and migrants, they were the worksites of Palestinians employees hired to work on major development projects (Al-Nakib 2013). Similar to the neighborhoods in metropolis cities in

the United States such as New York and Chicago, there are communities of Chinese or Hispanic inhabitants, but that does not mean they are forcibly secluded from Americans inhabiting the same city. A similar dynamic occurred in Kuwait in the mid-century.

Even beyond the family, all the participants discussed the motivation for not just family members to stay connected, but for all Palestinians in Kuwait to build a sense of community, or as Muhammad Jarrar put it, a sense of “belonging to a tribe”. If someone in Palestine needed a job, or a Palestinian in a managerial position had the opportunity to hire another Palestinian, there was the strong motivation to help a fellow countryman (especially in the case that they had no country). This is how all the participants spoke about their parents or other family member obtaining a position.

To keep large families connected that were beginning to spread across the region and the world, Kuwait was where Palestinian family *Diwans* were established. A *Diwan* is a formally established structure comprising of family elders that served to maintain family connections as members were beginning to spread across the Middle East and beyond. *Diwans* would vary in often they would meet or what sort of issues they were responsible for solving, such as a family member in need of a loan or the death of a family bread-winner. Today, several of these family *Diwans* established during this time currently have funds and scholarship programs as a result of the efforts made when Palestinians were arriving to Kuwait. The cohesion and tight family structure that was forming in Kuwait set precedent for the political organization and the maintenance of Palestinian memory that will be discussed in the following section.

### **Resident Legal Privileges, Rights and Restrictions**

Palestinians in Kuwait, relatively, enjoyed many privileges in Kuwait despite being nearly impossible to obtain Kuwaiti citizenship, and preferential treatment that prioritized Kuwaiti-nationals before expatriates. Besides tax-free living, one could “own” a portion of a business (only in which a Kuwaiti-national owned more than 50 percent of the business), and enjoyed government subsidized food, electricity, roads, education and medical services (Stork, 1977). Non-citizens could not vote, own property beyond movables like a TV (unless one had special permission by the ministry of Commerce) and could not trade in stocks.

Despite the restrictions, Souhair, Muneer and Muhammad spoke very highly of their lives in Kuwait. Souhair mentioned “life was very nice and cheap” and that as a student in public school she remembered being provided plentiful school lunches, brand new textbooks and complete school uniforms (Dibbeh, 2019). Free education was the highlight of the Kuwaiti experience as a Palestinian. Education was valued by Palestinians and was a primary way in which the Kuwaiti treatment of Palestinians was so distinct from other Arab states at the time. The Kuwaiti government allowed for the PLO to establish schools in Kuwait through the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the growing Palestinian community, which would eventually reach 450,000 by 1990 (Al-Nakib, 2014). Along with these PLO schools, the PLO was allowed to hire teachers directly from Palestine to teach and the night schools established for the children of Palestinian immigrants who arrived during a large wave in 1967. Muhammad Jarrar provided an anecdote which highlights the volume of children being taught at these schools:

I went to a PLO supported school during the day as a young kid, and one day I decided to leave a coin in my desk in the afternoon to see if anyone would take it. The next day, I found that the coin was gone. It was obviously because another student who went to the same school during the evening took it. There were so many kids going through the school (Muhammad Jarrar 2019).

Despite Kuwaiti support for these PLO schools at the grade-school level, education for Palestinians at the secondary level and beyond did not withstand the small quotas and preferential treatment that allowed for only 10 percent of university seats to be allotted to non-Kuwaitis, which became very competitive to obtain (Muneer Jarrar, 2019). But, within the university setting, Palestinians had the freedom to collect and organize to maintain the momentum for the Palestinian cause. Ido Zelkovitz explains that the combination of the Palestinian intelligentsia, the growing socio-economic support forming in Kuwait, along with the liberal political atmosphere led to how “the Emirate enabled them [Palestinians] to organize themselves politically, so long as they did not interfere with the internal affairs of the state” (Zelkovitz, 2014, p.89). Fatah was formed in Kuwait in 1959, and the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS) chapter at Kuwait University built a strong presence beyond the university setting. Arguably, with this freedom to collectivize and the strengthened Palestinian family structure described earlier, Palestinian migrants and their Kuwaiti-born offspring maintained a strong memory of Palestine. These youth of Palestinian origin recognized that their Palestinian identity was either equivalent to, or surpassed in value, any other identity that they had. This is reflected in the results of a study completed by Farah Tawfic in 1970s Kuwait, consisting of a survey of 240 school-aged children of Palestinian descent. When asked in a survey “who are you?”, an overwhelming majority of the students (nearly 90 percent) identified as Palestinian. Tawfic concluded at the time that “time so far has not diluted the attachment of Palestinian to his country. In addition, it appears that being geographically detached from Palestine has no apparent bearing on his attachment.” (Tawfic, 1977, p. 96). This is also supported from the experiential information provided by the participants. Muhammad Jarrar’s brother Sameer was an active member

within the PLO office in Kuwait from which he received a scholarship to study medicine in Bulgaria. Sameer went on to serve as a doctor in the PLO, caring for Palestinian patients in Syria and Lebanon. The PLO received \$892 million between 1961 and 1989 in foreign aid from the Kuwaiti government. Part of these funds was collected by a “liberation tax” through which 5 percent of all Palestinians’ paychecks was deducted to contribute to the PLO (Al-Nakib, 2014). In one way or another, all Palestinian migrants and their children have some sort of connection to Palestine and the Palestinian movement while in Kuwait.

### **The Palestinian Experience in Kuwait After 1985 - The Economy Takes a Turn:**

With Palestinians actively creating an economic, social and political base for themselves in Kuwait, their efforts begin to take a turn in the early 1980s. Due to the increased overproduction of oil, OPEC annual net oil prices went from \$572 million dollars in 1980 to around \$250 million dollars in 1985 (U.S. EIA, 2019). As other Gulf states, Kuwait’s economy was centered around its oil industry, and suffered from the drop in oil prices. During the early 1980s, Kuwait began its efforts to maintain only the foreign workers deemed essential and increase visa restrictions on foreigners trying to migrate to Kuwait, and the visas of foreigners already in Kuwait (Feiler, 1993). PLO teaching contracts were not extended, and visas close to expiration were not extended. Employment rates for both Kuwaitis and migrants reduced. And, to continue to fund the state’s welfare system, Kuwait could no longer afford to allow in large numbers of Palestinians and other foreigners into the country, and along with this began to reduce foreign aid to Palestinians.

With this began the decrease of remittances that was sent from Palestinians in Kuwait to their family members in Jordan. Even though Palestinians were spending money considerably in Kuwait, many were sending checks home to those in the occupied territories.

In 1989, remittances from Palestinians in gulf states totaled \$270 million, 70 percent of which came from Kuwait (Feiler 1993). All participants noted an increase in rent during this time, which many families could not continue to pay for very long before families started making the choice to leave Kuwait. Muneer's father Mahmoud made the conscious decision to send his family to Jordan during this time of economic hardship in 1989 while he continued to work as lorry truck driver for the Kuwaiti National Oil Company, delivering gas to gas stations. Abu Raed also made the same choice to send his family to Jordan, supporting his family and making money to stash in a savings account (Areefeh Jarrar, 2019). Along with the continuation of these economic struggles, many Kuwaiti-nationals began to breed anti-foreigner sentiments. Several decades after the state began to develop, many in Kuwait felt that Kuwaitis were now enabled to continue to build their country on their own (Mattar, 1994).

### **Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein**

While the Kuwaiti economy was suffering, neighboring (although not very neighborly) Iraq was in a war with Iran. Saddam Hussein, the leader of one of the most powerful militaries in the world, took on the Palestinian cause and made himself a staunch enemy against Israel and its occupation of Palestinian lands. Taking on the Palestinian cause, what he otherwise referred to as the “jewel of the crown” of pan-Arab solidarity, Saddam wanted to promote Arab nationalism. The Palestinian issue was a faith-based issue for the Muslim nations across the Middle East (Abed, 1991), and was a conduit for him to demonstrate himself in the region. Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO did not resist this support. George Abed writes about other Arab states who were not as attractive to Arafat for the political and logistical support of the PLO:

As the Palestinian leadership grew disenchanted in 1989 with Egypt's role in the peace process, it began to draw even closer to Iraq as the nationalist strategic ally in the Arab world. The choice was reinforced by necessity, given the deadly hostility of Syria on the one hand and the disengagement of Jordan from the Palestine issue in summer 1988 on the other (Abed, 1991, p.35).

Iraq had the threat of a strong military and also shared sentiments with Arafat on anti-western intervention in the region and Arab nationalism. Financially, Saddam was also giving \$48 million dollars annually to the PLO and Iraq had become the organization's second base after Tunisia (Mattar, 1994). But as Phillip Mattar discusses, Yasser Arafat's public support of was quite skirmish especially after threats made by Saddam to invade and occupy Kuwait. This lack of public support was also advised against by PLO deputy chief Salah Mesbah "Abu Iyad," Palestinian National Fund head Jawwad al Ghusayn and several prominent Palestinian scholars in the west who saw the dangerous implications of the invasion for the Palestinians (p. 34). Unable to pay debts back to Kuwait, frustrated of Kuwait's overproduction in oil and its negative economic impact on Kuwait, and claims of stealing Iraqi oil were all factors that contributed to the animosity Saddam Hussein had that formed into his threat for invasion. Other PLO leaders including Bassam Abu Sharif and Salah Khalaf made statements strongly condemning any forceful occupation of one state over another, in order to ensure that there was no mistake in understanding that the PLO did not support an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Eventually, Iraq would invade Kuwait on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August in 1990. Arafat made the first official policy statement on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1990, weeks after the invasion. This policy confirmed that the PLO would not take sides, supported an Arab-negotiated settlement and rejected any foreign intervention. This released policy also made a support of linkage, meaning that the PLO would support the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait if Saddam made it conditional to Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories,

Jerusalem, Golan Heights and Southern Lebanon (p. 35). What Arafat did not do was explicitly condemn Iraq for its forceful invasion.

### **Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait - "Life Became Black"**

Muneer was 18 years old and visiting his father in Kuwait. His father, Mahmoud, was finishing his shift at work. Muneer awoke from a nap in his father's flat, and quickly noticed through the sounds of scurries coming from the neighbors that something was going on out in the streets. Initially, rumors spread that the prime minister was trying to take over the government, but soon Mahmoud arrived home and they both watched on the television an Iraqi broadcast, congratulating the Popular Front Army and Saddam Hussein for the successful invasion of Kuwait, which was now a part of Iraq. Muneer explains the profound change in atmosphere:

It was a new world. The streets became black and full of smoke quickly. My father told everyone in the building not to leave the neighborhood because it was too dangerous (Muneer Jarrar, 2019).

Mahmoud and his son knew that they needed to leave the country as soon as possible. Muneer highlights how many people took advantage of the situation, like the charging extreme sums of money to allow entry into Iraq in order to escape (the border of which would not open for much longer). Prior to reaching the border, Muneer noticed men rushing out of jewelry stores with loot in their hands, which was rampant during occupation (committed by civilians and Iraqi soldiers). Once at the border, an Iraqi charged Mahmoud and his son three hundred and sixty Kuwaiti Dinars, each, to cross the border with the car Mahmoud illegally owned. With no other option, they paid the fee and traveled to Jordan and never returned to Kuwait.

Shafeeq Ghabra gives a similar but more gruesome eyewitness account of the invasion. Out of fear of their superiors and the strict orders they were given, Iraqi soldiers usually did not hesitate to harass, detain, torture or kill anyone who seemed to sympathize with Kuwaitis in the slightest. Kuwaitis organized a work boycott in rebellion against occupation, it gave foreigners such as Palestinians to continue working, if safe enough, because many families did not have the means to continue without any income. But if able to, Ghabra notes that there also a number of Palestinians who observed the boycott in solidarity; many sided with the Kuwaitis and felt a loyalty to the Kuwaiti state. The Fatah office took an individual stance and strongly supported Kuwait. Because of this, members of the Arab Liberation Front (and Iraqi-sponsored Palestinian organization) were deployed to “intimidate and control the Palestinian community and the local PLO.” (Ghabra, 1991, p.123). As for Kuwaitis, committees were formed to fill the labor vacuum at hospitals and bakeries to sustain the population. During that November of the occupation, the local military administration declared that “abandoned property and stocks” was in the ownership of the Iraqi government. Also announced was the conversion of the Kuwaiti dinar to the Iraqi dinar as the official currency; overnight peoples’ money shrank to one-twelfth of its former value. In addition, people were only allowed to withdraw 250 Iraqi dinars a week, which at the time in 1990 was equivalent to just under two U.S dollars. Ghabra ends his account with the following:

As a Kuwaiti citizen of Palestinian origin, leaving would make me a second-generation refugee. My parents had become refugees in 1948. Although I was born and raised in Kuwait, their memories of what had happened to them have accompanied me throughout my life. In 1990 I had to go through the same experience with my family, but this time the enemy spoke Arabic and twisted the concept of Arab nationalism, Islam and the question of Palestine (p. 126).

### **“The Fifth Column”**

By the end of the occupation, only 30,000 Palestinians remained in Kuwait. Two things contributed to a growing Kuwaiti resentment towards Palestinians after February 1991. First is the indirect support of Saddam by Arafat, which seemed to be publicly confirmed by an image taken of Arafat embracing Saddam after the invasion (Miller, 1991). Second is that there were individual Palestinians who had taken part in supporting invasion efforts. This included the Palestinians who joined the Popular Front army or belonged to pro-Iraqi groups, and the percentage of the Palestinians who did not observe in the boycott during occupation. This resentment turned into attacks, arbitrary arrests and detention, kidnapping of young Palestinian men and torturing by private militias of which the Kuwaiti government issued contradictory statements on. Ann Lesch explains that in a statement by the Emir on the April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1991 “that Saddam Hussein still had supporters within Kuwait who sought to ‘shake our security and stability’ and added that Kuwait had not yet been ‘cleansed’ of that ‘fifth column’” (Lesch, 1991, p. 50). Lesch lists the acts against Palestinians that the government was transparently responsible for the months following occupation, which included not reinstating any Palestinian in any positions of government, withheld pay from civil servants, and deliberately replacing Palestinian workers with those of other nationalities. Palestinians caught without their Kuwaiti identification while outdoors cards were sent to deportation centers, where they had no family contact or access to a lawyer. The PLO office had closed, and the Fatah office was burned during liberation in Kuwait (Rosen, 2012).

The Palestinian community left in Kuwait suffered injustices that were unfortunately left unreported for years after Kuwaiti liberation (p. 75). The Palestinians who were able to leave Kuwait struggled, trying to resettle in their new homes. Many resettled in Jordan. All the participants interviewed and their families left to Jordan, either right before the invasion

or immediately after, with the exception of Muhammad Jarrar, who was finishing a college degree in the United States. Jordan did not just accept the Palestinians who fled Kuwait, but other Arab migrants from southeast Asia. The Palestinians from Kuwait were either already Jordanian nationals who formerly lived in the West Bank, or were Palestinians from Gaza with Egyptian passports. Whatever paperwork they had, they were entering a Jordan that was hit by a recession in 1988 and had made only slight progress on IMF and World Bank programs to reduce the strain on the country's economy (which had also suffered due to Jordan's dependency on the gulf states who were also experiencing economic issues). Any progress made under these recovery programs was regressed by this demanding influx of Palestinians, along with the fact that Palestinian remittances to Jordan equaled \$1.2 billion in 1984, which exceeded total export revenue in Jordan until 1988. Now, these remittances had decreased significantly; another impact to the Jordanian economy. By April 1991, only seventeen percent of the newly arrived Palestinian population was able to find work, while many started their own business ventures due to the "problems finding work, low salaries, and the state's inability to meet their needs" (Troquer & Hommery Al-Oudat, 1999, p. 40). Palestinians coming from Kuwait possessed the skills to obtain work, with thirty percent of the population having had two to three years of higher education, but with the national unemployment rate being around twenty percent in 1990, many individuals with diplomas, Jordanian or Palestinian, were left without a job. The Jordanian government attempted to develop a Returnee's welfare Committee, but its lack of effective programming and action only motivated more Palestinians to start their own ventures (p. 43).

As for the possessions and property lost by Palestinians as a result of the invasion, the United Nations formed a compensation commission which was established by the security

council resolution in 1991. This program would allow for Palestinians who were in Kuwait to apply to be compensated for their losses. Jordan instituted this commission through the Ministry of Labor, where all applications were prepared, distributed and collected. Out of the participants, Muneer's father Mahmoud was the only one who applied. According to Muneer, there were two waves of applications that were submitted to the commission. Those who applied and their first claims were not approved applied again, of which an overwhelming majority were not accepted as many people exaggerated their losses. Muhammad Jarrar spoke of people he knew who were able to get away with these exaggerations and make money they never had or earned. To facilitate in the second application, there was a club formed in Jordan called "*jamyia taweedat al mutadarar min el ghazu*" roughly translated in English as "Invasion compensation committee." For a membership fee of ten Jordanian dinars, along with another twenty-five dinars for assistance on the second application, one could appeal for their claimed losses (Muneer Jarrar, 2019).

The participants were asked about the differences in lifestyle between Kuwait and Jordan, all answered with grim memories. Muneer's father struggled to find work in Jordan, suffered from the anxiety that built as he worried for his family's welfare. Souhair described life as very hard, and that Jordanians had become frustrated with the Palestinians who were also in need of the government's resources. Once Souhair's children reached high school, she moved back to Kuwait with her family, and was disappointed to see that the life she remembered as a young girl in Kuwait, which she even referred to as "*baladna*" or "our country" was much different.

## **Conclusion**

Early during the migration of Palestinians to Kuwait, Kuwaiti leadership did not see the Palestinians as a needy group of refugees who were hopeless; rather, they were seen as valuable contributors to the development of Kuwait. Of nearly two million foreigners in Kuwait in 1990, Palestinians comprised between 400,000 to 450,000. Their dominance was not just in their numbers but the skillsets but also in their eagerness to work and live long term in Kuwait. In return, the Kuwaiti government provided Palestinians in various ways. To the Palestinians in Kuwait, they were given the right as residents to benefit from the education provided to their children, subsidized goods and services, and the ability to rent homes. For the Palestinian leadership and the larger Palestinian movement, foreign aid was provided along with the ability to establish Fatah and PLO offices in Kuwait and allow for the political collectivization that maintained the Palestinian memory and identity for subsequent generations. The Kuwaiti government, like many Arab states at the time, saw the Palestinian issue as a faith-based dilemma, which is one reason they supported Palestinians, but because of the “stateless” circumstance Palestinians were faced with, the government saw the potential for Palestinians to serve the Kuwaiti state and even eventually shift the remittances that they were sending to family abroad to eventually stay in Kuwait. There was the potential for Kuwait to become a prominent and well-adjusted new home for Palestinians. In Kuwait, Palestinians were able to begin rebuilding a productive economic base in which they could maintain an identity as Palestinians in diaspora.

Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein as a leader who promoted Arab nationalism and a stronger resistance against Israel was fatal to the Palestinians in Kuwait. Even if Arafat was against the invasion and occupation, his support for Saddam that was unclear undefined worked to discredit the Palestinian movement in the region. George Abed writes

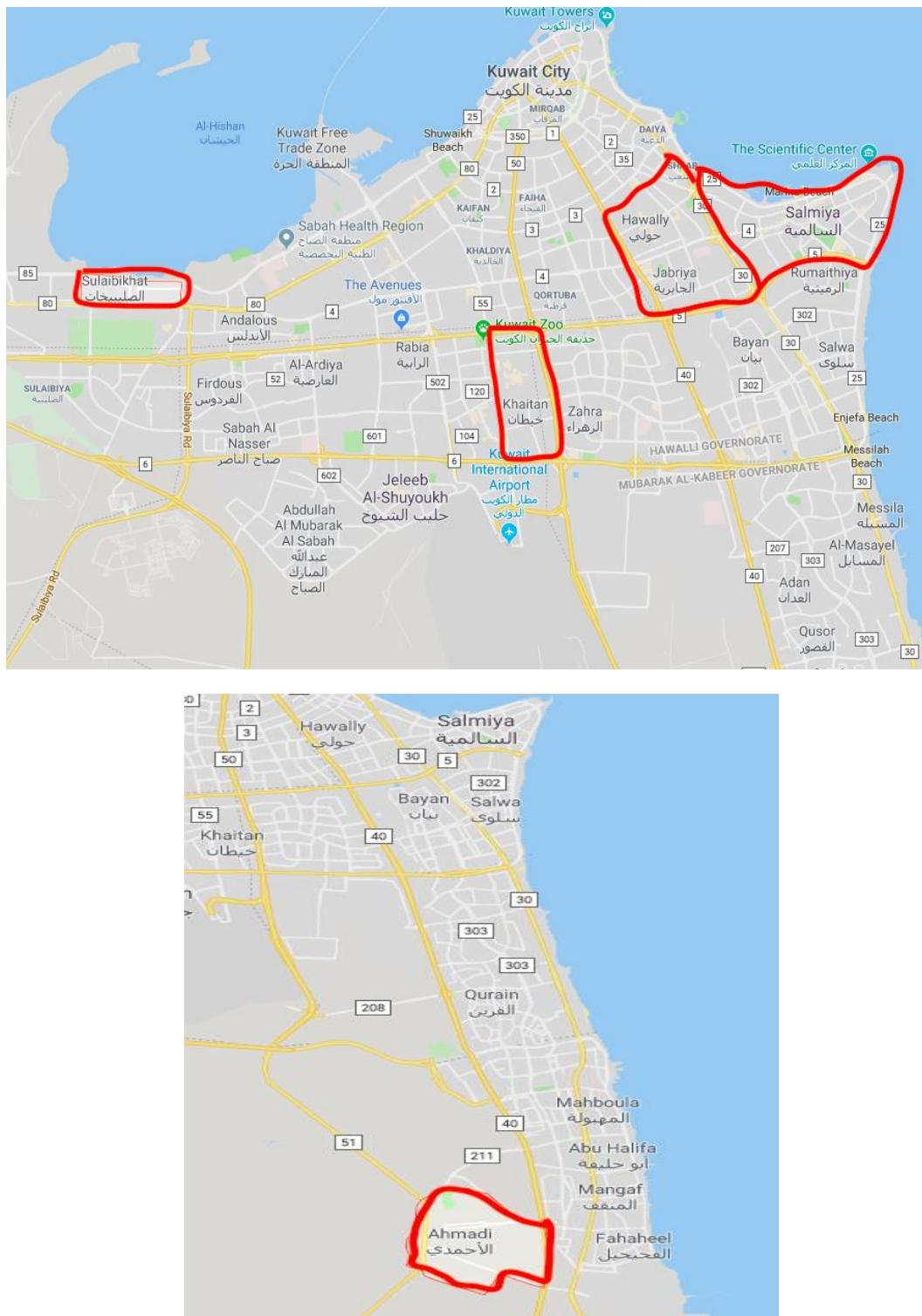
A more serious implication of the Gulf crisis to the question of Palestine is the cleavage that developed in the Arab consensus, and the virtual disintegration of institutional mechanisms to promote an “Arab point of view” on Palestine or on any of the other critical issues facing the region. At least on the surface, an Arab consensus on Palestine had always been a virtual article of faith, and this in turn facilitated the articulation and promotion of the Palestinian cause from a secure and broadly supportive Arab base. This greatly augmented the Palestinians own efforts in the domains of political, diplomatic and informational activity, but also, more critically, provided much of the essential financial, material and logistical backing (Abed, 1991, p. 34).

Arafat couldn't have possibly been under the impression that Saddam's invasion would not have been so catastrophic, or that his threat was not backed by the intention to act. But even with this, it is not clear what Arafat's priorities were, as so many individual Palestinians and families suffered as a result. If Saddam did not invade Kuwait, the prospect of Palestinians in diaspora establishing themselves in Kuwait would still be unclear, yet all the sign show great potential for the flourishing of Palestinians in Kuwait when considering the growth and support they saw from the 1940s up until invasion. Anti-immigration views could have sprouted proliferated at any time even if there was no invasion, but Saddam's invasion fueled a type of animosity of Kuwaiti towards foreigners, specifically Palestinians, which was not present to a considerable degree prior to occupation. Beyond 1991, Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations took years to mend. Once in leadership, the current president of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas made a statement apologizing to Kuwait. International human rights reports on the injustices that occurred after occupation in Kuwait also to several years to be published.

When the participants were asked about how they felt about the invasion by Saddam, mixed reactions were received. Muneer explained that he never really was fully in support of him, but he admired how he supported the Palestinians. Once he invaded Kuwait, Muneer explained “after that, there were Palestinians who praised his name, and those who cursed his

name” (Muneer Jarrar 2019). For his father Mahmoud, he was completely against Saddam after the invasion, as he struggled to support his family in the Jordanian economy. Souhair and Areefeh shared similar sentiments. There is something to be said about the discrepancy between the Palestinian people and the leadership that represents them. All the participants who gave interviews did not mention Yasser Arafat or any other political leader unless asked. For them, the political aspect of the invasion is just as complicated as for any outsider who watched it happen from afar. For these individuals, the second exodus from Kuwait to Palestine was just as significant and costly to their livelihoods as the first one was.

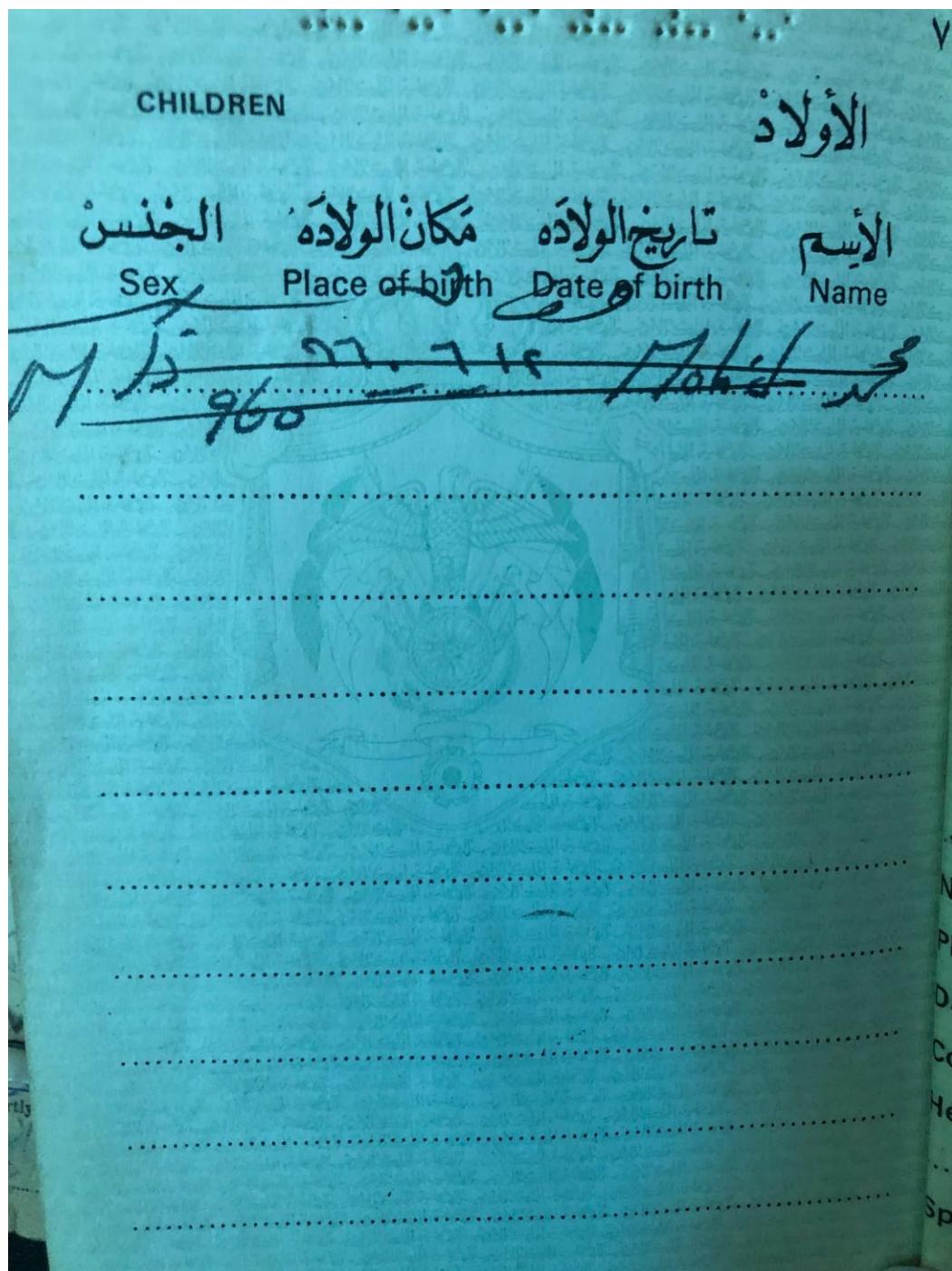
**Figure 1.0**



Outline borders of areas participants resided in while living in Kuwait (Google Maps)

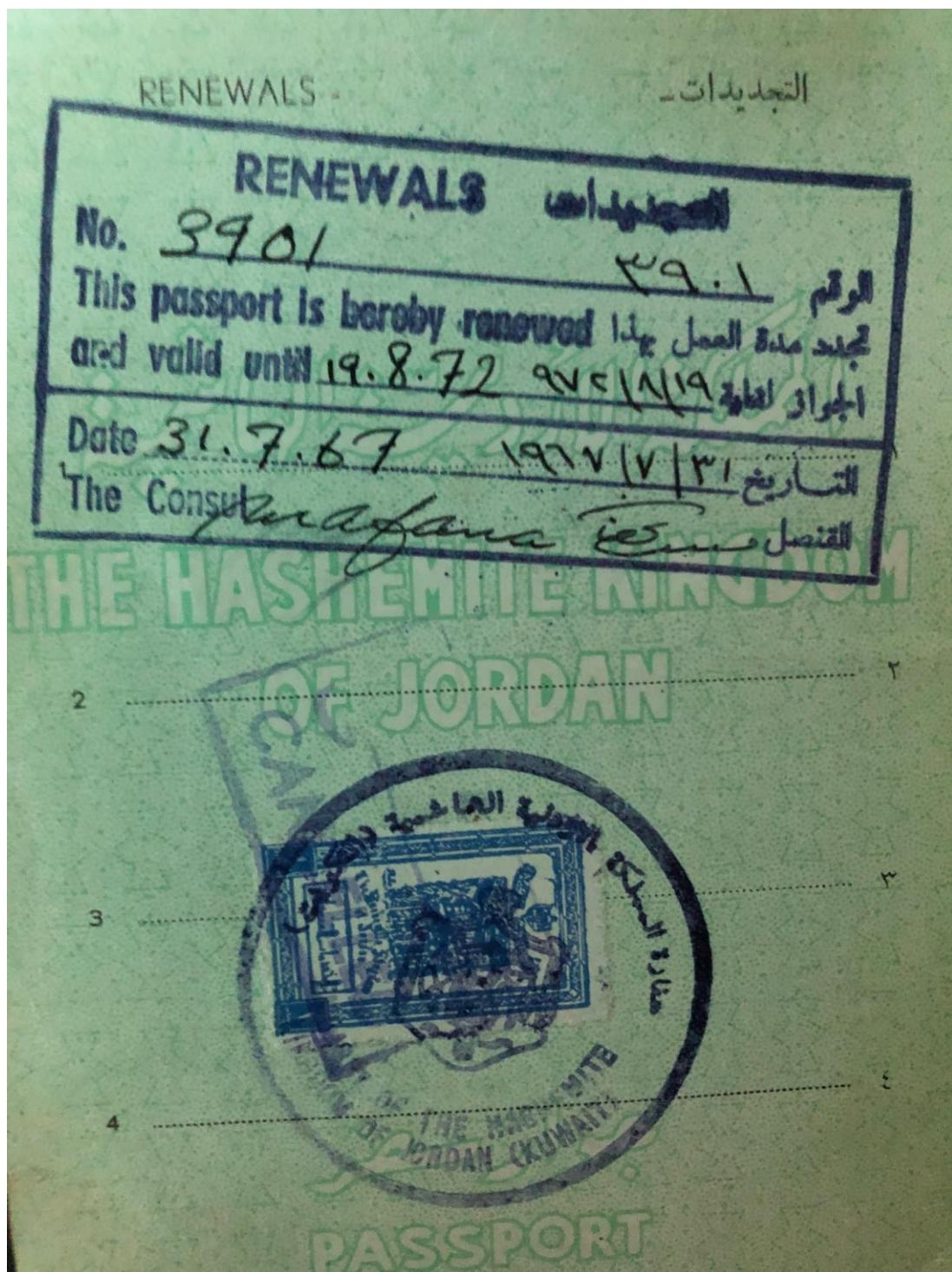
**Figure 1.1**

Child list in Ameen Jarrar's (Muhammad Jarrar's father) passport, dated 1962. Note here that Ameen only reported one son (his youngest) with the intention of bringing his wife and youngest son to Kuwait first while leaving the rest of his children to wait in the West Bank.



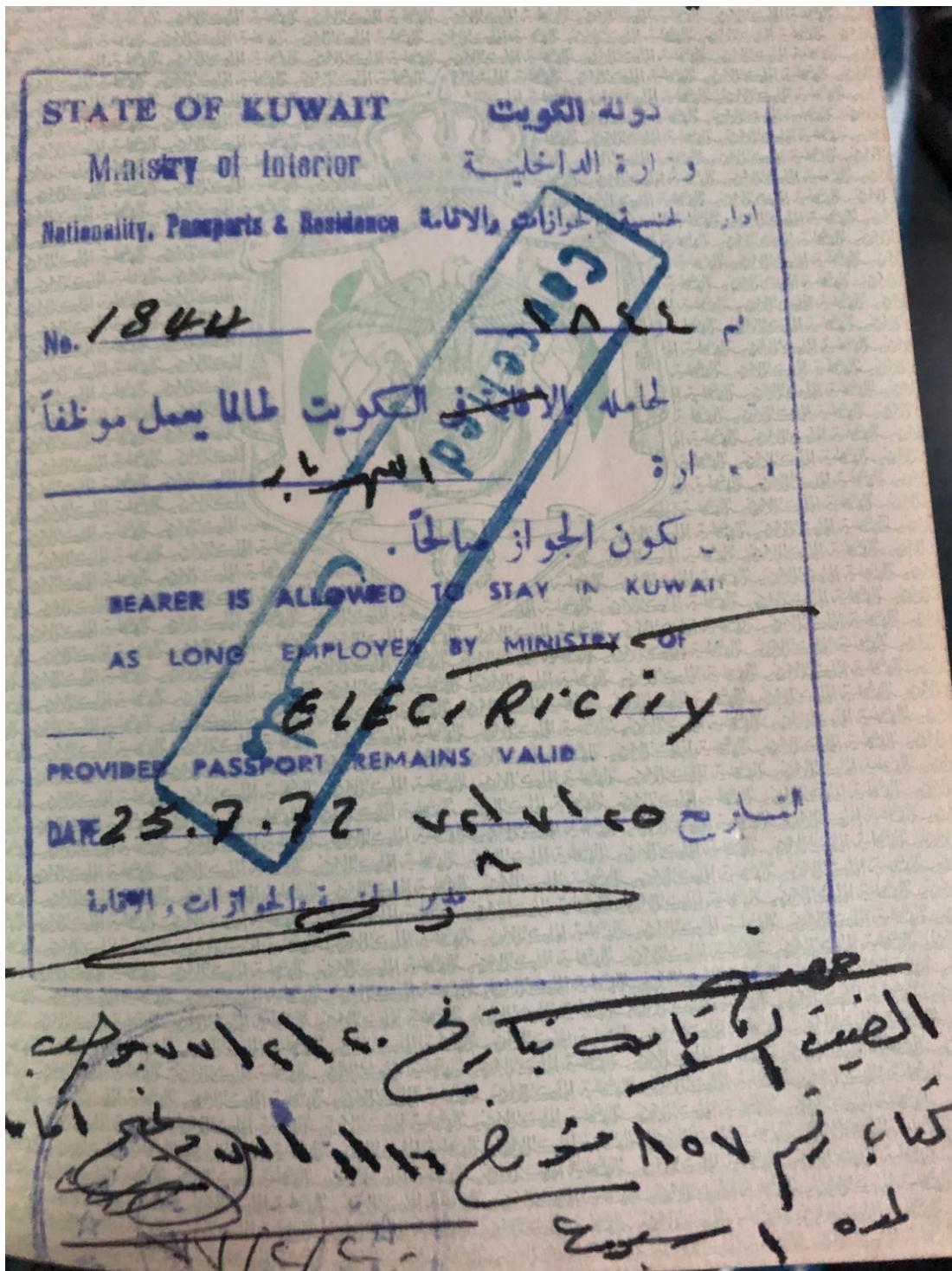
**Figure 1.2**

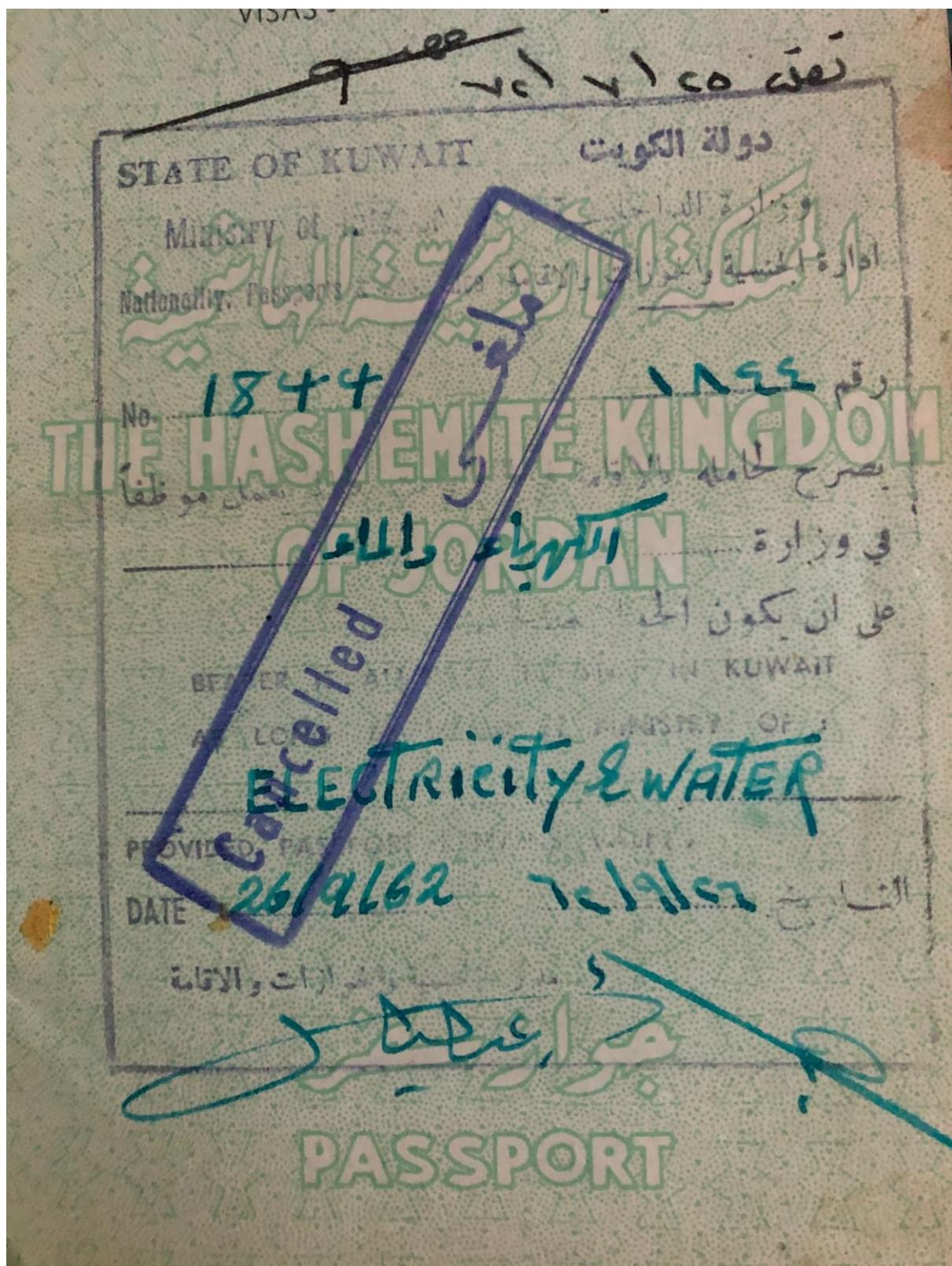
Renewal of Ameen's Kuwaiti visa stamped in his Jordanian passport, first issued in 1967.



Figures 1.3 & 1.4

Ameen Jarrar's Kuwaiti visas, validation date written as 1972, stating his occupation.





**Figure 1.5**

Photo Identification of Ameen Jarrar in 1962 Passport.



## Works Cited

Abed, George T. "The Palestinians and the Gulf crisis," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20 (2), 1991, pg. 29-42.

Al-Nakib, Farah. "Kuwait's Modern Spectacle: Oil wealth and the Making of a New Capital City, 1950–90." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33(1), 2013. 7-25.

Al-Nakib, Mai, "The People are Missing: Palestinians in Kuwait." *Deleuze Studies*, 8(1), 2014 pg. 25-52.

Brand, Laurie A. *Palestinians in the Arab world: Institution Building and the Search for State*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1991.

Dibbeh, Souhair, Personal interview, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.

Feiler, G. (1993). Palestinian employment prospects. *Middle East Journal*, 47(4), pg. 639-655.

Ghabra, Shafeeq The Iraqi Occupation of Kuwait: An Eyewitness Account. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20(2), 1991, pg. 123-147.

Ghabra, Shafeeq. "Palestinians in Kuwait: The Family and the Politics of Survival." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 17, no. 2 (1988). Pg.65

Ghrawi, Claudia (2015). "Structural and Physical Violence in Saudi Arabian Oil Towns, 1953–56." In *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*. Fuccaro N., Ghrawi C., & Lafi N. (Eds.), Berghahn Books, pp. 243-264.

Lesch, Ann M. "Palestinians in Kuwait." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 42-54.

Jarrar Areefah. Personal Interview. January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Jarrar, Muhammad. Personal Interview. December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Jarrar, Muneer. Personal Interview. January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Kanafānī, Ghassān, *Men in the Sun: and Other Palestinian Stories*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

Mattar, Philip. "The PLO and the Gulf Crisis." *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 31-46. Pg. 42

Miller, Judith "After The War: The P.L.O.; Arafat Sees No Damage To P.L.O. in War Stand." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, March 15, 1991.

Rosen, Steven J. "Kuwait expels thousands of Palestinians," *Middle East Quarterly*, 19(4), 2012, pg.72-80.

Stork, Joe et. al., "Palestinians and the Political Situation in Kuwait." *MERIP Reports*, no. 54 1977, pg. 16-22.

Tawfic E. Farah, "Political socialization of Palestinian children in Kuwait." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 4, 1977, 90-102.

The Kuwaiti National Oil Company. (n.d.). Retrieved January 1, 2019, from <https://www.kockw.com/sites/EN/Pages/Profile/History/KOC-History.aspx>

Troquer, Yann Le, and Rozenn Hommery Al- Oudat. "From Kuwait to Jordan: The Palestinians' Third exodus.(Jordanian Palestinians)." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3, 1999, pg. 37–51.

U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.eia.gov/>.

Zelkovitz, Ido, "A Paradise Lost? The Rise and Fall of the Palestinian Community in Kuwait," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 50:1, 2014, pg. 89-107.