

## **KUWAITI SALAFISM AND ITS GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE LEVANT**

**ZOLTAN PALL**

The internal developments and dynamics of Salafism in Kuwait have global significance. In the Middle East, where Salafism's influence has been rising since the Arab revolutions began in 2011, diverse Kuwaiti Salafi groups and networks have forged close contacts with Salafis in other states. But competition among Kuwaiti Salafi currents has produced corresponding fissures in local Salafi communities in Lebanon and Syria, with far-reaching consequences for each country.

### **Key Themes**

- The purist-activist schism in the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, an umbrella organization of Kuwaiti Salafis, is at the heart of the internal dynamics of Salafism in Kuwait. Purists mainly focus on peaceful proselytization and daily religious practices and are willing to cooperate with other religious groups. Activists, or *haraki*, believe in broader political involvement and often see violence as acceptable to achieve their aims.
- Kuwaiti Salafis have built up vast transnational networks by financially supporting Salafi groups worldwide, making them one of the main financiers of the international movement. This practice has provided them with significant influence over Salafism on the global level.
- Kuwaiti purist Salafis effectively contributed to the fragmentation of Salafism in North Lebanon. Their financial support was among the crucial factors that led Lebanese purists to dramatically increase their influence and counterbalance the activists.
- After the Arab Spring, purist Salafis lost ground to the reemerging *haraki* Salafis all over the Middle East largely because purist sheikhs had supported the autocratic Arab regimes during the uprisings and issued fatwas against the demonstrators.
- The different Kuwaiti Salafi groups mobilize vast financial resources from Kuwaiti citizens to sponsor a variety of Salafi armed groups in Syria, which has contributed to fragmentation and sectarianism within the Syrian armed opposition.

### **Recommendations for the Kuwaiti Government**

**Consolidate support for the rebel Free Syrian Army.** The government should consider urging Kuwaiti Salafis to press their beneficiaries in Syria to join the groups associated with the Free Syrian Army in order to strengthen opposition to the Syrian regime.

**Advocate for purist Salafism.** The Kuwaiti government should assist purist Salafis in strengthening the peaceful purist current in Lebanon. If purists attract more Salafi youth, these young Salafis will be less likely to end up fighting in Syria.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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