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## **In liberated Kuwait, many turn against U.S.**

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KUWAIT CITY - "Thanks Allies," reads a sign painted on the side of an apartment building below the red, white and green stripes of the Kuwaiti flag. It is a reminder that this tiny oil-rich state would no longer exist were it not for the U.S.-led forces that came to the rescue after Iraq invaded in 1990.

But when 22 jihadists went on trial here this week, accused of taking part in the insurgency against U.S. forces in Iraq, it signalled that something had changed in Kuwait. The nation that danced in the streets 13 years ago as Americans rolled in to end seven months of Iraqi occupation may be turning against its liberators.

Kuwait is a remarkably wealthy country, and many Kuwaitis remain grateful to the U.S. for freeing them from Saddam Hussein, but recruiters for jihad have nonetheless found no shortage of volunteers willing to combat the Americans. A body count is underway to determine how many Kuwaitis died in the recent battle in Falluja.

If Americans are no longer heroes in the eyes of some Kuwaitis it is partly because almost 40% of the population was not even born at the time of the brutal Iraqi occupation.

But another reason is that since the first Gulf War, Arab anger over U.S. policies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel, coupled with rising Islamic extremism, have all spilled into Kuwait.

"I would say there's a dichotomy," said Abdalla Al Naibari, a former member of parliament who now edits a weekly newspaper that trumpets what he calls the "traditional" liberal Kuwaiti values.

"The Islamists, of course, generally all over the Arab world ... are becoming increasingly anti-American," he said. "The rest of the public, they are friendly toward the Americans but at the same time they are concerned."

Kuwait is the main staging area for the U.S. military campaign in Iraq. There are 25,000 American troops in the country, as well as 12,000 civilian contractors. Convoys of dusty armoured vehicles and supply trucks ply the highways, ferrying soldiers and equipment in and out of the war zone.

"These forces came here to liberate Iraqis from the grip of a dictatorial regime and are not causing any problems to us," former oil minister Ali Ahmad Al-Baghli wrote in the Arab Times, in a front-page column responding to a visiting Saudi cleric who called for jihad against U.S. troops.

Occasionally Kuwaitis respond to the call to jihad by taking potshots at the American convoys or joining the Iraqi insurgent forces. Two years ago, two suspected Kuwaiti terrorists opened fire on U.S. Marines training on an island near the city, killing a serviceman.

"It is the brainwashing of all these groups," said lawyer Abdul Majeed Khuraibet, who represents two men accused of selling guns to the alleged Kuwaiti terrorist network that killed the Marine. They deny knowing the guns were to be used in the attack. "It is the religious fanaticism, like this group that goes to Falluja now."

Some of al-Qaeda's most senior leaders are Kuwaitis, among them Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, planner of the 9/11 attacks, and Suleiman Abu Gaith, a radical cleric who recruited many Kuwaiti youths and served as Osama bin Laden's official spokesman.

A dozen Kuwaitis are currently detained at Guantanamo Bay.

Radical Islamists inside and outside Kuwait are angered that the country is playing a key role in the war. A jihadist Internet site posted a message this week accusing Kuwait of collaborating with "God's enemies, the Jews, the Christians, the Shiites."

Kuwait has done well by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The capture of Saddam has removed the threat that he might re-invade. The economy has soared since his ouster, and the U.S. military presence provides security to a small wealthy state unable to defend itself alone in a rough neighbourhood.

The government of Kuwait, which is ruled by the royal Al-Sabah family, has taken a harsh line against jihadists. Thirty clerics who signed a statement against the U.S. invasion were barred from speaking in mosques.

Ismail Al-Shatti, a former member of the national assembly, said the extremists are a small minority.

"There is some, of course, like in Canada there is some. And those people who are the extremists are under the focus, but they are representing very very few persons in our society," he said.

The United States is facing opposition throughout the region over the invasion of Iraq, and Arabs from many surrounding countries have volunteered to fight alongside the insurgent forces, but few expected this from Kuwait.

On Sunday, a trial opened against a group of men accused of raising money and recruiting for the Iraq insurgency, as well as actively fighting. Three were teenagers. Also on Sunday, the courts upheld a two-year suspended sentence against radical cleric Hamid Al-Ali for publicly opposing the Iraq war. During his interrogation he said it was a religious duty to fight those occupying Muslim lands, local media reported.

"They are just using these young people and using their frustrations and trying to push them [to] what I call myself the death culture," said Ali Al-Tarrah, dean of social sciences at Kuwait University.

"We need the government to do something, not only send them to court, not only arrest them," he said.

Radical imams must be removed from their posts and the education system must be reformed, Mr. Al-Tarrah said. "It's a long process, it's not an easy one."

Some are confident Kuwait's material wealth and the relative freedom enjoyed by its citizens will immunize the country against the spread of radical Islam. Youths who drive Porsches and have personal maids are "not an ideal target for extremists or fundamentalists," one observer said.

But some of the Kuwaitis joining jihadist movements are members of prominent families.

Khalid al-Odah was a Kuwaiti resistance leader. A former air force pilot who trained in Texas, he commanded five cells that collected information on Iraqi military movements and relayed them to U.S. forces using satellite phones during the Gulf War.

Like most Kuwaitis, he vividly recalls the day of liberation, when the U.S. forces came up the highway from Saudi Arabia. Everyone was shouting and dancing, and waving Kuwaiti and American flags.

"My boy Fawzi was with me at that time," Mr. al-Odah said, sitting in the parlour of his large house, a framed portrait of his son on an end table.

However, the portrait is all he has seen of his son since 2001, when the youth was captured in Pakistan shortly after the fall of the Taliban and sent to Guantanamo Bay. He has been there ever since.

Mr. al-Odah said he cannot imagine his son actually joined the jihadist cause.

"For me it's impossible that Fawzi went there for this," said Mr. al-Odah, who leads a group trying to bring home Kuwaitis detained at Guantanamo.

"He owed the United States a great favour, the favour of liberating Kuwait."