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Between Populism and (Electric) Power: Reconciling a Green Shift and Popular Legitimacy in Kuwait

JON NORDENSON

Abstract: Kuwait faces the double challenge of potentially destabilising effects of climate change as well as a changing international energy market in favour of renewables that may threaten the foundation of the oil-based economies dominating the region. Both these challenges point to the need for a transition towards more renewable energy sources and not least more sustainable patterns of energy consumption — a transition that will be demanding for state and society alike. A successful green shift depends on a certain level of popular support or acceptance, yet it has proven difficult for the Kuwaiti government to gain support for their proposed solutions, and to reconcile the necessary changes with the existing relationship between state and society. This paper explores these challenges by studying public discourse concerning two contentious issues that are at the heart of the government’s economic reforms and of Kuwait’s planned efforts to cut GHG-emissions, namely fuel subsidy reform, and water and electricity conservation.

Keywords: Kuwait, GCC, climate change, the green shift, discourse, rentier state

1 Introduction: climate change in Kuwait

On 21 July 2016, at a weather station in Miṭraba in Kuwait, something out of the ordinary took place. The temperature rose to 54°C, perhaps the highest recorded temperature ever in the eastern hemisphere, or even in the world. The record temperature was part of a heatwave in the region, in which temperatures by a large margin exceeded “the seasonal averages”, and did so “over a sustained period [of time]”.¹ This was hardly a coincidence, then, but rather a warning about what might be in store, or, in the words of *The Washington Post*: “global warming’s hellish

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¹ World Meteorological Organization, “WMO Examines Reported Record Temperature of 54°C in Kuwait”, 26 July 2016.

curtain-raiser”.² There is wide agreement that the Middle East and North Africa will face potentially destabilising consequences of climate change, including extreme heat over sustained periods of time. These consequences are not part of some distant future, but are already making themselves felt in the region.

For Kuwait, climate change will lead to decreased precipitation, worsening an already acute lack of fresh water, raising sea levels, and of course increasing temperatures. While the former two are challenging but perhaps solvable, the extreme heat might prove critical, as temperatures such as those expected over time may be lethal to humans. In fact, British newspaper *The Guardian* even raised the question as to how what they call “the world’s hottest city” will survive?³ This might seem a bit dramatic, but recent studies argue that it is not, and that the increases in temperature might exceed human adaptability.⁴ Lelieveld et al. found that under a high emissions scenario, that is, if we are not able to cut GHG-emissions but instead such emissions continue to increase, then one would see extreme temperatures that will affect the habitability of parts of the Gulf region, within this century.⁵

Continuingly increasing emissions will be catastrophic for Kuwait, and the country has a strong interest in the world being able to change course and realize the goal of the Paris agreement, namely to keep a global rise in temperatures well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and ideally below 1.5°C. The policies needed to achieve this, however, will have profound implications for future utilization of fossil fuels such as oil and gas, and as follows, on Kuwait. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has provided an estimated global carbon budget, a limit to the cumulative global carbon emissions that we must stay below if we, in their view, are to have “at least a 50% chance” of realizing the goals of the Paris agreement.⁶ The emissions contained in current estimates of global fossil fuel reserves far exceeds the budget provided by the IPCC, meaning that substantial parts of known coal, oil and gas reserves must be left underground, even with wide-spread use of carbon capture and storage (CCS).⁷ Although there are insecurities and debates concerning numbers as well as the potential effects of technological developments, there is wide agreement on the main point: that continued increasing oil and gas production is incompatible with realizing the goals of the Paris agreement. We do need a green shift, and Kuwait and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are in a squeeze between an economic dependency on “the status quo of a world dependent on the fossil fuels they possess”⁸ and an environmental dependency on mitigation.

² Naylor, “An Epic Middle East Heat Wave Could be Global Warming’s Hellish Curtain-Raiser”, *The Washington Post*, 10 August 2016.

³ Michaelson, “Kuwait’s Inferno: How Will the World’s Hottest City Survive Climate Change?”, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2017.

⁴ Pal and Eltahir, “Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected to Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability”, *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2015).

⁵ Lelieveld et al., “Strongly Increasing Heat Extremes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the 21st Century”, *Climatic Change* 137.1 (2016), p. 257. Importantly, the projected consequences of climate change will be extremely severe also under more moderate scenarios. It should be noted that the use of this high emissions scenario, RCP 8.5, as a “business-as-usual-scenario”, recently has received some criticism: Hausfather and Peters, “Emissions – the ‘Business as Usual’ Story is Misleading”, *Nature* 577 (2020).

⁶ IPCC, “Summary for Policy Makers: Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report”, *World Meteorological Organization*, Geneva (2018).

⁷ McGlade and Ekins, “The Geographical Distribution of Fossil Fuels Unused when Limiting Global Warming to 2°C”, *Nature* 517 (2015).

⁸ Crystal, “The Securitization of Oil and Its Ramifications in the Gulf Cooperation Council States”, *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Verhoeven (2018), p. 82.

This is the double challenge that Kuwait and the other oil-producing Gulf countries currently face: on the one hand, the potentially devastating effects of climate change, and on the other, a changing international energy market in favour of renewables that may threaten the foundation of oil-based economies. For the regimes, there is of course a third challenge as well: to retain power through these difficulties and not least while the economic foundation of their power, of their relationship with society, may be changing.

These challenges demand substantial reform and adaptation and mitigation efforts. Seemingly, they point to the need for a green shift, a transition towards more use of renewable sources of energy and towards more sustainable patterns of energy consumption. Yet, while these challenges are difficult to deny, there are different ways to perceive them, different understandings of how they should be solved, and different ways to articulate the problem at hand. It is not a given that a green shift is the solution, and the title of this article might perhaps be surprising to some. Is there really a green shift taking place in Kuwait, is it something Kuwaiti authorities want, and if so, why is it a problem for their relationship to the population? This is the topic of this article: How do Kuwaiti authorities view the challenges discussed here, and how do they present these problems to their population? What kind of solutions do they advocate, and what do they do to make sure that any changes or reforms do not threaten their position, that is, how do they seek to reconcile any changes with popular legitimacy? And not least, which reactions do government policies provoke: What do NGOs, politicians, and other Kuwaitis say about these questions?

I will look into these questions by exploring public discourse on two issues that are both at the heart of Kuwait's economic reforms and that the government sees as important steps to reduce Greenhouse gas-emissions, namely reforming subsidies on fossil fuels, electricity and water, as well as conservation of the latter two. The material analysed consists of government documents including Kuwait's Nationally Determined Contributions and the Environmental law, magazines and articles from environmental groups, policy papers and studies and not least media items such as newspaper articles and TV segments covering the issues of fossil fuel subsidies and water and electricity. The material was gathered as the cases unfolded, during the summer of 2016 and throughout the spring of 2018, although relevant material from other periods also have been included. In addition, it is informed by interviews conducted by the author with involved actors in Kuwait in the autumn of 2018.

2 Addressing fossil fuel subsidies

Beginning with the issue of fossil fuel subsidies, we must go back to the summer and autumn of 2016, and look at two other events that took place. These events illustrate the severity of the challenges that Kuwait faces, and not least how these are not simply environmental, technical or even economic challenges, but also social and political ones.

The first of these events took place on 1 August, when the Kuwaiti government decided to “rationalize fuel subsidies”,⁹ or “set free the price” of gasoline,¹⁰ meaning it decided to make cuts in the country's extremely generous subsidization regime. More precisely, the cut entailed a 40%–80% hike on petrol prices, and the government also announced that it intended to cut in the subsidies on electricity and perhaps also water.¹¹ Until then, the price of gasoline had not

⁹ Kuwait News Agency, “Kuwait Decides to ‘Rationalize Fuel Subsidies’”, 1 August 2016.

¹⁰ This term was used by several newspapers, see for instance Al-Turkī and Al-Şnaideh, “Taḥrīr al-banzīn mashrūṭ bi-da'm al-muwāṭin”, *Al-Jarīda*, 4 August 2016, p. 1.

¹¹ Shehabi, *Assessing Kuwaiti Energy Pricing Reforms* (2017); anon., “Govt Austerity Measures Top Election Campaigns”, *Kuwait Times*, 13 November 2016.

been raised since 1999.¹² As such, the move may seem dramatic, but the authorities had good reasons to do so. Generous subsidies have kept the price of gasoline, as well as of water and electricity, extremely low in Kuwait, which in turn has led to unsustainable patterns of consumption.¹³ Kuwaiti citizens have one of the highest levels of water consumption in the world, in spite of Kuwait having zero renewable fresh water resources.¹⁴ Instead, almost all water for private consumption stems from desalination, in turn based on fossil fuels.¹⁵ Consumption of gasoline was doubled in Kuwait between 2002 and 2013, and in the same period, electricity consumption increased by 6% to 7% each year — and as with desalination, almost all electricity in Kuwait stems from fossil fuels. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kuwait and the other countries of the Middle East constituted the region in the world that saw the largest increase in CO₂-emissions from energy use in 2016 and in 2017,¹⁶ and as of 2018, consumption in Kuwait was still increasing.¹⁷ If Kuwait is to play its part in cutting emissions so that the country remains habitable, patterns of consumption have to become more sustainable, and cutting subsidies seem to be a necessary step to achieve this. The Kuwaiti government, of course, is very aware of this, and in Kuwait's Nationally Determined Contributions, that is, the promises the country has made under the Paris agreement, cuts in subsidies is given as an important step in order to achieve the country's ambitions in terms of cutting emissions.¹⁸ Even so, the government probably had another, more pressing concern in mind when it decided on the reform.

2.1 The economic challenge

Kuwait's subsidies are so generous that fuels, electricity and water for a long time have been sold at rates far below production cost — electricity reportedly for as little as a twentieth of actual cost.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, this is costing the state a small fortune, and subsidies accounted for about a quarter of the state's budget in the 2014–15 fiscal year.²⁰ Even so, high oil prices for a long period enabled the Kuwaiti state to shoulder these expenses, but then came the 2014 price collapse. As we know, the price went from over \$100 per barrel in the summer of 2014 to half that in January 2015, and then below \$30 a barrel a year later.²¹ For the Kuwaiti state,

¹² Krüger, “Bensinprisfastsettelsen i Kuwait”, *Babylon nordisk tidsskrift for midtøstenstudier* 1 (2014), p. 20.

¹³ Luomi, *The Gulf Monarchies and Climate Change: Abu Dhabi and Qatar in an Era of Natural Unsustainability* (2012), pp. 27–35.

¹⁴ World Bank, *Making the Most of Scarcity. Accountability for Better Water Management Results in the Middle East and North Africa* (2007), p. 142; World Bank, “Renewable Internal Freshwater Resources per Capita (Cubic Meters)”.

¹⁵ Shehabi, *Assessing Kuwaiti Energy Pricing Reforms*; Michaelson, “Kuwait's Inferno: How Will the World's Hottest City Survive Climate Change?”; Toumi, “Kuwait Has World's Highest Water Consumption”, *Gulf News*, 25 April 2011.

¹⁶ BP, “BP Energy Outlook Country and Regional Insights – Middle East” (2017); BP, “BP Statistical Review of World Energy June 2018”, *Statistical Review of World Energy* (2018).

¹⁷ Al-Zāhī, “Niḡābat al-kahrabā tarfuḍu taḥwīl al-wizāra ilā mu'assasa”, *Al-qabas*, 21 March 2018.

¹⁸ Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḡaddada wal-mu'tazima 'alā al-ṣa'īd al-waṭanī”, *EPA website* (2015).

¹⁹ Shehabi, *Assessing Kuwaiti Energy Pricing Reforms*, p. 3.

²⁰ Al-Ojayan, “Treating the Oil Addiction in Kuwait: Proposals for Economic Reform”, *Kuwait Programme Paper Series* 41, LSE (2016), p. 23.

²¹ Mottaghi, “Whither Oil Prices?”, *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief* 7, World Bank: Middle East and North Africa Region (July 2016); Mottaghi, “MENA Quarterly Economic Brief: Plunging Oil Prices”, *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief* 141, World Bank (February 2015).

for which oil exports constitute about 90% of its revenues,²² the collapse hit hard. Following 16 years of budget surplus, Kuwait has seen a deficit for the past years, the deficit reaching more than \$15 billion in 2016.²³ While the oil price later rose considerably, it never reached the pre-summer 2014 level before, in the spring of 2020, the Corona-crisis struck and the oil price collapsed completely. Lower oil prices do seem to be, as the World Bank has argued, the “new normal”.²⁴ Even for Kuwait, a country with vast financial reserves, economic reform had become a necessity. The generous subsidies were a rather obvious place to begin.

Yet, cuts in benefits are never popular with the population, nor, at least in the case of Kuwait, with politicians. The decision to cut the subsidies was made by the Kuwaiti government, not the parliament, and it was made on 1 August 2016, when the parliament was not in session due to the summer break. This was no coincidence: the government had attempted in vain to gain parliament’s support for subsidy cuts for many years,²⁵ and when this did not succeed, the authorities finally chose to bypass the elected representatives. Unsurprisingly, the MPs reacted with fury, seemingly competing to be the most outraged over the decision, and demanded that the decision be reversed.²⁶ There were two aspects of the reform that caused outrage among the people’s representatives: the cut itself and the government’s justification for it, and the way in which it was enacted. I will begin with the first aspect.

While, as we have seen, this reform could be a positive step in terms of cutting Kuwait’s GHG-emissions, this aspect was completely absent when the government presented the decision. Instead, it was all about the economy, about setting the prize free, and harmonizing prices with the other GCC states. The government maintained that Kuwait would still retain very low prices, and that fiscal responsibility was a necessity.²⁷ The MPs did not buy this, however, and replied that they were all for fiscal responsibility, but in that case, the government should begin by ending corruption and stop wasting money on inefficient and expensive programs with doubtful merits. Or, in the words of one MP: “we will not allow the government to cover its own wasteful spending at the expense of the citizen’s pocket”.²⁸ Many would argue that these objections are quite relevant, and the question of corruption is both contentious and central in Kuwaiti politics. Yet, cutting benefits to citizens in Kuwait — and in the other GCC states — is potentially problematic in a more fundamental manner.

As we know, Kuwait and its neighbours are oft-cited examples of the rentier state,²⁹ in which the state can provide the population with benefits without taxation due to income from state-controlled export of natural resources to the world economy. This, in turn, creates the foundation for a special relationship between the state and society marked by clientelism, in which non-elected regimes provide extensive welfare for their citizens in exchange for political loyalty. As many researchers have noted, the situation in the gulf countries is not as straight forward as the

²² US Dept of Commerce, “Kuwait: Oil and Gas”, *export.gov* (2018).

²³ Shehabi, *Assessing Kuwaiti Energy Pricing Reforms*, p. 1.

²⁴ Mottaghi, “Whither Oil Prices?”.

²⁵ Shehabi, *Assessing Kuwaiti Energy Pricing Reforms*, p. 4; Hagagy, “Kuwait’s Anti-Austerity Lawmakers Threaten Reform Plans”, *Reuters*, 5 December 2016.

²⁶ Al-Faḥaymān, “Nuwwāb ‘an ziyādat as‘ār al-banzīn: rafḍ lil-qirār”, *Al-Ra’y*, 3 August 2016, p. 5.

²⁷ Kuwait News Agency, “Kuwait Decides to ‘Rationalize Fuel Subsidies’”; anon., “Fuel Price Hike Has No Impact on Traffic Jam”, *Kuwait Times*, 31 August 2017; Al-Faḥaymān, “Nuwwāb ‘an ziyādat as‘ār al-banzīn”.

²⁸ Al-Faḥaymān, “Nuwwāb ‘an ziyādat as‘ār al-banzīn”.

²⁹ Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World”, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9.4 (1987); Mahdavy, “The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran”, *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East: From the Rise of Islam to the Present Day*, ed. Cook (1970).

rentier state theory claims.³⁰ The provision of benefits is not the only source of legitimacy for the regimes, and the absence of taxation does not hinder demands for popular political participation, as has been evident on many occasions in Kuwait. Even so, there is wide agreement that the theory identifies central mechanisms for regime power and popular legitimacy, as has been aptly demonstrated following the Arab Spring.³¹

Thus, when cutting benefits, a regime risks being seen as not fulfilling its part of this deal, namely providing its citizens with benefits and seeing to their needs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some in Kuwait saw the cuts in fuels subsidies in this light. The Islamic Constitutional Movement, the political movement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait that has taken part in several cabinets, were very explicit. In a statement, the group argued that the decision “reflects a spirit of non-responsibility towards the Kuwaiti people”.³² The fiscal argument, in other words, has been a difficult one to employ for the Kuwaiti government, even in times of falling oil prices.

2.2 *The human factor and the local context*

Then there is the issue of how the decision was taken and the role of the elected representatives in the parliament, and this brings us to the last event. On 16 October 2016, the Emir dissolved the Parliament, triggering new elections. The move came, according to the BBC, due to “disputes between MPs and the government over fuel price increases”.³³ Surely, other factors were involved as well, but there is no doubt that the subsidy cut played an important role, not only for the decision itself, but due to the government omitting the elected representatives. One MP even stated that the way the decision was made was worse than its content, and several MPs warned that it would destroy any opportunity for cooperation between the government and the assembly.³⁴ Seemingly, they were right.

In Kuwait, power ultimately rests with the Emir and the royal family. The Emir can dissolve the assembly and rule by decree, he appoints the PM which in turn appoints the cabinet, in which the most senior posts are reserved for the ruling Al-Şabāḥ family. At the same time, political inclusion and participation is an important part of the ruling family’s legitimacy, and elections for the parliament are genuine competitions between opposing political forces, and oppositional candidates often perform well. While the powers of the Parliament are quite limited, they do hold tools that can obstruct government policies. This often takes the form of interpellations, *istijwābāt* (referred to in local English-language media as “grillings”), against cabinet members from the royal family, which can be followed by votes of no confidence. As this is seen as humiliating by the royal family, presenting such interpellations have notoriously led to the dissolution of Parliament. Between 2006 and 2012, strong oppositional representation in Parliament led to numerous interpellations being filed, in practice leading to permanent political crisis: the government could not enact its policies, 10 governments came and left, and no less than five elections took

³⁰ Herb, “A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41.3 (2009); Selvik, “Golfmonarki: Mer variasjon enn olje kan forklare”, *Babylon nordisk tidsskrift for midtøstenstudier* 2 (2010); Krane, “Political Enablers of Energy Subsidy Reform in Middle Eastern Oil Exporters”, *Nature Energy* 3.7 (2018).

³¹ Nordenson, *Online Activism in the Middle East: Political Power and Authoritarian Governments from Egypt to Kuwait* (2017); Nordenson, *Fra opprør til kaos: Midtøsten etter den arabiske våren* (2018).

³² Al-Faḥaymān, “Nuwwāb ‘an ziyādat as‘ār al-banzīn”.

³³ BBC, “Kuwait Emir Dissolves Parliament over Fuel Price Row”, 16 October 2016.

³⁴ Al-Faḥaymān, “Nuwwāb ‘an ziyādat as‘ār al-banzīn”.

place.³⁵ In the autumn of 2012, after almost two years of continuous, oppositional popular and political mobilization, the government had had enough. Demonstrations were violently dispersed, activists and politicians arrested, the parliament dissolved, and a new electoral law that favoured the allies of the regime was decreed.³⁶ The opposition answered by boycotting the elections, as well as those that followed. Thus, the parliament that was dissolved in October 2016 was more or less free of opposition.³⁷ Yet, even though the MPs supported the government, they chose the opposition's favoured weapon — interpellation — to react against the price hikes, leading, predictably, to new elections. The opposition took part in these elections and won 24 out of 50 seats.³⁸ The government, in other words, ended up paying a very high political price for the price hike, but they deemed it necessary. The many pro-government MPs who were not re-elected also paid a high price, yet they did not dare to do anything but oppose a policy they knew to be extremely unpopular.

The events discussed so far illustrate several factors that will be central for the development in Kuwait and other GCC states over the coming years. For one thing, the consequences of climate change will be severe, potentially catastrophic, and substantial efforts have to be made in terms of adaptation. Yet, adaptation without mitigation will hardly be enough, and Kuwait will face extreme difficulties if the goals of the Paris agreement are not realized. From an environmental perspective, a green shift makes sense in Kuwait. From an economic perspective, a green shift globally threatens Kuwait's oil-based economy, yet if such a shift *does* take place, Kuwait needs to reform its economy, increase its sources of revenue, and cut back on lavish spending such as subsidies. Again, a green transition seems to be part of the solution. Finally, these events show that the human factor — the views, opinions and actions of the people of Kuwait — is central for any green shift, and popular support is a necessity if reform is to take place. This, of course, is particularly important for a regime wanting to retain its position.

It also clearly demonstrates that a central part of this is how an issue is presented, framed, and perceived, as argued by several previous studies (albeit not focused on the MENA region).³⁹ As we have seen, if people do not agree with the definition of the problem at hand or its solution, reform becomes difficult. Within the literature, there is wide agreement that support or acceptance for green policies is dependent on values and beliefs, inclusion in the decision process, and not least the local context: policies that are popular one place may be seen as irrelevant somewhere else⁴⁰ — this also holds true for Kuwait. How the problem at hand is presented and whether the narrative provided appeals to its intended audience is central. Similarly, how authorities present a problem can tell us much about how they view it and what they intend to do — no one spends time and resources trying to solve a problem they do not recognize.

³⁵ For an overview of Kuwait's political system and the contentious period between 2006 and 2012, see Nordenson, *Online Activism in the Middle East: Political Power and Authoritarian Governments from Egypt to Kuwait*, pp. 140–60. For an overview of Kuwaiti elections, election results, and the various cabinets, see Herb, "Kuwait Politics Database".

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ BBC, "Kuwait Emir Dissolves Parliament over Fuel Price Row".

³⁸ Hagagy, "Kuwait's Anti-Austerity Lawmakers Threaten Reform Plans".

³⁹ Cherry, Kallbekken, and Kroll, "The Acceptability of Efficiency-Enhancing Environmental Taxes, Subsidies and Regulation: An Experimental Investigation", *Environmental Science & Policy* 16 (2012); Nisbet, "Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 51.2 (2009).

⁴⁰ Adger et al., "Are There Social Limits to Adaptation to Climate Change?", *Climatic Change* 93 (2009); Wolf, Alice, and Bell, "Values, Climate Change, and Implications for Adaptation: Evidence from Two Communities in Labrador, Canada", *Global Environmental Change* 23.2 (2013); Few, Brown, and Tompkins, "Public Participation and Climate Change Adaptation: Avoiding the Illusion of Inclusion", *Climate policy* 7.1 (2007).

When the reform of the fuel subsidies was announced, the government presented it as a necessary and responsible fiscal measure — without much success. When they also sidestepped the elected parliament, they were portrayed as ignoring two central elements of their relationship with the population: their duty to provide welfare and services, and the participatory aspect of politics in the country. In spite of this, one could argue that the government succeeded in the sense that the changes were implemented and are still in force. Still, the gains are rather limited given the high political price paid, and much more wide-reaching changes will likely be necessary in the future if the government is to reach its goals. While the cuts did lead to fiscal savings, the environmental results were modest, to say the least. Although sales of some types of fuel dropped, this was almost matched by increased sales of others. Thus, one year after the reform, the total sales of car fuels had reportedly declined by no more than 0.8%.⁴¹

That being said, the government seemed to have learned valuable lessons from the process, and when the government turned their attention to the issue of water and electricity in the spring of 2018, they seemingly chose a different strategy. Hoping to reduce consumption, the government paid more attention to the environmental aspect, and appealed to its citizens to take responsibility.⁴² Did this signal a shift? Does the Kuwaiti government want a green shift, and have they adopted new strategies to get their population on board? In order to answer this, it is useful to look into the discursive context within which water and electricity was discussed and look at how the Kuwaiti authorities view environmental issues more generally, beginning with their view on climate change, and what they intend to do.

3 Climate change in Kuwaiti state discourse

Kuwait has signed the Paris Agreement and ratified it on 23 April 2018, and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) sets Kuwait's goals and promises under the agreement. Whereas the GCC states, and Saudi-Arabia in particular, previously have been accused of not recognizing the problem of climate change,⁴³ Kuwaiti authorities state in the NDC that they share the world's concern for GHG-emissions and climate change, that action is needed, and that Kuwait will be severely affected by climate change. They also make it clear, however, that Kuwait is not to blame for this problem — quite literally: “despite the fact that Kuwait didn't contribute to this phenomenon, Kuwait's geographical location made it vulnerable to the impacts of climate change ...”.⁴⁴ In a similar vein, the document argues that Kuwait “only” is responsible for 0,27% of the world's emissions, such a small number that it hardly matters.⁴⁵ Yet, Kuwaiti citizens account for only 0,016% of the world's population, meaning their emissions are extremely high.

This text is also quite telling of the tools used in government discourse to deal with the different and at times conflicting points of view and positions that Kuwaiti authorities include in their environmental discourse. Interestingly, it also illustrates some striking similarities to how Norwegian authorities, Norway being a fellow oil exporting country, deal with similar contradictions. Kjersti Fløttum, in her analysis of the climate discourse of the Norwegian government, argues

⁴¹ Anon., “Fuel Price Hike Has No Impact on Traffic Jam”.

⁴² Anon., “Al-Kahrabā: Al-Kuwait min 'alā al-duwal fī mu'addalāt istihlāk al-miyāh”, *Al-Waṭan*, 4 March 2018; Al-'Alās, “Al-Rashīdī: 909 malāyīn ghālūn sa'atnā al-'intājiyya lil-miyāh ba'd khams sanawāt”, *Al-Ra'y*, 23 March 2018.

⁴³ Luomi, *The Gulf Monarchies and Climate Change: Abu Dhabi and Qatar in an Era of Natural Unsustainability*, pp. 199–202.

⁴⁴ Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu'tazima 'alā al-ṣa'īd al-waṭanī” (2015), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

that it should be analyzed by examining both macro- and micro-linguistic features, combining a narrative approach with a polyphonic approach.⁴⁶ Analysis of the narrative is concerned with the story told in a text, who the main actors are, who is the hero and villain, what the problem or complication is, how to solve it and what the desired end-state is.

Polyphony is a concept first and foremost associated with Bakhtin, introduced in his analysis of Dostoevsky,⁴⁷ and then developed further by Fløttum and others.⁴⁸ As noted by Fløttum, the main principle is that in a text or an utterance, there is not one unique voice, but rather multiple voices and points of view present in addition to the author's — much like polyphony as we know the term from music. This can be explicit, in that someone is quoted, or it can be implicit, and it might often not be clear who these other points of view belong to. The relationship between these views and that of the author, and thus between one discourse and others, can be determined through different linguistic tools. For instance, using the connective “but”, one could say that “climate change demands instant mitigation action, but we cannot sacrifice people's jobs”. This shows that the author recognizes the importance of action but will not prioritize it over jobs, in turn illustrating the relationship between different climate discourses, and between different interests that engage in these discourses. Negatives are often used in this way, and so also in this text. The Kuwaiti government argues that Kuwait is *not* to blame for climate change,⁴⁹ thus refuting the argument and the discourse that holds that oil producers are responsible for the pollution caused by the fuels they have sold.

Moreover, the Kuwaiti government on numerous occasions employs a tool that Fløttum has identified in Norwegian discourse, in which authorities present two different and conflicting views, and then moves on without addressing the inherent contradiction: “It appears that it [The government] through the polyphonic utterances avoids to deal with the conflicts inherent in the problems”.⁵⁰ This is very evident in the Kuwaiti NDC. Kuwait “shares the concerns of the international community”, agrees on the importance of lowering emissions, is “ambitious” to avoid increases in emissions, and assigns great importance to international efforts towards mitigation.⁵¹ At the same time, they plan to continue and increase Kuwaiti oil production, refuse to commit to emission reductions, and refute their responsibility for global emissions and climate change.⁵²

It should be noted that, in terms of mitigation action, Kuwait stresses that it is a developing economy reliant on one source of income and as such cannot be expected to do too much and will depend on assistance from developed countries.⁵³ Yet, while other developing countries set concrete targets conditional on assistance, Kuwait does no such thing, and provides no promises and no targets at all. Instead, the country will *strive* to reduce emissions along three paths: technical

⁴⁶ Fløttum, “A Linguistic and Discursive View on Climate Change Discourse”, *ASp. la revue du GERAS* 58 (2010); Fløttum and Gjerstad, “Arguing for Climate Policy Through the Linguistic Construction of Narratives and Voices: The Case of the South-African Green Paper National Climate Change Response”, *Climatic Change* 118.2 (2013).

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (2014).

⁴⁸ Fløttum and Espeland, “Norske klimanarrativer – hvor mange ‘fortellinger’? En lingvistisk og diskursiv analyse av to norske stortingsmeldinger”, *Sakprosa* 6.4 (2014); Fløttum and Gjerstad, “Arguing for Climate Policy Through the Linguistic Construction of Narratives and Voices”.

⁴⁹ Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu‘tazima ‘alā al-ṣa‘īd al-waṭanī”, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Fløttum and Espeland, “Norske klimanarrativer–hvor mange “fortellinger”? En lingvistisk og diskursiv analyse av to norske stortingsmeldinger”, p. 15.

⁵¹ Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu‘tazima ‘alā al-ṣa‘īd al-waṭanī ”, pp. 1, 5, 9.

⁵² Reuters, “Kuwait Petroleum to Spend over \$500 bln by 2040 as It Lifts Oil Capacity”, 31 January 2018; Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu‘tazima ‘alā al-ṣa‘īd al-waṭanī”.

⁵³ Kuwait Govt, “Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu‘tazima ‘alā al-ṣa‘īd al-waṭanī”.

upgrading of oil and energy production, reduction in consumption through subsidy reform and fostering a sustainable culture, and investments in renewables. The document does refer to the Emir's vision for renewables, yet while this is given as 15% of energy needs being met by renewables by 2030 in other documents, no number is given here.⁵⁴ In short, no concrete promise, and what will be done will be done through technical solutions, regulations, awareness, and voluntary cuts in consumption. This is in line with the wider environmental discourse employed by the Kuwaiti state, and in order to look at that, a good place to start is the website of the ministry of oil, and an article entitled "Environment and safety in oil production".⁵⁵

This document recognizes that pollution is the "dark side" of the oil industry, yet it states that pollution isn't really a problem in itself, the real problem is ignorance towards pollution.⁵⁶ Once one recognizes the problem, it can be solved using new technology, strict regulations, a rigorous supervision regime, and spreading knowledge and awareness. This, luckily, the Kuwaiti state provides, and the state is the actor that solves the problem, protecting its citizens. This narrative and these thematic lines are consistent in state discourse. Thus, while Kuwaiti authorities may refute a climate discourse that entails cuts in oil production, and while they refuse many of the policies associated with a green shift, they do not refute climate change and certainly not the importance of environmental issues. On the contrary, Kuwaiti authorities spend much time and resources on an environmental discourse that offers a comprehensive and mostly consistent view on the problem, its causes, and how it can be solved.

4 Environmental issues as the state's domain

The main governmental body dealing with environmental issues is the Environmental Public Authority (EPA). It is led by a member of the royal family, and itself subject to the supreme council for the environment, led by the deputy prime minister. The EPA is the agency tasked with supervising environmental issues, spreading awareness and information, raising new initiatives, and not least enforcing the Environmental protection law adopted in 2014 and amended in 2015.⁵⁷ This is the main document concerning the environment in Kuwait, and is the central document referred to in the NDC helping Kuwait reduce its emissions.⁵⁸

The Environmental Law provides a definition of climate change in the preamble, and then moves on to not mention climate change again — in spite of the scope of the law being very wide. The aim of the law is given as protecting the environment and its resources, as well as living creatures and biological diversity.⁵⁹ On numerous instances, the law speaks of the need to manage nature's resources so that these can be utilized by coming generations as well, and sustainable development is listed as a goal along with industrial and economic expansion — there is no conflict between expansion and the environment.⁶⁰ If, that is, one takes care to protect the environment, follow a careful regime of supervision, strict regulations, and employ new technology.

Focus in the law is on avoiding spills, on physically protecting the immediate environment, and there is talk of the Montreal protocol and the Ozon layer. These are all important topics, but combined with the lack of attention to climate change, it is reminiscent of environmental discourses of the 1980s and 1990s — not least given the focus on technical solutions and strict

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kuwait Ministry of Oil, "Al-Bī'a wal-salām fī al-šin'a al-naftiyya", *Ḥaqā'iq wa 'arqām*.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kuwait Govt, "Qānūn ḥimāiat al-bī'a raqm (42) li-sanat 2014", EPA website (2014).

⁵⁸ Kuwait Govt, "Al-Musāhamāt al-muḥaddada wal-mu'tazima 'alā al-ṣa'īd al-waṭanī", pp. 7–8.

⁵⁹ Kuwait Govt, "Qānūn ḥimāyat al-bī'a raqm (42) li-sanat 2014", pp. 24–25.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

regulations rather than a transition towards green solutions and changes in habits. In short, it brings to mind what Dryzek terms “Administrative Rationalism”,⁶¹ and what Hajer terms “traditionalist-pragmatist story-line”,⁶² in which experts and the state through regulations and supervision can solve environmental problems without, crucially, fundamental changes to society or the economy.

The main agent in the Kuwaiti state’s discourse is, without a doubt, itself. It is the state that is to supervise, analyse and define the problems, it is to make use of experts from state institutions to find the best solutions, and then implement these. It is to make sure everyone follows the regulations, and the environmental protection law even institutes an environmental police force. The state fulfils the paternalistic role as protector of the environment, and thereby the citizens, and solves the problem so that they don’t have to worry about it — a convenient narrative for the rentier state. There is, nevertheless, a role for the population as well. For one thing, it is on the receiving end of the awareness and information campaigns of the state — although not any information. The one paragraph in the law that mentions the media states that it is forbidden to spread false news about the environment that might lead to fear or doubts about the state of the environment.⁶³ Moreover, the population is invited to take part in numerous and regular voluntary campaigns, often organized by the EPA, by the semi-official Environmental group Kuwait Environment Protection Society (KEPS),⁶⁴ or other organizations and public and private companies. These campaigns usually aim to spread information, or to clean beaches, camping grounds, and so on. This is of course important, yet again, it is also a convenient understanding of the problem for an oil exporting country.

This same narrative is found also in other sources, such as the environmental magazines published by EPA and KEPS: *bīatnā* (our environment) and *al-bī’a* (the environment), respectively. While climate change is given some attention in these outlets, there is no talk of or demands for policy changes in Kuwait. Instead, there is talk of the necessary technical solutions for adaptation that the government puts in place. In general, however, the focus remains on spills, on wildlife, and the like. An automated word count of the latest issues of these magazines confirms this impression:⁶⁵ the most employed words are not climate change, green shift, transition, activism, or the like. Instead, it is, expectedly, the environment, and then words like the state, ministries, law, the EPA, and so on. There is, again, no doubt as to the responsible agent: it is the state.

Thus, the Kuwaiti state recognizes the problem of climate change, but does not see Kuwait as responsible or obliged to take substantial steps to solve it. Climate change is something distant that is solved through international agreements — to which Kuwait is a part, and so the country is doing its share. Instead, focus is on the local, where problems can be solved through supervision, strict regulations enforced by the state, technical solutions and awareness — again built by the state. While this isn’t really an answer to climate change, the Kuwaiti state solves this using the same approach as the one identified by Fløttum in Norwegian governmental discourse. It recognizes climate change as a

⁶¹ Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (2013).

⁶² Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (1995).

⁶³ Kuwait Govt, “Qānūn ḥimāyat al-bī’a raqm (42) li-sanat 2014”, p. 130.

⁶⁴ Or, in Arabic, Al-Jam‘iyya al-Kuwaitiyya li-ḥimāyat al-bī’a [Kuwait Environment Protection Society (the group’s own translation)], whose website can be found at www.keps.org.kw/.

⁶⁵ The magazine of the EPA has not been published since October 2014. The issues included are *Bī’atnā*, issue 166 (October 2014) and *Al-Bī’a*, issue 394 (April 2018).

problem, yet refutes responsibility and large-scale cuts, and offer instead the environmental discourse described here — without dealing with the contradictions in this line of action. Thus, a discourse and an understanding emerge in which the Kuwaiti oil industry is not in conflict with the environment, and in which the clientelist relationship between state and society is maintained — the state solves the problem, provides services, and protects its citizens.

5 Water and electricity consumption: state service or environmental issue?

How then, did Kuwaiti authorities present the issue of water and electricity conservation during the spring of 2018? The background is, as we have seen, that water and electricity consumption levels in Kuwait are among the highest in the world, that both are heavily subsidized and based on fossil fuels, and so current levels of consumption are not sustainable neither in a fiscal nor environmental perspective. The level of consumption has increased substantially every year since the early 2000s,⁶⁶ and so the Kuwaiti authorities wish to stop this trend and reduce consumption. The government had already taken one important step when it introduced new and increased tariffs on water and electricity in the summer of 2017. These new tariffs, however, were only applied to public institutions, private companies, and some areas inhabited by foreign workers.⁶⁷ Ordinary Kuwaitis were exempt, even though the residential sector consumes most of the electricity produced in Kuwait.⁶⁸ Instead, the authorities chose a different approach towards their own citizens as summer approached in 2018: to encourage (voluntary) conservation.

This, in itself, is nothing new, and a governmental committee has worked to promote conservation in government institutions since 2007.⁶⁹ Similarly, a program aimed at spreading awareness in Kuwaiti schools has been running for years. These efforts continued through the spring of 2018, and in addition, the government sought to encourage the general population to conserve as well. The message was relayed in a number of articles in Kuwait's top newspapers, that, almost without exception, were more or less verbatim the same in each newspaper, in turn often verbatim the same as a news item on the website of the ministry of Electricity and Water — the government clearly succeeded in getting its message across in the media.⁷⁰ In these pieces, the minister himself or others from MEW and other ministries, called on the Kuwaiti people to limit their use of water and electricity: they appealed to the importance of using natural resources in a sustainable manner, they argued that wasting water was uncivilised, and they drew attention to how big the problem of lacking water resources is globally. On the occasion of the world water day, the director of the EPA argued that we all need to take appropriate measures to adapt to the consequences of climate change, conserving water being one of these.⁷¹ The authorities stated that

⁶⁶ Ferroukhi et al., *Renewable Energy Market Analysis: The GCC Region* (2016), pp. 32, 34; International Energy Agency, "Kuwait: Electricity and Heat for 2015".

⁶⁷ Kuwait News Agency, "New Tariffs Help Rationalize Water, Electricity Consumption – Official", 23 August 2017; Bū'amrī, "Al-Kuwait tarfa'u as'ar al-kahrabā' wal-mā' 500% 'alā al-wāfidīn", *Al-'Arabiyya*, 22 August 2017.

⁶⁸ Ferroukhi et al., *Renewable Energy Market Analysis: The GCC Region*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Kuwait General Authority for Applied Education and Training, "Liqa' ma'a al-muhandis 'Alī al-'Aidī al-ustādh bil-ma'had al-ṣinā'ī – al-Shuwaikh", 18 July 2011.

⁷⁰ See for instance Kuwait Ministry of Electricity and Water, "Ṣaif al-Kuwait 'āmin mā'iyyan wa kahrabā'iyyan", 23 March 2018; Al-'Alās, "Al-Rashīdī: 909 malāyīn ghālūn"; anon., "Al-Rashīdī: Al-Kuwait tahtāj ilā 840 milyūn ghālūn miyāh yawmiyyan fi 2030", *Al-Jarīda*, 23 March 2018.

⁷¹ Kuwait News Agency, "Mudīr al-b'ta al-Kuwaitiyya: qaḍiyat al-miyāh tafaṣṣaddaru awwaliyyātnā wa nas'ā li-tarshīd istiḥlākīhā wa idārat istiḥdāmīhā", 22 March 2018.

the aim was to increase awareness, and they claimed success arguing that the discourse on water in the country has changed.⁷² The authorities claimed success in terms of more tangible changes as well, as the increase in electricity consumption during the summer was smaller than expected.⁷³ Yet, when consumption nevertheless continued to increase in spite of the new tariffs and the conservation campaigns, it is important to note that conservation was not the only message the Kuwaiti authorities relayed.

On every occasion, the Kuwaiti government made sure to let the population know that they did everything that needed to be done in order to meet demand and deliver uninterrupted services to them in spite of record high levels of consumption: the summer was “safe both in terms of electricity and water”.⁷⁴ The government detailed how it invested large sums in upgrading and expanding existing power and desalination plants, and how it made sure that enough workers were on call at all times. This message got extensive coverage in Kuwait’s top newspapers, and articles on the government’s efforts to secure supply were often printed next to texts on the need for conservation, or the two messages were combined in the same article — making the appeal to conserve seem anything but acute.⁷⁵ Again, conflicting considerations are facilitated by allowing different voices and different messages and ignoring the contradiction, in line with Fløttum’s observations. As noted by Al-Sarihi, the Gulf countries do not comprehensively assess “contradictions between climate change mitigation and adaptation themselves and other policy goals” in their Nationally Determined Contributions, and run the risk of pursuing conflicting strategies.⁷⁶ Yet, as we have seen here, this may in itself be a strategy, at least in the case of Kuwait.

Moreover, the texts were quite technical and detailed, referring to large investments, impressive plants, and the extensive expertise needed — features only a state can deliver. In other words, conservation is something the government looks favourably on, it is a good way to engage the population, but it is not and it cannot be the solution. The solution has to be that the state solves the problem on behalf of its citizens making sure that they get the services and resources they need. This illustrates two important points: for one thing, the state cannot be seen to be unable to solve problems and deliver services, that would undermine the contract between state and society. Secondly, it can’t be anyone else who solves it. The problem can’t be solved by, for instance, citizens taking action, by private companies with new solutions, or by decentralized power production, because that would, in a very concrete manner, remove power from the state.

6 A hegemonic discourse

These themes, as we have seen, are the foundation for the Kuwaiti authorities discourse on the environment, on climate change, on electricity, water, and energy. We have also seen that the Kuwaiti government, to say the least, is highly successful in getting its message across in Kuwaiti media, and this is of course key. The discourse that is able to dominate or be hegemonic,

⁷² Al-‘Alī, “Būshahrī: juhūd al-tarshīd bada’at yu’fī thimārḥā”, *Al-ambā*, 28 March 2018.

⁷³ Al-Dīn, “‘Al-Kahrabā’: Al-ziyāda al-sanawiyya fī al-istihlāk inkhafāḍat 4%”, *Al-qabas*, 25 September 2018.

⁷⁴ Al-‘Alī, “Al-Rashīdī: ṣaifnā āmin mā’iyyan wa kahrabā’iyyan wa ḥasm ‘ghāz al-‘Irāq’ qarīban”, *Al-ambā*, 23 March 2018.

⁷⁵ See for instance Al-Zāhī, “Niḡābat ‘al-kahrabā’ tarfuḍu taḥwīl al-wizāra”; Al-‘Alī, “Al-Rashīdī: ṣaifnā āmin mā’iyyan wa kahrabā’iyyan”.

⁷⁶ Al-Sarihi, “Prospects for Climate Change Integration into GCC Economic Diversification Strategies”, *LSE Middle East Centre Paper* (2018), pp. 22, 24.

sets the terms for how a problem is understood. As argued by Chantal Mouffe, what constitutes “common sense”, the “natural order”, or in short, how we perceive things, are not “manifestations of a deeper objectivity”.⁷⁷ Rather, they are manifestations of power relations at any given time, they are the ways in which discourse is constructed in order to preserve the interests of those with power.⁷⁸ The aim, of course, is to set limits for discourse that prevent alternatives, to exercise their power through discourse, without having to resort to violence and coercion. And Kuwaiti authorities to a large extent succeed in doing this. If policy is to change, the discourse would first have to be challenged, but by and large, it is not. The state dominates media debate, and if we look at the discourse of environmental NGOs, it falls in line with the official one. I will give two brief examples, involving the above-mentioned group KEPS, and the more independent Green Line Environmental Group.

Beginning with KEPS, this group has cooperated with the EPA in order to spread awareness about climate change in connection with Kuwait’s second national communication. The group launched a campaign entitled “climate change literacy”, aiming to spread awareness through various events, publications, and the like.⁷⁹ On August 28 2018, the Secretary General presented her views on Kuwait’s efforts to deal with climate change in a newspaper article entitled “Juhūd kabīra fī majāl al-taghayyur al-manākhī” [Substantial Efforts in the Field of Climate Change]. As the title suggests, the Secretary General praises Kuwait’s efforts, arguing that the Emir’s vision for renewables demonstrates the commitment of the authorities to the issue at hand. Moreover, climate change is an international problem, and Kuwait has signed the different agreements reached through the United Nations framework, and takes part in the conferences each year, and so it is doing its part.⁸⁰ Again, climate change is seen as something distant, the domain of the state, and nothing to worry about for ordinary citizens.

The Green Line Environmental Group is an NGO that is highly critical of the state, and which frequently criticizes the EPA and other state institutions. Using social media, the group has frequently raised the issue of the poor and at times hazardous air quality in Kuwait City. It uses measurements published on the website of the US embassy as well as other sources to criticize Kuwaiti authorities and the EPA for its failure to both warn citizens about the health hazards, and to take steps to improve the situation. It argues that the EPA doesn’t fulfill its responsibilities, that it doesn’t provide precise measurements, and that it doesn’t do enough to punish the polluters. In other words, the state (the EPA) is the responsible actor, and the solution is in rigorous supervision and regulations. This, of course, does not mean that the Green Line necessarily agrees with all aspects of the state’s view on environmental issues, and it certainly does not mean that the critique is not sincere. Yet, either way, the criticism raised falls well within the framework of the state’s construction of how environmental issues are to be seen.

7 Conclusion: a monumental challenge

The double challenge that Kuwait and the other oil producing Gulf countries face will become increasingly demanding for both state and society in the years to come. Yet, so far, Kuwaiti authorities has constructed an environmental discourse in which the challenge of climate change is recognized, but which nevertheless insists on the continuation of Kuwait’s oil industry and the

⁷⁷ Mouffe, “Space, Hegemony and Radical Critique”, *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey*, ed. Featherstone and Painter (2013), pp. 26–7.

⁷⁸ Fairclough, *Language and Power* (2013); Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2001).

⁷⁹ GreenArea, “Al-Kuwait ‘atlaqat ḥamlat ‘maḥw ummiyya taghayyur al-manākhī”, 9 April 2017.

⁸⁰ Anon., “Juhūd kabīra fī majāl al-taghayyur al-manākhī”, *Al-Anbā*, 28 August 2018.

political arrangements it supports. Responsibility for climate change is refuted, and the responsibility to act is mainly placed elsewhere. The state does not, however, refute environmental issues as such, and spends time and resources constructing a discourse in which the state is the actor that identifies and deal with such problems through strict regulations and supervision, without fundamental changes to the economy or to society. The state is largely successful in dominating public debate, and even critical voices follow the logic of the state's discourse. In line with this discourse, Kuwait plans to not only continue oil production over the coming decades, but to increase production capacity substantially.⁸¹

Clearly, discourse does not tell the whole story. Non-elected governments may pursue policies that are not publicly announced, and there is of course a difference between what is said in public and what the authorities discuss in closed meetings. Still, to the extent that the discourse described here is reflective of its views, it seems the Kuwaiti government takes what can only be described as an optimistic view of the consequences of both climate change and of efforts for a green shift and its effects on the international energy market — a view in which Kuwait can continue as before. Whether this is feasible in the long run is, to say the least, debatable, and short-term political gains may come at the expense of the sustainability of the system.⁸² Moreover, while the Kuwaiti regime certainly seeks to provide their population with welfare and good lives, there is no doubt that a main priority of the un-elected Arab regimes is to secure their own position. For the moment, it seems the Kuwaiti regime equates securing their own position with continued and even increased oil exports. This raises many questions: Can we realistically expect the regime to change its policies in this regard? Would this mean that a green shift is impossible, and does it mean that a managed transition is less likely than insistence on an oil-based economy until it is no longer functional? Does it mean that Kuwaitis will have to choose between a green shift that accommodates the ruling regime or no green shift at all?

That said, this also reflects the very real and incredibly difficult challenges and dilemmas the Kuwaiti government, and the population, will face over the coming years, and these must be taken seriously. What are the real and viable economic alternatives to oil production in Kuwait? Should we expect the Kuwaiti people to give up on their wealth and voluntarily choose economic hardship? And at what point, given that oil exportation still (and for many years to come) is extremely profitable? Even with the best of intentions, a green shift in Kuwait and the other oil-exporting Gulf states will be extremely difficult. Most likely, it will lead to increased societal conflict as differing interests clash, and adaptation and mitigation measures along with economic reforms are weighed against concerns for jobs and welfare.

Importantly, all GCC states have made cuts in energy-related subsidies, albeit in varying degrees, and while foreign workers, private companies, and public institutions so far bear the brunt of these cuts, citizens have not been entirely shielded.⁸³ As several researchers have noted, these cuts have not sparked as much popular discontent as one might have expected,⁸⁴

⁸¹ Reuters, "Kuwait Petroleum to Spend over \$500 bln by 2040 as It Lifts Oil Capacity".

⁸² Krane, "Stability Versus Sustainability: Energy Policy in the Gulf Monarchies", *Energy Journal* 36.4 (2015).

⁸³ Young, "Confronting the Governance Crisis in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward Establishing Inclusive and Pluralistic States Post-Arab Spring", *Baker Institute for Public Policy, Issue Brief*, Rice University (2018); Krane and Hung, "Energy Subsidy Reform in the Persian Gulf: The End of the Big Oil Give-away", *Baker Institute for Public Policy, Issue Brief*, Rice University 28 April 2016.

⁸⁴ Hertog, "Challenges to the Saudi Distributional State in the Age of Austerity", presented at *Saudi Arabia: Domestic, Regional and International Challenges*, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 12–13 December 2016; Young, "The Difficult Promise of Economic Reform in the Gulf", *Baker Institute for Public Policy*, Rice University (2018).

and, as argued by Krane, lower oil prices along with international campaigns to “end fossil fuel subsidies and address negative externalities such as pollution and climate change” have provided political cover for reforms.⁸⁵ Yet, as we have seen, this seems to be different in Kuwait, with the regime both experiencing and fearing political reactions even to quite modest reductions. This may signal that the issue is perceived differently in Kuwait, or that Kuwait’s comparatively more open political system to a larger extent allows for or even encourages such responses. This may of course change in Kuwait as the economic situation makes the need for reform more acute, or it may change in neighbouring countries if even harsher cuts provoke reactions initially discouraged by more restrictive political environments. Either way, dealing with the many challenges that come together in the issue of climate change means negotiating different and competing interests in a manner that the Gulf countries largely have been able to avoid for the past decades.

In this context, I believe this kind of discourse analysis, and the focus on the polyphonic aspect, has a lot to offer, as it helps identify the relationship between different discourses and by extension between the positions of different groups. As such, it can identify common features in the discourses of groups that refute each other’s positions overall, perhaps demonstrating that they do have some views in common and help build the ground for compromises. This is sorely needed, as debate on climate change have been showed to be increasingly polarized, and as a consequence, “societies should look for mitigation policies that have co-benefits across groups of different value orientations”.⁸⁶ As we have seen, the cuts in fuel subsidies were seen very differently by the government and members of parliament in Kuwait, and likely by large segments of the population as well. This made the reform difficult and costly for the authorities, and so far, they have not followed up on plans to cut subsidies on electricity and water for ordinary citizens. Yet, as the effects of both climate change and a changing international energy market become more tangible, the Kuwaiti government will likely have to make more wide-reaching changes in the future, and postponement due to opposition might not be an option. There will of course be many different ways to make such changes, and differing interests will come up against each other, making the ability to reach compromises all the more important. The approach suggested here may help identify why different groups disagree, why or why not a position gains support, and which narratives that appeal to different groups. Equally important, it will help identify the differences and conflicts of interests that cannot be circumvented by linguistic tools, and that will have to be dealt with in some way or another if a green shift is to succeed, and if Kuwait is to succeed in adapting to both climate change and a changing international energy market.

Writing on the seemingly democratic reforms introduced in Egypt, Tunisia, and many other countries in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1980s, Brynen et. al. argue that these changes were in fact not real steps towards political liberalization. Rather, they were part of a wider “authoritarian upgrading” in the region, which “was intended as a substitute for, rather than a step toward, fuller democratization”.⁸⁷ As the consequences of climate change become increasingly tangible, the big question is of course whether the same holds true for the environmental discourse of Kuwaiti authorities: is it meant as a step towards, or a substitute for, more comprehensive reforms?

⁸⁵ Krane, “Political Enablers of Energy Subsidy Reform in Middle Eastern Oil Exporters”, pp. 550–51.

⁸⁶ Aasen, “The Polarization of Public Concern About Climate Change in Norway”, *Climate Policy* 17.2 (2017), p. 225.

⁸⁷ Brynen et al., *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism & Democratization in the Arab World* (2012), p. 4.

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