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Walls Built On Sand: Migration, Exclusion, And Society In Kuwait

Anh Nga Longva

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When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the sight of tens of thousands of non-Kuwaiti Arabs, Indians, East Asians, and Westerners fleeing or trapped under occupation made the outside world suddenly aware of a singular fact of Kuwaiti society—that Kuwaitis are an absolute minority in their own country. Basing her analysis on extensive fieldwork and archival research, the author examines the social dimension of labor migration to Kuwait since independence in 1961, exploring how the presence of over one million foreign workers has influenced the way Kuwaitis organize their lives and perceive themselves. In particular, Longva looks at the relations between two sharply differentiated social categories and the politics of exclusion that have allowed Kuwaitis to protect their rights and privileges as citizens against infringement by the huge influx of expatriates. Longva examines the little-studied system of kafala, or sponsorship, under which all foreign workers enter and reside in the country, showing how it has become the most critical source of power for native Kuwaitis vis-à-vis immigrants. She also addresses aspects of ethnicity and class, describes the life of expatriates, and looks at developments in gender relations and the role of women in building the national identity in the context of migration and modernization.

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