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Anti-U.S. Views Surface in Kuwait's Youth

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Kuwait City - Waving at his liberators wasn't enough for Fawzi al-Odah. The 14-year-old slipped his hand out of his father's and ran down to the highway where U.S. tanks rumbled into a Kuwait that was experiencing its first moments of freedom after months of Iraqi occupation.

"He goes and shakes hands with the American troops," recalled Khaled al-Odah, Fawzi's father, about that day in February 1991. "He was shouting. He was very happy."

Eleven years later, U.S. troops hold Fawzi al-Odah prisoner, an accused "enemy combatant" of al-Qaida, at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Among the 625 men from 43 countries held captive at Guantanamo, 12 are Kuwaitis. The United States still has no closer ally in the Arab world than the country it saved from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein - and Kuwait almost inevitably will be a major staging ground for U.S. soldiers should the United States invade Iraq.

But somehow, for a small number of Kuwaitis, the friendship has soured so fully in the past decade that they now see America as a foe against whom it is worth fighting a holy war. Diplomats and Kuwaiti observers say there are between 40 and 100 men in Kuwait who could be prepared to use violence against U.S. targets.

While Western diplomats in Kuwait say there is no doubt that the majority of the million Kuwaitis and the government will back the United States in a war with Iraq, some are worried that an attack on Iraq will only further push some Kuwaitis into taking violent action against their American guests.

Most Kuwaitis "do not like the idea of another war that is going to kill lots of people needlessly in their view," said one Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity. "I think they felt the status quo was acceptable. ... they will be more ready to do something."

The anti-American feeling that some observers in the region say has been building in Kuwait since the end of the Gulf War in 1991 erupted in deadly violence for the first time last month when two young Kuwaitis fatally shot a U.S. Marine during military exercises on a Kuwaiti island. Marines shot dead the two assailants.

Soon after, Kuwaiti authorities arrested a dozen men accused of being part of the plot, which the brother of one of the gunmen said was sparked by fury at the United States' support of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

Many in Kuwait are asking themselves what it is that has turned young men who have many reasons to be grateful to the United States into its enemies.

At 25, al-Odah is the oldest of Khaled al-Odah's five children. A former Kuwaiti fighter pilot who spent five years at U.S. Air Force bases in Texas in the 1970s, Khaled al-Odah now runs a successful plumbing business in Kuwait City. His house is lavish and large. He says he is between the middle and the top rungs of the Kuwaiti social ladder, which for most people in the world would indicate that the family is extremely wealthy.

It is also a religious family, no one more so than Fawzi.

By the time he was 16, Fawzi knew the entire Koran by heart. In his spare time, he would bring neighborhood kids home and teach them about Islam.

"I tried to raise him in a way to be a religious man," said his father on a recent evening as he sat in his diwaniya, the large rectangular room that is the social gathering place for men in many Kuwaiti homes. "Not, you know ... but as a real religious, Islamic person."

Not, Khaled means, as a violent zealot. As head of a committee of the families of Kuwaiti detainees at Guantanamo, Khaled is the chief messenger for what the families say is the truth about their sons: They were in Afghanistan and Pakistan doing charity work, not fighting with al-Qaida and the Taliban. Their incarceration is a miscarriage of justice. They want their sons home.

A graduate in Islamic law - sharia - from the University of Kuwait, Fawzi had been active in charitable work since 1996, his father said. As he had done in the summer of 2000, he spent the summer of 2001 in Pakistan building wells, mosques and teaching, the elder al-Odah said.

"He called us every day or two saying he was OK and fine," he said.

Then came the attacks of Sept. 11. Fawzi was due home by Sept. 15 but called to say he was staying to help refugees fleeing Afghanistan.

His calls became less frequent.

"Then after the air raids started I think he was caught inside Afghanistan," Khaled said. "Maybe he crossed the border, trying to help. We lost contact after the raids."

The next Khaled heard about his son was in late December. Fawzi had been captured by Pakistani tribesmen as he fled Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. The tribesmen sold him to the Americans, Khaled said.

The father said he does not know what his son was doing in Afghanistan but supposes that he was continuing his charitable work.

U.S. officials refuse to discuss the cases of men held at Guantanamo, but diplomats here say it's possible that some of the Kuwaiti prisoners were merely in the region working for Islamic charities. Still, said the diplomats, who spoke on condition they not be identified, it is extremely unlikely that all 12 are innocent, as their families claim.

"It's almost unbelievable that all of them were building schools and handing out copies of the Koran," one diplomat said.

Key to understanding how young Kuwaitis like Fawzi al-Odah could become holy warriors against the United States is their age, Kuwaitis and Western observers say.

Kuwait has a very young population, with about 40 percent under the age of 16. For many Kuwaitis, the American-led liberation is a vague memory.

"The problem is that they're young and stupid," said Najib al-Wagyan, a lawyer who is defending the young men detained after the shooting of the U.S. Marine. "Some have no mustache on their faces. They're brainwashed."

They have also experienced a decade that saw the collapse of the peace process between the Palestinians and Israel and the ensuing Palestinian uprising. Daily, on Arabic television stations,

Kuwaitis see images of Palestinians killed by Israeli troops. This has deeply impacted them and they blame America for its support of Israel, said Bader Ben Eisa, a professor in the sociology department of Kuwait University.

"When they see that on TV, what Israel is doing to kids and old people, they feel it's OK to go and get killed for the cause," Ben Eisa said. "And although they can't go to Israel they can do things" like fight American soldiers in Afghanistan or Kuwait.

At the same time, analysts say, young Kuwaitis have been angered by the United States' military presence in Saudi Arabia, the holiest of Islamic lands. They also object to American support for autocratic regimes in countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Although most hate Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, they also detest the American-supported UN sanctions that many say have contributed to the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians. American military action in Afghanistan also appeared to many Kuwaitis as yet another example of American imperialism in the Islamic world.

Now the threat of another American-led war against another Islamic country, albeit the mistrusted neighbor Iraq, is seen by some Kuwaitis as yet another example of American anti-Islamic aggression.

Even among self-proclaimed pro- American families like the al-Odahs, these issues provoke criticism of the United States. When asked about his son's political opinions, Khaled al-Odah initially said he had none. But on those specific points, al-Odah acknowledged that both he and his son objected to American policy.

Stoking all of these issues have been the increased strength and popularity of Islamic political groups and hardline clerics in Kuwait in the past 11 years.

After the shooting of the marine, the government outlawed the springtime camps that Islamic charities held for young Kuwaitis in the country's deserts. The worry was that hardline clerics were preaching anti-Americanism to young men in the camps.

The government also has clamped down on clerics who preach war and on the funding of the Islamic charities, some of which are believed by American intelligence officials to fund terrorist groups.

From this web of grievances, propaganda and political power come the young Kuwaitis, from mainly wealthy families, who now see America as their enemy rather than protector and figures like Osama bin Laden as heroes.

"The example of bin Laden surrendering his luxurious life and going to live in a cave - there's a certain amount of appeal to that, the kind of Robin Hood thing," a Western diplomat said. "Especially for young men, combined with the politics and the Palestinian conflict. ... Bin Laden is a mythical hero figure who's taking a stand. Perhaps the journey is best understood in those terms."

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