



**Ali Al-Youha**  
**Secretary General**  
**Kuwait National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL)**

**Gulf Affairs: What is the mandate and scope of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters?**

**Ali Al-Youha:** The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters was established by Emiri Decree on July 17, 1973 as an independent public body, chaired by the Minister of Information, with a board consisting of a number of representatives from other public departments and arts, culture and literary circles. Over 40 years old, the Council's role has grown alongside Kuwait's journey as a country. Its primary duties include educational, literary, artistic, and cultural development nationally, in addition to developing relations with similar Arab and international counterparts. Its role includes:

- Surveying and conducting studies on the Kuwaiti cultural landscape and current efforts of other departments.
- Conducting studies on the status of culture and its development and direction in Kuwait.
- Record collecting and conserving.
- Publishing, including magazines, journals, dictionaries, and books generally.
- Events and outreach: the Council is regularly active in establishing a number of events, including

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conferences, forums, festivals and national competitions, with the aim of developing cultural communication and awareness.

- Public and civil cultural engagement and promotion.
- Preservation of local and Arab heritage and the promotion of literary culture through series and ad hoc publications.

### **Gulf Affairs: What have been the primary achievements of the NCCAL over the past few years?**

**Al-Youha:** Since its inception, the Council has succeeded in supporting and organizing Kuwaiti cultural and artistic movements and consequently established, over four decades, regular cultural phenomena that reflect the Kuwaiti social landscape. These efforts included:

- Kuwait International Book Fair: a book fair prominent internationally and within the Arab world running since 1975.
- The Annual Qurain Cultural Festival: launched in 1994 and eventually transforming from a mere 'festival' to an artistic and literary phenomenon within the GCC and Arab-wide.
- Specialized festivals including: The Youth Cultural Festival, The Kuwait Theatrical Festival, The International Music Festival, The Future Generation Cultural Festival, and The Summer Cultural Festival.
- Energizing the idea of Arabic and International cultural weeks.
- Exhibitions in fine arts.

In addition, the Council is a regular contributor to and supporter of many published materials that attract unprecedented readership in the Arab cultural arena, including:

- "Aalam Al-Ma'rifah" (World of Knowledge): a series of monthly published short books (since 1978).
- "Al-Masrah Al-Aalami" (Global Theatre): a series of global theatrical plays from foreign languages, translated to Arabic (since 1969).
- "Aalam Al-Fikr" (World of Intellect): a quarterly containing articles and research with a diversity of academic cultural, artistic, and historical research (since 1970).
- "Al-Thaqafah Al-'Alamiyah" (Global Culture): a magazine publishing translated material on cultural, artistic, and literary affairs (since 1980).
- "Ebda'at 'Alamiya" (Global Creations/Fantasy): a series of global theatrical plays, translated to Arabic (since 1969).

The Council's other achievements include its support for the creation of national theatre groups, in addition to the preservation and management of historical architecture and national heritage. The Council is also party to a number of agreements and memorandums with Arab and other foreign counterparts.

### **Gulf Affairs: How do you describe the state of the cultural movement in Kuwait and what would you say are some of its unique attributes?**

**Al-Youha:** The Kuwaiti government places immense interest and care in culture and even relies on culture as a key to increased human awareness more generally. Many factors have contributed to making Kuwait an Arab regional cultural beacon, including the diversity of the population, the tolerance for which Kuwaitis are known, and their love for culture and arts. The Kuwaiti cultural movement, its roots, and its figures are considered among the most noteworthy in the Arab region and are among the reasons Kuwait

was chosen as a capital for Arab culture and a capital for Islamic culture in 2001 and 2006 respectively. The strength of the Kuwaiti cultural movement relies on active publishing and strong roots in theatre, fine arts, literature, poetry, music, and many other activities.

The Kuwaiti cultural scene has included from its early beginnings, which pre-date independence, the active contribution of women, especially in literature and the arts. This is in addition to increased youth participation, especially in recent years. The role the Council plays, in addition to other governmental departments and the private sector, supports this cultural scene with a constant number of initiatives and achievements, affording a notably cultural visage to Kuwait that we take pride in sharing locally and globally.

### **Gulf Affairs: How does the NCCAL contribute to supporting the cultural and artistic movement in the country?**

**Al-Youha:** As mentioned earlier, as per the Council's roles and decree of establishment, the Council supports and sponsors a wide range of activities, including talents in writing, literature, acting, music, and other arts. Two examples of how the Council supports these sectors are the Kuwaiti National Encouragement Prize, which is given annually for achievements in different cultural and educational fields, and the Kuwaiti National Recognition Prize, given for notable cultural and social contributions. These awards come in addition to the Council's role in supporting other activities in collaboration with local societies and clubs such as publishing, short movies, play scripts, and other art forms.

Moreover, the Council provides regular training on heritage preservation and restoration at many of Kuwait's heritage sites, both on its mainland and islands. I would also like to note the signing of a bilateral agreement with the Department of History at Kuwait University for archaeological exploration and preservation.

### **Gulf Affairs: Despite being a small country, Kuwait exhibits a lot of cultural diversity. Can you tell us more about the characteristics of Kuwaiti identity and how you see them reflected in today's culture and art?**

**Al-Youha:** The cultural diversity and lively nature found in the Kuwaiti cultural movement owes itself to a number of factors, including, as mentioned earlier, the social tolerance and openness to 'the other,' as is evident from trends in migration to Kuwait by a number of nationalities, especially Arab. This is accompanied by the constant Kuwaiti desire and inclination for the cultural, artistic, and literary exchange, amongst other factors. The combination of such internal and external factors creates what one may deem today as Kuwait's current cultural visage, perhaps most known for its openness and tolerance to others' contributions, without incurring a negative backlash to the Kuwaiti identity.

In turn, the Council, within its professional specializations and obligations and alongside other public institutions and civil society organizations, has over the decades contributed to the instilment of this identity. The contribution comes from all segments of society including schools and their activities, Kuwait University's research on all aspects relating to identity, iconic public figures, voluntary efforts, and others directed towards children.

This joint effort has given birth to significant cultural and literary output, be it in theatre, novels and writing more generally, or travel, without departing from the foundation of the Kuwaiti national identity,

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primarily rooted in openness, tolerance, and acceptance of the other.

### **Gulf Affairs: With the advent of social media, how have you seen this impact the cultural movement in Kuwait, particularly among the youth segment?**

**Al-Youha:** It may be more plausible for one to speak of the positives of the social media revolution than it is to speak of the negatives on the cultural scene, especially when referring to the young population.

Today we see the rise of a unique constellation of young Kuwaitis, from both genders, who have been given the chance to translate and widely disseminate their work thanks to advances in communications. The latest of such examples was the award winning “Saq Al-Bamboo” (The Bamboo Stalk) novel by Saud Al-Sanousi, winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction—supported by the Booker Prize Foundation—whose work was turned into a television series. Similarly, there are many other authors whose work found greater recognition due to social media networking.

Statistically speaking, Kuwaiti society is highly active in such platforms, developing the ability to use them in responsible means that have served the cultural scene rather than harmed it in any way. The young population, in particular, actively uses social networking to promote arts, including fine arts, caricatures, short stories, and as a means to promote workshops and seminars. I also think that Kuwaiti society is immune to the potential negative social and cultural impacts of globalization because of its long-standing openness that precedes phenomena such as social media networking. Consequently, Kuwaitis have succeeded over decades to incorporate diversity without divorcing from the roots of their cultural identity.