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#### WIDESPREAD ARRESTS IN KUWAIT

Among those known to have been detained since Monday, May 7 are:

**Mr. Ahmed Bager**, ex-member of parliament

**Mr. Abdel Mohsen Farhan al-Farhan**

**Dr. Ahmed al-Khatib**, ex-member of parliament

**Dr. Ahmed al-Nafissi**, magazine editor-in-chief

**Mr. Abdallah al-Nibari**, ex-member of parliament

**Mr. Khaled al-San'a**, businessmen

**Mr. Khaled al-Wassmi**, ex-member of parliament

Dr. Al-Nafissi is a founding member of the Cairo-based Arab Organization for Human Rights and a member of its Board of Directors; Mr. Al-Nibari is also a member of the AOHR.

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Kuwaiti security forces have dealt a heavy blow to the country's nascent pro-democracy movement, arresting an estimated 34 leading figures. Among those detained this week, in raids on private homes, are at least four members of the National Assembly dissolved in 1986 on the Emir's orders.

In response, Middle East Watch today dispatched a letter of protest to the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah. The letter deplored the arrest of people detained for the expression of their beliefs. It also criticized a step which can only retard the process of greater public participation in political life to which the ruler committed himself on January 20.

The latest arrests of intellectual opponents of the regime are the first to take place since the movement to reconvene parliament and restore press freedom began last October. Periodic round-ups of members of Kuwait's large Shi'a minority, suspected of sympathies for neighboring Iran, have, however, continued. In mid-February, 10 people, including prominent religious leaders, were arrested.

Acknowledging eight arrests yesterday, a statement by the Interior Ministry has said that Dr. Ahmed al-Khatib, the country's most prominent opposition politician, is being held for addressing an illegal meeting. There was no indication whether he would be charged with any specific offense. A member of the former National Assembly, Dr. Khatib has been a leading opponent of the ruling al-Sabah family for nearly 30 years.

In response to mounting protests, Sheikh Jaber announced last month that elections would be held on June 10, for an interim, four-year Assembly charged with examining the working of Kuwait's

political system. A third of the Assembly's members would be appointed by the government.

Opposition groups -- a cross-section of academics, journalists and former parliamentarians -- denounced the government plan as a sham and as unconstitutional. Calls for a boycott of the elections have been led by Mr. Ahmed Saddoun, speaker of the dissolved Assembly, who has called the planned interim Assembly "the illegitimate child of the 1962 constitution."

If widely heeded, the boycott would have severely embarrassed the government, at a time when the ruling al-Sabah family is trying to tread a delicate line between diametrically opposing forces: conservative Saudi Arabia and the pro-democracy movement at home. Although Kuwait has traditionally had the liveliest political life of any Persian Gulf state, in recent years it has come under heavy pressure from Saudi Arabia, to curb expressions of public dissent.

According to information received by Middle East Watch, one of those arrested, Mr. Ahmed Bager, a former member of parliament affiliated with the Islamic tendency, was detained on Monday while driving in his car. Pamphlets criticizing the Emir's speech on the occasion of the important Eid al-Fitr religious festival two weeks ago were reportedly found in his vehicle by the police. Held incommunicado for two days, Mr. Bager was said to have refused release on bail on religious grounds.

Apart from Mr. Bager, none of the other opposition figures detained on Tuesday night during a *diwaniyeh*, or open-house meeting, at the home of Mr. Abdel Mohsen Farhan al-Farhan have been allowed access to their lawyers or to their families. Nor has their place of detention been made public.

Others known to have been arrested are Mr. Abdallah al-Nibari and Mr. Khaled al-Wassmi, former parliamentarians, Mr. Khaled al-San'a, a businessman, and Mr. Ahmed al-Nafissi, Editor-in-Chief of a weekly magazine, *al-Talia*.

The National Assembly was closed down in July 1986, during the height of the Iran-Iraq war, on the grounds that Kuwait needed to close ranks, and could not afford the luxury of divisive debate. Strict press censorship was imposed at the same time. During the war, Kuwait was the target of missile attacks and acts of sabotage either mounted by Iran or by Shi'a Muslim Kuwaitis backed by Teheran.

However, in the months prior to the suspension of parliament, a vocal faction within the Assembly had launched unprecedented criticism of corruption and incompetence within the government, calling individual ministers to account. The National Assembly regularly criticized government policy and was capable of exercising sufficient pressure on the government to persuade it to amend proposed legislation.

Most observers believe that it was this factor, coupled with the behind-the-scenes pressure from Saudi Arabia -- uncomfortable with the free-wheeling Kuwaiti press -- rather than the supposed threat to national unity, which prompted Shekh Jaber to act.

Democracy in Kuwait, even under the system which prevailed off-and-on up to 1986, has always been severely restricted, limited to a tiny minority of the country's two million-strong population

defined as "first-class citizens". These are the 65,000 Kuwaitis whose families can trace their ancestry back to 1920, when the state was formed. Political parties have been prevented from being formed, although informal groupings were permitted in the pre-1986 National Assembly.

These restrictions on political participation have caused considerable discontent among the many permanent residents of Kuwait from all over the Arab world, notable Palestinians and Iraqis, who have not been granted Kuwaiti citizenship.

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