



Kuwait: The Biduns' review cards

- The Bidun population
- Registration with the Central System and issuance of review cards
- Are children of registered Biduns automatically registered, and do they get their own review cards?
- During what period have green review cards been issued? How long have they been valid for?

The Bidun population

The Biduns¹ constitute a heterogeneous group of residents who have lived in Kuwait for up to several generations without Kuwaiti citizenship. A large proportion of them are descendants of nomadic Bedouin tribes who resided within the borders of present-day Kuwait when the country became independent in 1961. For various reasons, most of these individuals did not become citizens (see MRG 2020; HRW 1995; Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 24-26).²

Another subgroup were citizens of neighbouring countries who were recruited to the Kuwaiti army and police force in the 1960s and 70s. The authorities registered these people as Biduns, allegedly to conceal the fact that foreigners made up large parts of the army and security apparatus (MRG 2020).³ A third category supposedly came later during the oil boom of the 1970s and 80s. However, some sources suggest that most of these individuals are likely to have been among the

¹ The name is an abbreviation of the Arabic term *bidun jinsiyya*, which means without nationality.

² Some of these people neglected to apply for citizenship, lacking either awareness or understanding of the new nationality law and its implications (MRG 2020). Others submitted applications but did not meet the documentation requirements, and their cases remained unresolved. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 1995), this applied to one-third of those who registered for citizenship. One group, however, was apparently naturalised later in the 1960s and 70s as part of a series of political naturalisations implemented by the Emir to secure new, loyal allies (see more in Ghabra 1997, p. 363-365).

³ These Biduns have had good reasons to believe that they would be naturalised, according to a well-informed source (email, April 2019). Serving in the army implies a form of loyalty that many expected would eventually be rewarded. There is also legal basis for this in the nationality law (1959, Art. 5). There were also stateless Bedouins amongst those who were drafted into the army and police (Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 27).

many Biduns who left the country during the Iraq invasion in 1990/91,⁴ and whose return was later denied (Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 47; well-informed source, email April 2019).

Furthermore, the nationality law continually gives rise to new generations of Biduns. Children of stateless fathers inherit statelessness regardless of whether the mother is a Kuwaiti national, and regardless of whether the child is born in Kuwait (Beaugrand 2018, p. 112; Stateless Journeys 2019, p. 7).

During the first decades of Kuwait's independence, Biduns were treated as lawful residents, having access to employment, education and health services just like Kuwaiti citizens (MRG 2020). However, after 1985, the authorities changed the Biduns' status to illegal residents, claiming that the vast majority of them were hiding their true nationality. This change of policy eventually stripped the Biduns of their basic rights and continues to cause severe hardship, despite the set of fundamental rights promised to them in 2011.⁵

A well-informed source (email, April 2019) points out that Biduns are generally a vulnerable group. This means that even if they have documentation confirming long term-residence, their access to basic rights remains unprotected. Nevertheless, some groups are believed to fare better than others, such as those in possession of 1965 census papers⁶ and those who have served in the army and police.⁷ A network of informal contacts can also facilitate access to employment and public services. Moreover, there are prominent Kuwaiti advocates for Bidun rights, including members of parliament (source A,⁸ email April 2019).

The total number of Biduns is uncertain

According to official statistics, the number of registered Biduns is currently 88,000. The official figure has decreased regularly, from about 121,000 registered Biduns in 1995 (Central Agency 2017; source A, email April 2019).

⁴ Estimates of how many left the country vary from about 100,000 to 140,000 (Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 47; Beaugrand 2018, p. 36).

⁵ The rights are enshrined in Decree 409/2011, which came after the Biduns started a protest movement for civil rights in the wake of the Arab Spring. See Landinfo & the Swedish Migration Board 2012 (p. 8-11) for details about these rights. Information about the demonstrations can be found in and MRG 2020 and UK Home Office 2016 (p. 18-20).

⁶ Kuwait conducted its first census in 1965.

⁷ Until 1990, the Biduns were the backbone of the country's army and police forces (HRW 1995). There are no official statistics, but it is estimated that about 80 per cent of the regular army forces were Biduns (Beaugrand 2018, p. 106).

⁸ This source bases its information on conversations with several sources in Kuwait.

The exact number of Biduns in Kuwait is, however, a topic of dispute and estimates vary (Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 1). Claire Beaugrand, the author of the book “Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait”, argues that the official numbers should be seen as “conservative estimates” at best. In her opinion, the authorities may have an interest in showing declining numbers, implying that policies have been successful and that the Biduns are recovering their original nationality (Beaugrand 2018, p. 36-37).

It has also been argued that the official figures do not reflect population growth, nor do they include a group of Biduns who obtained fake foreign passports that later expired (Beaugrand 2018, p. 37).⁹

On the other hand, other sources believe there are probably not many more Biduns than the authorities state (source A,¹⁰ email April 2019).

Estimates from the most updated written sources now range from “somewhere between 88,000 and 106,000” (HRW 2020) to “more than 120,000” (KSHR 2019, p. 9).

The Central System – registration and review cards

Since 1993, a special government committee currently known as the Central System/Agency has been in charge of dealing with all issues related to the Biduns. The committee assesses whether Biduns may qualify for naturalisation,¹¹ or whether they must regularise their stay, i.e. change the basis of their residence. Three committees have succeeded each other since 1993, and the current one was established in 2010 (UK Home Office 2016, p. 21-22). Despite repeated promises to find lasting solutions to the problem, most cases remain unresolved, and only a few Biduns have been granted citizenship (KSHR 2019, p. 9; Beaugrand 2018, p. 139; Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 50-51).

⁹ By presenting passports from other states, Biduns could obtain five-year work visas in Kuwait. However, as many Biduns acquired fake, non-renewable passports, the visas could not be renewed. As far as Kuwaiti authorities are concerned, these people have, through their actions, admitted to having another nationality (“corrected their status”) (Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 42), and are thus no longer regarded as Biduns. According to Beaugrand (2018, p. 130) the buying and selling of forged passports has been no secret to the authorities. In the early 2000s, South American and African passports were allegedly sold right outside the committee’s premises.

¹⁰ See footnote 8.

¹¹ It is the Emir who decides on naturalisation, not the Central System. The latter, however, assesses who may be eligible to apply and makes its recommendations (well-informed source, email April 2019).

Claire Beaugrand points out that gathering proof and presumptions of origin has been an important task of the committees, to substantiate the claim that Biduns are illegal foreign residents. When assessing a person's eligibility for naturalisation, more emphasis is put on subjective evidence of foreign origin than the length of stay in Kuwait, according to Beaugrand (2018, p. 127).

The current committee, the Central System – *Central System to Resolve Illegal Residents' Status* – has more extensive powers than its predecessors (Beaugrand 2018, p. 129). Referred to as “a state within the state”, the Central System regulates the Biduns' access to documents and formal rights in an arbitrary and non-transparent manner (source A, email April 2019). Biduns do not have insight into the basis of the committee's decisions, nor can they contest the decisions. In practice, the courts also lack authority to rule on the status of stateless persons (well-informed source, emails 2019 and 2020; U.S. Department of State 2019, p. 16; Elgayar 2020; International Coalition on the Rights of the Stateless in 2014, p. 8; KSHR 2018, p. 15).¹²

According to the Central System itself, the Bidun files are categorised in three groups (Central Agency 2017):

1. Illegal residents whose status need to be adjusted.
2. Illegal residents who might be considered for naturalization.
3. Illegal residents for whom residency permits are issued after remedying their status (i.e. after declaring their original nationality [Landinfo's comment]).¹³

Biduns registered with the Central System are to be issued a card confirming their registration, a so-called review card (also known as a security card). The card contains the holder's personal data and a case number but is not a regular ID card. Furthermore, a valid card supposedly confirms the holder's right to certain public services, such as personal documents (birth certificates, marriage/divorce certificates, death certificates), health services and schooling, as well as employment rights (Kuwaiti Government 2011, p. 8-9; Landinfo & the Swedish Migration Board 2012, p. 8-11).

¹² Court rulings in favour of Biduns have not been implemented by the Central System (see International Coalition on the Rights of the Stateless in 2014, p. 8; Elgayar 2020).

¹³ The first and third categories seem similar. As far as Landinfo understands, the first category includes people who have security restrictions or hold Kuwaiti documents dating only to 1980 (based on Beaugrand 2018, p. 130; Lund-Johansen 2014, p. 46). It is unclear what new status they can obtain. The third category, on the other hand, can obtain a five-year residence visa as a foreign migrant in Kuwait if they present a passport.

In general, however, the system is less straightforward than it might seem. The card needs to be renewed frequently, having been issued with an increasingly shorter validity length in recent years. While they were previously valid for one or two years, they are now valid for either three months, six months or a maximum of twelve months (well-informed source, email February 2020; Elgayar 2020). A well-informed source told Landinfo that more and more frequently, the cards are only valid for three months (email May 2020).

Renewing the review cards can be very complicated

Precisely how often and on under what conditions Biduns must renew their card, depends on the circumstances of the case. For many, however, the process is arbitrary, non-transparent and difficult. Biduns with “security restrictions”¹⁴ will probably not be able to renew their cards. This may apply to their family members as well (Elgayar 2020). Also, Biduns suspected of having a foreign nationality may face severe difficulties renewing their cards (source A, email April 2019).

Sources report that the Central System uses dubious methods to get as many Biduns as possible to declare their “true nationality” and renounce their claim on Kuwaiti citizenship (source A, email April 2019; U.S. Department of State 2020, p. 18-19; Amnesty International 2019, p. 2). This occurs when Biduns are trying to renew their review cards or obtain other necessary permits to access public services. The practice includes various forms of administrative hurdles and means of pressure, such as:

- Repeated postponements of permissions to access services and requests for additional documentation (well-informed source, email May 2020).
- Shortening the validity of the review cards (down to three months), requesting the holder to “regularise his/her basis of residence” (well-informed source, email February 2020).
- Pressure to sign various types of documents in exchange for a renewed card or other services. This includes declarations renouncing their claim to citizenship, confirmations of information not revealed to them, and signing blank pieces of paper. Subsequently, the Biduns’ signatures could be used as a confession of

¹⁴ Security restrictions have been imposed for a number of reasons, and it is difficult to form a clear picture of the motives behind. Sources say the system appears to be arbitrary (source A, email April 2019). Initially, security restrictions were imposed on Biduns who had joined Saddam Hussein’s Popular Army during the Iraqi invasion in 1990. Now, actions such as participating in unauthorised demonstrations and posing threats against the government on social media could lead to security restrictions (source A, email April 2019). Furthermore, security restrictions may also be imposed on families who have acquired fake foreign passports to get five-year work visas. Upon expiration of these passports, the concerned families are not able to restore their former status as registered Biduns (Elgayar 2020; Beaugrand 2018, p. 37), and fall into the category of unregistered Biduns.

having another nationality (Albloshi 2019; source A, email April 2019; well-informed source, email May 2020; KSHR 2018, p. 14-15, U.S. Department of State 2020, p. 18-19).

- Arbitrary and unjustified attribution of presumed nationality, which then appears both on the renewed review card and in the database records system (Amnesty International 2019, p. 2; Elgayar 2020; well-informed source, email May 2020). A well-informed source (email May 2020) says this practice is becoming increasingly current and irrational. It could be based on irrelevant information, such as having an uncle who is a citizen of a neighbouring country. There are also cases where siblings have been assigned two different nationalities (Elgayar 2020).

As a consequence of this practice, some registered Biduns will not have valid review cards (source A, email April 2019; U.S. Department of State 2020, p. 19). Landinfo has been informed that many Biduns resist the kind of pressure describe above, and thus may be unable to renew their cards (source A, email April 2019). A well-informed source adds (email May 2020) that the increasing practice of attributing another nationality and noting it on the cards, causes some Bidun to refrain from trying to renew them. For others, it may be cumbersome bureaucratic processes that prevent renewal.

Biduns who lack valid review cards will have severe difficulties accessing public services (including health services and education), personal documents and work unless they have Kuwaiti connections that assist them (source A, email April 2019).

From 2011 to 2018, 12,700 Biduns reportedly “admitted” holding other nationalities (U.S. Department of State 2020, p. 18). More than half of these were allegedly registered as Saudi nationals, 3,500 as Iraqis and almost 1,000 as Syrians. Sources believe these admissions were made under considerable pressure (source A, email April 2019). Furthermore, the practice of assigning Biduns other nationalities has not been discussed with the alleged countries of origin. Consequently, these residents have Kuwaiti ID cards stating that they are Iraqis, Syrians or Saudis, while the states that have been assigned them do not necessarily recognize them as their citizens (source A, email April 2019; Amnesty International 2019, s. 2).

Are children of registered Biduns automatically registered and issued their own review card?

In principle, children of registered Biduns are supposed to get registered. From the age of five, they are entitled to have their own review card (Kuwaiti Government 2011, p. 8). However, Landinfo has no information indicating that this occurs automatically. According to Beaugrand (2018, p. 37), many Bidun children are not included in official statistics because they lack birth certificates. Similarly, the U.S. Department of State reports that some Bidun children still do not receive birth certificates and, consequently, no review cards (U.S. Department of State 2020, p. 19).

There may be several reasons for this, for instance “extensive administrative requirements”, as reported by U.S. Department of State (2020, p. 19). Group29, a Kuwaiti human rights organisation, reported on this topic in 2012 (p. 13, 19–21). Apparently, obtaining birth certificates for children over the age of six, was particularly cumbersome. Group29 describes a very bureaucratic process of 23 steps, taking at least 15 months, where the parents must prove that the child is theirs. The case is processed by departments for genealogy and forensic evidence before a court decides on the matter. The court decision must then be approved by the Central System before a birth certificate can be issued (Group29 2012, p. 13, 19-21).

In order to get civil documents for their children, parents must have valid review cards (Albloshi 2019). As mentioned above, this is not necessarily the case for all registered Biduns. Even those who have valid cards may be put under pressure to resolve their status before getting access to documents and services that they are entitled to. Minority Rights Group International (MRG 2020) describes this as follows:

Bedoon with reference cards are required to request permission from the Central System to Resolve Illegal Residents’ Status (informally known as the Central System, or Al-Jihaz Al-Markezi, in Arabic) in order to obtain basic forms of civil documentation, such as birth, marriage and death certificates. However, Bedoon who request documentation are often met with refusal on the grounds that the government has intelligence suggesting they have other nationalities. [...] Many are then told to ‘resolve their status’ by confirming their other nationality in order to obtain the civil documentation requested. However, by doing so they would forfeit any future claims to Kuwaiti citizenship.

Statistics from the Central System indicate that the number of registered Biduns has decreased steadily since the early 1990s (Central Agency 2017). As mentioned in the introduction, these figures are disputed and not necessarily updated. The previous paragraphs have shown that some children may be excluded from these figures. This also applies to families (including children) who have lost the registration with the Central System due to the purchase of non-renewable foreign passports (Beaugrand 2018, p. 37; MRG 2020). For examples on how this affects children, see Group29 2012 (p. 10-19).

Green review cards – issuance period and length of validity

Until 2012, all review cards were green, with a validity of either one or two years. During a fact-finding trip to Kuwait in October 2011, Landinfo got to see a specimen of this card, a copy of which can be found in the report from the trip (Landinfo & the Swedish Migration Board 2012, p. 21-22).

The validity of the cards reflected the cardholder's length of residence in Kuwait, as defined by the authorities (Kuwaiti Government 2011, p. 8):

- Cards valid for two years were issued to individuals (including their descendants) who were either registered in the 1965 census or who could prove long-term residence in the country from that year or prior to it.
- Cards valid for one year were issued to the remaining group.

In 2012, the authorities introduced a colour-coded card scheme to distinguish different categories of Biduns from each other. Green cards with a validity of five years were to be issued to individuals who could be eligible for naturalisation. Biduns believed to have another nationality would get yellow cards, valid for three years. The remaining group would receive red cards (Beaugrand 2018, p. 130).¹⁵

Landinfo has no information indicating that this scheme has been practiced as consistently as announced, or that the cards have been valid for as long as five and three years. Indeed, it is unclear which types of cards have been issued, and how long they have been valid for. Some of the types announced, including the green one, may have existed only in theory. A well-informed source informs to have seen yellow cards valid for one year in 2014 and has never seen green cards

¹⁵ The validity of the red cards is not known to Landinfo.

issued after 2011 (well-informed source, emails February and May 2020; Lifos 2017, p. 11-12).

In the opinion of the well-informed source, the colour-coded card system no longer seems relevant. Most cards issued now are reportedly yellow, showing that the holder is asked to regularise his/her basis for residence (well-informed source, email February 2020).

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The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, is an independent body within the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. Landinfo provides country of origin information (COI) to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet – UDI), the Immigration Appeals Board (Utlendingsnemnda – UNE) and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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Oral sources

Source A. Email 2 April 2019. This source bases its information on conversations with several sources in Kuwait.

Well-informed source. Emails 26 April 2019, 10 February 2020, and 12 and 16 May 2020.

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