Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy

Updated March 4, 2019

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
RS21513

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

Kuwait has been pivotal to the decades-long U.S. effort to secure the Persian Gulf region because of its consistent cooperation with U.S. military operations in the region and its key location in the northern Gulf. Kuwait and the United States have a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), under which the United States maintains over 13,000 military personnel in country and prepositioned military equipment in Kuwait to project power in the region. Only Germany, Japan, and South Korea host more U.S. troops than does Kuwait, which hosts the operational command center for U.S.-led Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) that has combatted the Islamic State.

Kuwait usually acts in concert not only with the United States but also with allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman). Kuwait is participating militarily in the Saudi-led coalition that is trying to defeat the Shia "Houthi" rebel movement in Yemen, but Kuwait tends to favor mediation of regional issues over the use of military force. Kuwait is trying to mediate a resolution of the intra-GCC rift that erupted in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia and the UAE moved to isolate Qatar. Kuwait has refrained from intervening in Syria's civil war, instead hosting donor conferences for victims of the Syrian civil conflict, Iraq's recovery from the Islamic State challenge, and the effects of regional conflict on Jordan's economy. Kuwait generally supports U.S. efforts to counter Iran and has periodically arrested Kuwaiti Shias that the government says are spying for Iran, but it also engages Iran at high levels. U.S. government reports have praised recent steps by Kuwait to counter the financing of terrorism, but reports persist that wealthy Kuwaitis are still able to donate to extreme Islamist factions in the region. Kuwait has consistently engaged the post-Saddam governments in Baghdad in part to prevent any repeat of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Experts have long assessed Kuwait's political system as a potential regional model for its successful incorporation of secular and Islamist political factions, both Shia and Sunni. However, this assessment has evolved since 2011 because Kuwait has followed other GCC states in incarcerating and revoking the citizenship of social media and other critics. Kuwait's political stability has not been in question but long-standing parliamentary opposition to the ruling Sabah family's political dominance has broadened in recent years to visible public pressure for political and economic reform. Parliamentary elections in July 2013 produced a National Assembly amenable to working with the ruling family, but the subsequent elections held in November 2016 returned to the body Islamist and liberal opponents of the Sabah family who held sway in earlier assemblies. Assembly oppositionist challenges to government policy led to a cabinet resignation in early November 2017, although the current cabinet does not differ much from the previous cabinet on key policy questions. Kuwait has increased its efforts to curb trafficking in persons over the past few years.

Years of political paralysis contributed to economic stagnation relative to Kuwait's more economically vibrant Gulf neighbors such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Like the other GCC states, Kuwait has struggled with reduced income from oil exports during 2014-2018. Kuwait receives negligible amounts of U.S. foreign assistance, and has offset some of the costs of U.S. operations in the region since Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Contents

Governance 1
Leadership Structure 1
Elected National Assembly 1
Political Factions in and Outside the National Assembly 2
Post-2006 Political Turmoil: Assembly Suspensions and Elections 2
Elections during 2006-2009 3
Arab Uprisings Intensify Political Strife 3
Recent Developments 4
Broader Human Rights Issues 5
Women's Rights 6
Trafficking in Persons and Labor Rights 6
Status of Noncitizens and "Stateless Persons"(Bidoons) 7
Freedom of Expression and Media Freedoms 7
Religious Freedom 7
U.S.-Kuwait Relations and Defense Cooperation 8
Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), Strategic Dialogue, and Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) Status 8
U.S. Troops in Kuwait and Facilities Used 8
Major Non-NATO Ally Status 9
Operational U.S.-Kuwait Defense Cooperation: 1987-2011 9
Defense Cooperation with Other Countries/NATO Center 10
U.S. Arms Sales to Kuwait 10
Major U.S. Arms Sales to Kuwait 11
International Military Education and Training (IMET) 12
Foreign Policy Issues 12
Intra-GCC Issues 12
Relations with Iraq 13
Iran 15
Syria and the Islamic State 16
Yemen 16
Kuwaiti Policy on Other Regional Conflicts and Issues 17
Egypt/Muslim Brotherhood 17
Palestinian-Israeli Dispute 17
North Korea 18
Domestic Terrorism and Counterterrorism Cooperation 18
Terrorism Financing Issues 19
Economic Issues 20
U.S.-Kuwait Economic Issues 21
U.S. Assistance 21

Figures

Figure 1. Kuwait at a Glance 22

Tables

Table 1. Senior Leaders in Kuwait 1
Table 2. Composition of the National Assembly 5

Contacts

Author Information..... 22

Governance

Kuwait's optimism after the 2003 fall of its nemesis, Saddam Hussein, soured after the January 15, 2006, death of Amir (ruler) Jabir Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah. From then until 2013, Kuwait underwent repeated political crises that produced economic stagnation.

Leadership Structure

Under Kuwait's 1962 constitution, an Amir (Arabic word for prince, but which is also taken as "ruler") is the head of state and ruler of Kuwait. He is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, appoints all judges, and can suspend the National Assembly. The Amir appoints a Prime Minister as head of government, who in turn appoints a cabinet. The Prime Minister has always been a member of the Sabah family, and until 2003 the Prime Minister and Crown Prince/heir apparent posts were held by a single person. It is typical of Kuwaiti cabinets that most of the key ministries (defense, foreign policy, and finance) are led by Sabah family members.

At the time of Amir Jabir's death, his designated successor, Shaykh Sa'ad bin Abdullah Al Sabah, was infirm. A brief succession dispute among rival branches of the ruling Al Sabah family was resolved with then-Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah, the younger brother of the late Amir, becoming Amir on January 29, 2006, although the long-standing tacit agreement to alternate succession between the Jabir and Salem branches of the family was suspended. Amir Sabah appointed two members of his Jabir branch as Crown Prince/heir apparent and as prime minister (Shaykh Nawwaf al-Ahmad Al Sabah and Shaykh Nasser al Muhammad al-Ahmad Al Sabah respectively). The succession dispute was unprecedented for the involvement of an elected legislature in replacing a Kuwait leader.

Amir Sabah tends to be more directly involved in governance than was his predecessor. He is 87 years old, but remains actively engaged in governing. Still, there reportedly is growing discussion within Al Sabah circles about the succession. The current Prime Minister, Shaykh Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah, has been in office since December 2011.

Table 1. Senior Leaders in Kuwait

Amir (Ruler)	Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah
Crown Prince	Nawwaf al-Ahmad Al Sabah
Prime Minister	Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah
First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister	Nasser al-Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah
Foreign Minister	Sabah al-Khalid al-Hamad Al Sabah
National Assembly Speaker	Marzuq al-Ghanim

Elected National Assembly

The National Assembly, established by Kuwait's November 1962 constitution, is the longest-serving all-elected body among the Gulf monarchies. Fifty seats are elected, and up to 15 members of the cabinet serve in the Assembly *ex-officio*. The government has expanded the electorate gradually: in the 1990s, the government extended the vote to sons of naturalized Kuwaitis and Kuwaitis naturalized for at least 20 (as opposed to 30) years. Kuwaiti women obtained suffrage rights when the National Assembly passed a government bill to that effect in May 2005. In recent elections, about 400,000 Kuwaitis have been eligible to vote.

Kuwait's National Assembly has more scope of authority than any legislative or consultative body in the GCC states. It can draft legislation, rather than merely act on legislation introduced by the government. The Assembly does not confirm cabinet nominees (individually or en bloc), but it frequently questions ministers ("grilling"). It can, by simple majority, remove ministers in a vote of "no confidence," and can oust a prime minister by voting "inability to cooperate with the government." The Assembly reviews government decrees issued during periods of Assembly suspension. Kuwait's leaders have, on nine occasions (1976-1981, 1986-1992, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2016), used their constitutional authority to dissolve the Assembly. Suspension mandates new elections within 60 days. Some oppositionists seek a constitutional monarchy in which an elected Assembly majority would name a Prime Minister, who would form a cabinet.

Political Factions in and Outside the National Assembly

Political parties are not permitted, and factions compete in Assembly elections as "currents," "trends," or "political societies." These factions also organize at a parallel traditional Kuwaiti forum called the *diwaniyya*—informal evening social gatherings, hosted by elites of all ideologies. Factions in Kuwait generally group as follows.

Government Supporters

- *"Tribalists*." Generally less educated but who dominate two out of the five electoral districts. At times, some tribalists in the Assembly have grouped into a faction widely referred to as "service deputies"—members primarily focused on steering government largesse and patronage to their constituents.
- *Shias.* Most Shias in the Assembly are Islamists, organized in a bloc called the National Islamic Alliance. These deputies tend to side with the government, perhaps out of concern about Sunni Islamists.
- *Women*. Elected women deputies have tended to align with the government.

Critics/Opponents

- *"Liberals.*" Highly educated and mostly secular elites, many of whom supported Arab nationalist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In prior years adherents of this view banded together in the "Kuwait Democratic Forum" political society.
- *Sunni Islamists*. There are two major Sunni Islamist tendencies in Kuwait: supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, and harder-line "Salafists." Muslim Brotherhood supporters operate in Kuwait under a banner called the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), with no record of violence. However, the government has sought to disband the Brotherhood's Kuwait charity arm, *Islah*.
- *Youths*. Since 2008, Kuwaiti youth groups have organized to support "liberal" deputies, using such names as the "Orange Movement" or "Fifth Fence." These groups participated in street protests in Kuwait during the 2011 Arab uprisings.

Post-2006 Political Turmoil: Assembly Suspensions and Elections

Disputes between the Al Sabah and oppositionists in the Assembly after Amir Jabir's death in 2006 manifested as repeated Assembly suspensions and elections, none of which has resolved differences over the power balance between the executive and the Assembly.

Elections during 2006-2009

- *June 29, 2006, Election*. Five months after taking power, Amir Sabah suspended the Assembly in May 2006 to prevent oppositionists from questioning the Prime Minister over the government's refusal to reduce the number of electoral districts to 5 (from 25). The proposal sought to reduce "vote buying" and the effects of intratribal politics. In elections set for June 29, 2006, the opposition, backed by youths supporting the "Orange" banner, won 34 out of the 50 seats. Women were allowed to vote and run for the first time, but none of the 27 women won. After the election, the government reduced the number of electoral districts to 5.
- *May 17, 2008, Election*. In March 2008, amid Assembly demands for government employee pay raises, the Amir dissolved the Assembly and set new elections for May 17, 2008. Sunni Islamists and conservative tribal leaders won 24 seats, and "liberals" won seven. Progovernment and other independent tribalists and Shias held the remaining 19 seats. No woman was elected.
- *May 16, 2009, Election*. Amid an Assembly demand to question the Prime Minister for alleged misuse of public funds, the Amir suspended the Assembly and set elections for May 16, 2009. More than 20 new parliamentarians were elected, including 4 women (the first ever elected). Two votes of no confidence in the Prime Minister (in December 2009 and January 2011) failed, although the second vote was narrow (22 of the 50 Assembly deputies voted no confidence).[1]

Arab Uprisings Intensify Political Strife

The Arab uprisings that began in early 2011 broadened Kuwait's opposition. In January 2011, opposition deputies, supported by youths using names such as the "Fifth Fence," forced the Interior Minister to resign for failing to prevent the torture to death of a man in custody. In March 2011, a Shia parliamentarian's request to "grill" the Foreign Minister about Kuwait's sending of naval forces to support Bahrain's Sunni minority government against a Shia-led uprising prompted a cabinet resignation and reshuffling. Following reports that two Kuwaiti banks had deposited $92 million into the accounts of several parliamentarians, thousands protested in September 2011, compelling the cabinet to adopt an anticorruption law.

On November 16, 2011, oppositionists in and outside the Assembly stormed the Assembly building, demanding the Prime Minister's resignation. On November 28, 2011, he did so, and the Amir appointed another royal family member, then-Defense Minister Shaykh Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah. He was sworn in without first naming a new cabinet, a technical constitutional breach.

- *February 2, 2012, Election*. On December 6, 2011, Amir Sabah dissolved the National Assembly and set new elections for February 2, 2012 (within the mandated 60 days). About 20 opposition deputies competed as one "Opposition Bloc," supported by youth leaders, advocating a fully elected government and legalization of political parties. Opposition candidates won 32 of the 50 seats, but none of the 19 woman candidates was elected. Turnout was about 62%. A leading opposition figure, Ahmad al-Sadun, returned to the Speaker post he held during 1985-1999, replacing the progovernment Jassim Al-Khurafi. The Prime Minister appointed four oppositionists to the cabinet. In June 2012, when the Assembly requested to grill the Interior Minister, the Amir exercised his authority, under

[1] "Kuwait's Prime Minister Survives Parliament Vote." *Al Jazeera TV*, January 5, 2011; Kristin Smith Diwan, "Kuwait: Too Much Politics, or Not Enough?," *Foreign Policy* online, January 10, 2011.

Article 106 of the constitution, to suspend the Assembly for one month (renewable for two months, with the concurrence of the Assembly).

- *December 2012 Election Triggered by Court Decision*. On June 20, 2012, the constitutional court voided the December 2011 Assembly suspension on technical grounds and reinstated the May 2009 Assembly. The Amir set new elections for December 1, 2012, and decreed that each voter would cast a ballot for one candidate (per district), rather than four. In October 2012, an estimated 50,000-150,000 protesters called the decree an effort to complicate opposition efforts to forge alliances. The government responded by banning large public gatherings. A boycott by Sunni Islamist factions lowered turnout to 40% and produced a "progovernment" Assembly, including an unprecedented number of Shias (17). Three women were elected, as were some independent Sunni Islamists.
- *Another Court-Triggered Election*. On June 16, 2013, the Constitutional Court upheld the Amir's decree that each person would vote for only one candidate per district (see above), but dissolved the Assembly on the basis of improper technicalities in the Amir's election decree. New elections—the sixth in five years—were held on July 27, 2013, and eight women ran (out of 418 candidates registered). Several opposition groups, including the ICM, boycotted again, producing another progovernment Assembly that included nine Shias and several tribalists. Two women initially won seats, but a miscount deprived one of them of her seat, and the other resigned in 2014. Shaykh Jabir continued as Prime Minister, and his cabinet included one Shia and four Salafists.
- *November 2016 Election*. Public demonstrations generally subsided after 2013, and oppositionists indicated they would participate in the next Assembly elections. Citing "circumstances in the region" (an apparent reference to the Islamic State challenge and conflicts in Syria and Yemen), the Amir suspended the National Assembly and set new elections for November 26, 2016—earlier than planned. Of the 454 candidates, 15 were women. The main opposition political societies participated, and the vote produced an Assembly roughly split between progovernment and opposition deputies. The State Department called the elections "generally free and fair."

Recent Developments

Reflecting its altered balance of factions, the Assembly "grilled" the Prime Minister in 2017 for "administrative regularities." To forestall further Assembly challenges, the Amir dissolved the cabinet in October 2017. A new government was appointed on December 11, 2017, with a policy outlook similar to that of the previous cabinet. The Amir's son was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister. Two of the appointees were women—the Minister of Social and Labor Affairs, and the Minister of State for Housing and for Services Affairs. The next National Assembly elections are due to be held in 2020. Elections for vacant seats are held periodically, including by-elections for two vacant seats to be held in March 2019.

Table 2. Composition of the National Assembly

Ideology/Affiliation	2008 Vote	2009 Vote	Feb. 2012 Vote	Dec. 2012 Vote	July 2013 Vote	Nov. 2016 Vote
Sunni Islamist (opposition) Muslim Brotherhood (ICM) and Salafi	24	14	23	4	3 (all Salafi, no ICM)	16 (roughly equal numbers of ICM and Salafi)
Liberals and allies (opposition)	7	10	9	1	9	8
Shia (progovernment)	5	9	7	17	8	6
Sunni Independents (includes tribalists, probusiness deputies, and women). Generally progovernment	14	17	11	28	30	20
Women (generally progovernment) included in categories above	0	4	0	3	1	1

Source: CRS, based on articles and analysis from various observers.

Note: Some members of the National Assembly might span several different categories, and several sources often disagree on precise categorizations of the members of the Assembly.

Broader Human Rights Issues[2]

On broad human rights issues, the State Department identifies the principal human rights problems in Kuwait as allegations of torture of detainees; political prisoners; restrictions on freedom of speech, including criminalization of criticism of government officials and defamation of religion; limited rights for a stateless population referred to as *Bidoons*; trafficking in persons; criminalization of male same-sex sexual activity; and reports of forced labor, especially among foreign workers. Since 2011, Kuwait's government has increasingly imprisoned and revoked the citizenship of social media critics for "insulting the Amir," tarnishing Kuwait's reputation for political tolerance. In 2017, Kuwait also revived, after a four-year hiatus, the practice of executions by executing seven prisoners—one of which was a member of the ruling family—for capital offenses. Most were expatriates.

Of the 140 Gulf-based activists identified in November 2016 by Human Rights Watch as struggling against government repression, 44 are from Kuwait.[3] Two of the most prominent independent human rights organizations in Kuwait are the Kuwait Society for Human Rights and the Kuwait Association for the Basic Evaluation of Human Rights, both of which have been allowed access to Kuwait's prisons.

U.S. democracy programs in Kuwait funds discussions with Kuwaiti leaders, public diplomacy, training civil society activists, enhancing the capabilities of independent Kuwaiti media, promoting women's rights, and providing a broad spectrum of educational opportunities. However, published readouts of most high-level U.S.-Kuwait meetings indicate that U.S.-Kuwait discussions focus mostly on security and regional issues.[4] The National Endowment for

[2] Much of this section is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2017. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=277251#wrapper.

[3] https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/01/arab-gulf-states-attempts-silence-140-characters.

[4] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/13/remarks-president-obama-and-amir-sabah-al-sabah-kuwait-after-bilateral-m.

Democracy, which obtains funds from the State Department, has in recent years given grants to Kuwaiti groups that promote civil society, human rights, women's rights, and the rights of noncitizens in Kuwait.

Women's Rights

Women enjoy substantial, but not equal, rights in Kuwait. Women serve in national appointed positions and, since 2006, have been able to run and vote in National Assembly elections. Women in Kuwait can drive, and many women own businesses. An estimated 16% of the oil sector workforce is female. Women run several nongovernmental organizations, such as the Kuwait Women's Cultural and Social Society, dedicated to improving rights for women.

Still, Kuwait remains a traditional society and Islamists who want to limit women's rights have substantial influence. The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, although courts try such cases as assault. Kuwaiti women who marry non-Kuwaiti men cannot give their spouses or children Kuwaiti citizenship. Numerous international reports assert that violence, particularly against expatriate domestic workers, is frequent. Female police officers in public places combat sexual harassment.

Trafficking in Persons and Labor Rights[5]

For eight years ending in 2015, Kuwait was designated by the State Department's *Trafficking in Persons* report as "Tier Three" (worst level). Kuwait's rating was assessed in the 2016, 2017, and 2018 reports as "Tier 2: Watch List," on the grounds that it is making significant efforts to meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons. The 2018 report credited Kuwait for implementing a labor law that prohibits employers from confiscating domestic workers' passports, increases penalties for employers who engage in unscrupulous recruiting practices, makes more aggressive efforts to investigate and prosecute traffickers, and funds a five-year national strategy to combat trafficking in persons.

Over many years, there have been repeated reports of beatings and rapes of domestic workers by their Kuwaiti employers, occasionally causing diplomatic difficulties for Kuwait. In July 2016, Kuwait set a minimum monthly wage for maids working in Kuwait, almost all of whom are expatriate women. In February 2018, following reports that a Filipina maid had been found dead in an apartment freezer in Kuwait, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte barred travel by Philippines citizens to Kuwait. In April 2018, Kuwait expelled the Philippines' ambassador and recalled its ambassador from Manila.

Kuwait's labor laws protect the right of workers to form and join unions, conduct legal strikes, and bargain collectively, but contain significant restrictions. The government allows one trade union per occupation, but the only legal trade federation is the Kuwait Trade Union Federation (KTUF). Foreign workers, with the exception of domestic workers, are allowed to join unions. Since 2011, strikes have taken place among customs officers and employees of Kuwait Airways, and oil workers conducted a three-day strike in April 2016. In 2014, the government prevented a strike by Kuwait Petroleum Company employees by threatening to imprison strikers.

[5] The most recent State Department "Trafficking in Person" report for 2018 is at https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2018/index.htm.

Status of Noncitizens and "Stateless Persons"(Bidoons)

Non-Gulf Arabs, Asians, and stateless residents continue to face discrimination largely because of the perception that they are seeking to take advantage of generous Kuwaiti social benefits. The legal status of the approximately 100,000 stateless persons ("bidoons," the Arabic word for "without"), who have no proof of citizenship but claim that they have lived in Kuwait for many generations, has vexed Kuwait for decades. The U.N. High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that about 43,000 of the bidoons have a legitimate claim to citizenship. In March 2011, the government set a deadline of 2017 to resolve the status of the bidoons. That deadline was not met, although over the past few years, the government has been giving citizenship to small numbers of bidoons who were children of soldiers killed resisting the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In 2017, the government opened a hospital closed to noncitizens.

Freedom of Expression and Media Freedoms

Successive State Department human rights reports have asserted that the government does not always respect constitutional provisions for freedom of speech and the press. Governmental press censorship ended in 1992, fostering the growth of a vibrant press, but the Press and Publications Law establishes topics that are off limits for publication and discussion. Publishers and bloggers must be licensed by the Ministry of Information. Kuwait (and other GCC states) has increasingly used and enacted laws against the use of social media to criticize the government. Kuwait's penal code (Article 25) provides for up to five years in jail for "objecting to the rights and authorities of the Amir or faulting him." In July 2015, Kuwait enacted a cybercrimes law that punishes insulting religious figures, criticizing the Amir, or harming Kuwait's relations with other countries. Since 2014, the government has revoked the citizenship of some naturalized Kuwaitis for criticizing the government, but Kuwait-born citizens cannot legally have their citizenship revoked.

Religious Freedom[6]

Recent State Department religious freedom reports have noted little change in Kuwait's respect for religious freedoms. Of the 30% of Kuwait's population that are Shia Muslims, about half are Arabs originally from Saudi Arabia, and half are of Persian origin. Kuwaiti Shias are well represented in the rank and file of the military and security apparatus as well as government institutions, and are able to select their own clerics without government interference. A national unity law prohibits "stirring sectarian strife," and the government continues to prosecute Sunnis for alleged violations. However, Kuwaiti Shias continue to report official discrimination, including limited access to religious education and places of worship.

In contrast to some of the other Gulf states, there is no registration requirement for religious groups, but all non-Muslim religious groups must obtain a license to establish an official place of worship. Religious groups are generally able to worship without interference. Members of these groups report difficulties obtaining permission to construct new facilities. Despite opposition from Kuwaiti Islamists, the government has licensed seven Christian churches to serve the approximately 750,000 Christians in Kuwait (almost all are expatriates): Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Anglican. Members of religions not sanctioned in the Quran—including about 400 Baha'i's, 100,000 Buddhists, 100,000 Hindus, and 10,000 Sikhs—are mostly noncitizens working in Kuwait. In addition to a few hundred Christians, there are some Baha'i citizens.

[6] The latest State Department report on International Religious Freedom (2017) can be found at https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper.

U.S.-Kuwait Relations and Defense Cooperation

Kuwait was not strategically or politically close to the United States until the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), when Kuwait—a backer of Iraq—sought U.S. help against Iranian attacks. A U.S. consulate opened in Kuwait in October 1951 and was elevated to an embassy upon Kuwait's independence from Britain in 1961. Kuwait was the first Gulf state to establish relations with the Soviet Union in the 1960s, perhaps reflecting the political strength in Kuwait of relatively left-wing figures. Lawrence Robert Silverman is U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait.

Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), Strategic Dialogue, and Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) Status

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, and the U.S. role in ending the Iraqi occupation, deepened the U.S.-Kuwait defense relationship. A formal bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) was signed on September 19, 1991, seven months after the U.S.-led expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in the 1991 Operation Desert Storm. The DCA had an initial duration of 10 years, but remains in effect.[7] The text is classified, but reportedly provides for mutual discussions in the event of a crisis; joint military exercises; U.S. evaluation of, advice to, and training of Kuwaiti forces; U.S. arms sales; prepositioning of U.S. military equipment; and U.S. access to a range of Kuwaiti facilities.[8] The DCA includes a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that provides that U.S. forces in Kuwait be subject to U.S. rather than Kuwaiti law—a common feature of such accords.

The visit of Amir Sabah to Washington, DC, on September 8, 2017, included convening of the second U.S.-Kuwait "Strategic Dialogue," which reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to enhance Kuwait's military capabilities.[9] During a December 3-5, 2017, visit to Kuwait, then-Defense Secretary James Mattis said that the U.S.-Kuwait military relationship is "very close."[10] The Amir has met with President Trump on three occasions, most recently September 5, 2018, focusing on regional issues including the U.S. concept of an anti-Iran Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). Another U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue meeting was to be held during Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's trip to the Gulf states in January 2019, but the Secretary was compelled to return to the United States before reaching Kuwait due to a death in his family.

Kuwait's military has regained its pre-Iraq invasion strength of 17,000. U.S. officials say that the U.S. training and mentorship has improved the quality of the Kuwaiti military, particularly the Air Force.

U.S. Troops in Kuwait and Facilities Used

Since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, there have been about 13,500 U.S. troops in Kuwait under the DCA[11]—constituting more than one-third of the 35,000 total U.S. forces in the Gulf.

---

[7] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/13/remarks-president-obama-and-amir-sabah-al-sabah-kuwait-after-bilateral-m.

[8] Hajjar, Sami. U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects. U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute. p. 27.

[9] Department of State. Remarks with Kuwait First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled al-Hamad al-Saba at the U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue.

[10] "U.S.-Kuwaiti Partnership Forget in 1991 Liberation Endures, Mattis Says. DoD News, December 5, 2017.

[11] Thom Shanker. "In Kuwait, Panetta Affirms U.S. Commitment to Middle East," *New York Times*, December 11,

Defense Secretary Mattis noted during his December 2017 visit to Kuwait that only Germany, Japan, and South Korea host more U.S. forces than Kuwait does. The U.S. force includes Army combat troops, not purely support forces, giving the United States the capability to project ground force power in the region.[12] Each spring, these forces participate in an annual three-week "Eagle Resolve" military exercise with forces from Kuwait and other GCC states. As discussed below, Kuwait hosts the headquarters for the U.S.-led operations against the Islamic State (Operation Inherent Resolve) and has made its military facilities available to coalition partners in that military campaign.

U.S. forces in Kuwait are stationed at several facilities that include Camp Arifjan (the main U.S. headquarters in Kuwait, 40 miles south of Kuwait City); a desert training base and firing range called Camp Buehring (near the border with Saudi Arabia); Ali al-Salem Air Base; Shaykh Ahmad al-Jabir Air Base; and a naval facility called Camp Patriot. Under the DCA, the United States maintains 2,200 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in Kuwait.[13] U.S. armor prepositioned in Kuwait was used for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. (In December 2005, U.S. forces vacated Camp Doha, the headquarters for U.S. forces in Kuwait during the 1990s.)

Major Non-NATO Ally Status

Recognizing Kuwait's consistent and multifaceted cooperation with the United States, on April 1, 2004, the Bush Administration designated Kuwait as a "major non-NATO ally (MNNA)," a designation held by only one other Gulf state (Bahrain). The designation opens Kuwait to increased defense-related research and development cooperation with the United States, but does not expedite U.S. executive branch approval of arms sales to Kuwait.

Operational U.S.-Kuwait Defense Cooperation: 1987-2011

The following sections discuss U.S.-Kuwait defense cooperation in recent regional conflicts.

Iran-Iraq War. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran had sought to compel Kuwait to end its financial and logistical support for Iraq by striking Kuwaiti oil facilities, such as the Al Ahmadi terminal, with cruise missiles. In 1987-1988, the United States established a U.S. naval escort and tanker reflagging program to protect Kuwaiti and international shipping from Iranian naval attacks (Operation Earnest Will). As part of the skirmishes between the United States and Iran in the course of that operation, Iran attacked a Kuwaiti oil installation (Sea Island terminal).

Operation Desert Storm. Asserting that Kuwait was one of Iraq's key financiers during its fight against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, Kuwait's leaders were shaken by the August 2, 1990, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Most experts believe that the invasion was a result of Saddam Hussein's intent to dominate the Persian Gulf. Iraq's occupation lasted until U.S.-led coalition forces of nearly 500,000 expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in "Operation Desert Storm" (January 16, 1991-February 28, 1991). Kuwait's leaders, who spent the occupation period in Saudi Arabia, were restored to power. Kuwait paid $16.059 billion to offset the U.S. incremental war costs.

Iraq Containment Operations (1991-2003). After the 1991 war, about 4,000 U.S. military personnel—and enough prepositioned U.S. armor to outfit two combat brigades—were stationed

2012.

[12] Michelle Tan. "15,000 in Kuwait, At Least For Now." *Army Times*, January 16, 2012.

[13] State Department Fact Sheet on Security Cooperation with Kuwait. http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/2016/253849.htm.

at Kuwaiti facilities to contain Iraq. The 1992-2003 enforcement of a "no fly zone" over southern Iraq (Operation Southern Watch, OSW) involved 1,000 U.S. Air Force personnel deployed at Kuwaiti air bases. Kuwait contributed about $200 million per year for U.S. costs of these operations,[14] and two-thirds of the $51 million per year U.N. budget for the 1991-2003 Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) that monitored the Iraq-Kuwait border. Kuwait also hosted U.S. forces en route to participate in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Post-Saddam Iraq. Kuwait supported the U.S. decision to militarily overthrow Saddam Hussein by hosting the bulk of the U.S. OIF force of about 250,000, as well as the other coalition troops that entered Iraq in March 2003. Kuwait closed off its entire northern half for weeks before the invasion; allowed U.S. use of two air bases, its international airport, and sea ports; and provided $266 million to support the combat. Kuwaiti forces did not enter Iraq. During 2003-2011, there were about 25,000 U.S. troops based in Kuwait, not including those deploying to Iraq, and Kuwait was the gateway for U.S. troops deploying to that war zone. According to Defense Department budget documents, Kuwait contributed about $210 million per year in similar in-kind support to help defray the costs incurred by the U.S. military personnel that rotated through Kuwait into or out of Iraq during 2003-2011.

Defense Cooperation with Other Countries/NATO Center

Kuwait has supported efforts to promote greater military coordination among the GCC countries, including the GCC decision in 2013 to form a joint military command. Kuwait has also sought cooperation with other non-Arab U.S. partners. In December 2011, NATO and Kuwait began discussing opening a NATO center in Kuwait City as part of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) initiated in 2004. Kuwait joined the ICI in December 2004. The NATO center, formally titled the NATO-ICI Regional Center, opened on January 24, 2017, in a formal ceremony attended by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.[15] On October 1, 2018, the NATO-ICI Regional Center held its first annual meeting to review the center's performance, discussing programs including maritime security, cybersecurity, and protection against the use of weapons of mass destruction.[16] On November 26, 2018, Kuwait opened a diplomatic office at NATO.

In late November 2017, Kuwait signed an agreement with France to strengthen their defense cooperation. In November 2018, the two countries held ground forces exercises in Kuwait. As do the other manpower-short GCC states, Kuwait has enlisted some military help from Pakistan; in April 2014, Kuwait set up an office in Pakistan to recruit Pakistani trainers for Kuwaiti soldiers.[17]

U.S. Arms Sales to Kuwait

U.S. arms sales to Kuwait are intended, at least in part, to promote interoperability with U.S. forces. Kuwait is considered a wealthy state that can fund its own purchases. Kuwait has, in some years, received small amounts of U.S. assistance in order to qualify Kuwait for a discount to send its officers for training in the United States. As part of the U.S. effort to promote U.S. defense relations with the GCC as a whole, rather than individually, a December 16, 2013, Presidential Determination authorized U.S. defense sales to the GCC.

[14] Author conversation with U.S. military official in Kuwait. February 2014.

[15] http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_140308.htm.

[16] Kuwait News Agency. October 1, 2018.

[17] Middle East Media Research Institute. April 22, 2014.

Major U.S. Arms Sales to Kuwait

U.S. arms sales have sought to enhance Kuwait's capability and the interoperability of its military with U.S. forces. Because of its ample financial resources, Kuwait is not eligible to receive U.S. excess defense articles. Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) include the following:

- ***Missile Defense Systems***. In 1992, Kuwait bought five Patriot antimissile fire units, which were delivered by 1998. The system intercepted Iraqi missiles during the 2003 Iraq War. In July 2012, the Administration notified a sale of 60 Patriot Advanced Capability ("PAC-3") missiles and 20 Patriot launching stations, plus associated equipment, valued at $4.2 billion. Kuwait has not announced whether it will buy the more sophisticated Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile defense system that the United States has offered to the Gulf states. The United States also has deployed four U.S.-owned Patriot systems in Kuwait since the 1991 Gulf War, but the United States announced on September 26, 2018, that it was redeploying that system, as well as U.S. Patriots in Bahrain and Jordan, to areas pertinent to U.S. strategic competition with Russia and China.[18]
- ***Combat Aircraft/F-18s.*** The core of Kuwait's fleet of combat aircraft is 40 F/A-18 combat aircraft Kuwait bought in 1992. In mid-2015, Kuwait asked to buy up to 40 additional F/A-18s, and the following year expressed frustration at delays in the DOD approval process, threatening to buy 28 Eurofighters instead.[19] The Obama Administration notified to Congress on November 17, 2016, the potential sale of up to 32 F-18s to Kuwait along with support, equipment, and training.[20] On November 28, 2016, U.S. officials stated that Kuwait had proceeded to order 28 of the jets—an agreement with a value of $5 billion.[21]
- ***Tanks.*** In 1993, Kuwait bought 218 M1A2 tanks at a value of $1.9 billion. Delivery was completed in 1998. On October 16, 2017, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency notified Congress of a determination to sell Kuwait new tank hulls, armament, and engines for its U.S.-made tank force, at an estimated sale value of $29 million.[22]
- ***Apache Helicopters***. In September 2002, Kuwait ordered 16 AH-64 (Apache) helicopters equipped with the Longbow fire-control system, valued at about $940 million. Kuwait reportedly is seeking to buy additional Apaches.
- ***Tactical Missiles***. In 2008, Kuwait bought 120 AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM), along with equipment and services, with a total value of $178 million. In February 2012, the Administration notified Congress of a sale of 80 AIM-9X-2 SIDEWINDER missiles and associated parts and support, with an estimated value of $105 million. On July 30, 3018, DSCA notified Congress of a potential sale to Kuwait of 300 Hellfire air-to-ground

[18] Kuwait Calls U.S. Decision to Remove Missile Systems 'Routine.'" Reuters, September 26, 2018.

[19] "Kuwait Says Sticks to F-18 Jets Despite Approval Delays." Reuters, January 21, 2016; "Kuwait to Sign Eurofighter Jet Deal with Italy: Minister. Gulf News, February 12, 2016. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, The Government of Kuwait – F/A-18E/F Super Hornet Aircraft with Support. Transmittal No. 16-21. November 17, 2016.

[20] http://www.reuters.com/article/us-boeing-fighters-gulf-idUSKCN11Y2TX.

[21] White House. Remarks by President Trump and Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah of Kuwait in Joint Press Conference. September 7, 2017.

[22] DSCA Transmittal Number 17-16. October 16, 2017.

missiles, with an estimated value of $30.4 million. Kuwait already has Hellfires in its inventory, according to DSCA.

- DSCA announced in June 2014, that Kuwait would fund $1.7 billion for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build a Kuwait Armed Forces Hospital.

In December 2015 Kuwait's government asked the National Assembly to approve $20 billion in additional funds for arms purchases. The funds will presumably pay for the F-18s Kuwait has ordered, as well as for additional U.S. Apache helicopters, French naval vessels and light armored vehicles, and Russian-made missile systems and heavy artillery.[23]

International Military Education and Training (IMET)

In some past years, Kuwait received very small amounts of funding under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program—for the primary purpose of earning Kuwait discounts on the training it pays for its officers to undergo in the United States. It received $19,000 in IMET in FY2007, $14,000 in FY2008, and $10,000 in FY2010. Approximately 200 Kuwaiti military personnel study intelligence, pilot training, and other disciplines at various U.S. military institutions. Kuwait spends a total of about $10 million per year on this program.

Foreign Policy Issues

After the United States, Kuwait's most important alliances are with the other GCC states. Kuwait has tended to act within a GCC consensus and to try to preserve GCC unity.

Intra-GCC Issues

Kuwaiti leaders argue for GCC unity as the optimal means for dealing with regional threats. Amir Sabah has been the key Gulf mediator of the intra-GCC rift that erupted in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain—asserting that Qatar implements policies fundamentally at odds with other GCC states—broke relations with Qatar and denied it land, air, and sea access to their territories. Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson conducted unsuccessful "shuttle diplomacy" on the issue from Kuwait in July 2017. After Amir Sabah's meeting with President Trump in September 2017, President Trump brokered brief direct talks between Qatar's Amir and Saudi Arabia's heir apparent, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud. Kuwait convened the annual GCC summit on December 4, 2017), but Amir Sabah adjourned it after a few hours.

The rift reportedly was a focus of Amir Sabah's meeting with President Trump on September 5, 2018, but, with no apparent imminent resolution of the rift, the Administration has repeatedly postponed a U.S.-GCC summit planned first planned for early 2018. Kuwait's reluctance to adopt the Saudi/UAE/Bahrain hard-line position on Qatar reportedly caused the abbreviation of the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud to Kuwait on September 30, 2018—his first visit to a Gulf state since becoming Crown Prince. In support of a resolution of the rift, Kuwait hosted the military chiefs of staff of the GCC, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as the commander of U.S. Central Command, on September 12, 2018. Kuwait did not join Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar for several months in 2014 over similar issues.

[23] "Kuwait Planning to Boost Military Capabilities—US, GCC States Eye Boots on the Ground Against ISIS." *Arab Times*, December 9, 2015.

Kuwait has sometimes acted militarily to defend GCC leaderships. Kuwait sent a naval unit to support the March 14, 2011, intervention of the GCC's "Peninsula Shield" unit to assist Bahraini security forces, but did not send ground troops into Bahrain. The Kuwaiti naval unit departed in July 2011. Kuwait's involvement came despite opposition from some Kuwaiti Shias.

Relations with Iraq

Kuwait has built political ties to the Shia-dominated government in Iraq in order to move beyond the legacy of the Saddam era invasion of Kuwait and to prevent any Iraqi Shia-led violence in Kuwait such as occurred in the 1980s. On July 18, 2008, Kuwait named its first ambassador to Iraq since the 1990 Iraqi invasion. On January 12, 2011, then-Prime Minister Nasser became the first Kuwait Prime Minister to visit Iraq since the 1990 invasion. Then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Kuwait in 2011 and 2012, paving the way for Amir Sabah's attendance at the March 27-29, 2012, Arab League summit in Baghdad that marked Iraq's return to the Arab fold. The speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly visited Iraq on February 28, 2019, to mark the anniversary of the liberation from the Iraqi invasion.

As part of its outreach to post-Saddam Iraq, Kuwait ran a humanitarian operation center (HOC) that gave over $550 million in assistance to Iraqis from 2003 to 2011. In 2008, Kuwait hosted a regional conference on Iraq's stability attended by the United States and Iran. In 2018, Kuwait held a conference that raised $30 billion for Iraq reconstruction to help it recover from the Islamic State challenge.

Some residual issues from the Iraqi invasion remain. In August 2012, the Iraqi government vowed to "end all pending issues with Kuwait before the start of [2013]"—a statement that furthered Iraq's argument that the U.N. Security Council should remove any remaining "Chapter 7" (of the U.N. Charter) mandates on Iraq stemming from the invasion. During a visit to Iraq by Kuwait's Prime Minister on June 12, 2013, the two countries agreed to take the issues of still-missing Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti property out of the Chapter 7 supervision of the United Nations and replace them with alternative mechanisms, as discussed below. On December 15, 2010, the U.N. Security Council passed three resolutions—1956, 1957, and 1958. These resolutions ended Saddam-era sanctions against Iraq, but did not end the "Chapter 7" U.N. mandate on Iraq and continued the 5% automatic revenue deductions for reparations payments, discussed below.

Reparations Payments. Until 2014, 5% of Iraq's oil revenues were devoted to funding a U.N. escrow account that, since 1991, has been compensating the victims of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The U.N. Compensation Commission (UNCC), created by the post-Desert Storm U.N. resolutions, paid out about $52 billion awarded to over 100 governments and 1.5 million individual claimants by the time it ended in April 2015. As of that time, the process had paid $48 billion of that amount, leaving only about $4.6 billion left to be paid—the last remaining amount due from the $14.7 billion awarded for damage to Kuwaiti oilfields during the Iraqi occupation. In 2014, the UNCC, accounting for Iraqi budget shortfalls, extended the deadline for Iraq to make the final payments to early 2016.[24] In 2015, Kuwait extended that deadline until 2018,[25] and Iraq paid Kuwait $90 million in April 2018. The two countries agreed to retire the remaining balance through the payment of 1.5% of Iraq's oil revenues in 2019, and 3% in each of 2020 and 2021.

[24] http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/18/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-un-idUSKBN0JW1DH20141218.

[25] http://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/kuwait-delays-iraq-reparations-payment-to-2017/; Author conversations with Kuwaiti diplomats, July 2016.

However, budgetary difficulties in Iraq have caused Iraq's new government to request in November 2018 that Kuwait agree to another suspension of the payments.[26]

Missing Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti National Archives. The U.N. resolutions adopted in December 2010 also continued the effort, required under post-1991 war U.N. Security Council resolutions (primarily 687), to resolve the fate of the 605 Kuwaitis and third party nationals missing and presumed dead from the 1991 war, as well as that of the missing Kuwaiti national archives. A special U.N. envoy, Gennady Tarasov, was U.N. High-Level Coordinator for these issues. In September 2011 and in June 2012, Iraq called for an end to the mandate of that post and for Iraq and Kuwait to pursue the issue bilaterally. The June 16, 2013, visit of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister to Iraq—which followed progress on border demarcations issues—resulted in an Iraq-Kuwait joint recommendation to remove these issues of missing property and persons from the Chapter 7 U.N. mandate. That recommendation was endorsed in the U.N. Secretary-General's report of June 17, 2013. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2107 of June 27, 2013, abolished the High-Level Coordinator mandate and transferred the supervision of these issues to the U.N. Assistance Mission—Iraq (UNAMI)—under Chapter VI of the U.N. Charter.[27]

The search process has resulted in finding the remains of 236 Kuwaitis, to date. The cases of 369 Kuwaitis remain unresolved. Kuwait has been a donor to the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights, which is the lead Iraqi agency trying to determine the fate of the Kuwaitis. More than 10,000 trenches have been dug to search for remains, and former members of Saddam's regime have been interviewed. In February 2019, a U.N. Security Council presidential statement urged reinvigoration of the process of determining the fate of the Kuwaiti missing, noting that no human remains had been exhumed since 2004.[28]

As far as the Kuwaiti National Archives, U.N. reports on December 14, 2012, and June 17, 2013, say there has been no progress locating the archives. However, Annex I to the June 17, 2013, report (U.N. document S/2013/357) contains a list of all the Kuwaiti property returned to Kuwait by Iraq since 2002. In June 2012, Iraq returned to Kuwait numerous boxes of tapes from Kuwait's state radio, books belonging to Kuwait University, and keys to Kuwait's Central Bank. In November 2018, visiting Iraqi President Barham Salih brought with him to Kuwait some Kuwaiti archival material that had been found.

Kuwait-Iraq Border. Disputes over the Iraq-Kuwait border, some of which apparently were a factor in Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, have been mostly resolved. Under post-1991 Gulf War U.N. Security Council Resolution 833, the Council accepted the U.N.-demarcated border between them. Kuwait insisted that post-Saddam Iraqi governments formally acknowledge Iraq's commitments under that resolution to pay some of the costs of border markings and signs. As a consequence of the March 2012 Maliki visit to Kuwait, Iraq agreed to pay its portion of the costs of maintaining the border markings, and sea border markings and related issues were resolved in 2013. In 2017, Iraq ceded to Kuwait greater access to the shared Khor Abdullah waterway.[29]

Other Outstanding Bilateral Disputes/Iraqi Airways. Kuwait has not forgiven about $25 billion in Saddam-era debt, but Kuwait does not appear to be pressing the Iraqi government for payment. The March 2012 Maliki visit resolved Kuwait Airways' assertion that Iraq owed Kuwait $1.2 billion for planes and parts stolen during the Iraqi invasion with agreement for Iraq to pay Kuwait

[26] "Iraq Proposes Suspending War Reparations to Kuwait." The National, November 21, 2018.

[27] Actions under Chapter VI do not carry the enforcement mechanisms of those adopted under Chapter VII.

[28] http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/20/c_137834954.htm.

[29] http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2017/02/08/renewed-tensions-over-kuwait-iraq-border/.

$300 million in compensation, and to invest $200 million in an Iraq-Kuwait joint airline venture. Subsequent to the visit, Iraq-Kuwait direct flights resumed.

Threat from Iraqi Extremist Groups. Kuwait remains wary of pro-Iranian Shia militia groups operating in Iraq, most of which grew out of pro-Iranian anti-Saddam elements. The December 1983 bombings of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait and an attempted assassination of the Amir in May 1985 were attributed to the Iran-inspired Iraqi Da'wa (Islamic Call) Party, composed of Shias. Seventeen Da'wa activists were arrested for those attacks, and Da'wa activists hijacked a Kuwait Airlines plane in 1987. Da'wa is the party that two of Iraq's previous prime ministers headed, although the party disbanded its militia wing long ago. In July 2011, the Iran-supported militia of Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr rocketed Kuwait's embassy in Iraq.

Iran

Kuwait has undertaken consistent high-level engagement with Iran, reflecting a legacy of Kuwait's perception of Iran as a counterweight to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. After 1991, Kuwait often hosted pro-Iranian anti-Saddam Iraqi Shia oppositionists for talks, even though some of these same groups had conducted attacks in Kuwait in the 1980s. Amir Sabah visited Iran in June 2014, including meetings with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani visited Kuwait and Oman in February 2017, in conjunction with Kuwait's role as a mediator in an unsuccessful attempt to establish a broader Iran-GCC dialogue.

Like the other GCC states, and despite engaging Iranian leaders, Kuwaiti leaders support U.S. efforts to reduce Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the region, while supporting continued implementation of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) to curb Iran's nuclear program. Kuwait has also purchased missile defense equipment that supports U.S. efforts to forge a joint GCC missile defense network against Iran, and it participates in all U.S.-led military exercises in the Persian Gulf. Kuwait enforces all U.S. sanctions against Iran, and it has not pursued a long-discussed plan to import Iranian natural gas.[30] In January 2016, Kuwait downgraded relations with Iran over the sacking of Saudi diplomatic facilities in Tehran and Mashhad by demonstrators protesting the Saudi execution of dissident Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al Baqr Al Nimr. Kuwait recalled its Ambassador from Iran but it did not follow Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in breaking relations. In September 2018, Kuwait rebuffed Iranian entreaties to return its ambassador to Tehran.

Amir Sabah represented Kuwait at the May 13-14, 2015, and April 21, 2016, U.S.-GCC summits in Camp David and in Riyadh respectively, during which then-President Obama reassured the GCC states of the U.S. commitment to Gulf security. Kuwait's Foreign Ministry reacted to the Trump Administration's May 8, 2018, announcement of its exit from the JCPOA by expressing "understanding" that U.S. suggestions for improving the accord were not adopted.[31] Kuwaiti officials have indicated the country will join the U.S.-backed Middle East Strategic Alliance to counter Iran, if such a bloc is formed.

Kuwait has been vigilant in preventing Iran from undermining security inside Kuwait. In 2010, Kuwait arrested some Kuwaiti civil servants and stateless residents for allegedly helping the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF) of Iran (the IRGC unit that supports pro-Iranian movements in the region) plot to blow up Kuwaiti energy facilities.[32] In September

[30] http://en.trend.az/business/energy/2482129.html.

[31] https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2725312&language=en.

[32] "Iran Spy Cell Dismantled in Kuwait." Associated Press, May 6, 2010; "Iran Cell Planned Attacks in Kuwait,

2015, Kuwait arrested 25 Kuwaiti Shias and 1 Iranian who had reportedly hidden explosives near the border with Iraq.[33] In January 2016, a criminal court sentenced 2 of the defendants, including the Iranian (in absentia), to death, and 12 to prison terms. Another 12 were acquitted.

Syria and the Islamic State

Kuwait joined the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, along with the other GCC states, in September 2014. It has hosted the operational headquarters for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). "ARCENT"—the U.S. Army component of U.S. Central Command—is based in Kuwait, and the ARCENT commander serves as overall U.S. commander of OIR. Kuwait also has allowed Canada and Italy to base reconnaissance and combat aircraft in Kuwait for their participation in OIR.[34] Unlike some of the other GCC states, Kuwait did not conduct any air operations against Islamic State forces in Syria. No GCC state deployed ground forces to Syria or Iraq, and Kuwaiti officials say the government does not fund or arm any rebel groups fighting in Syria.

Kuwait's leaders asserted that Syrian President Bashar Al Asad should leave office and, along with the other GCC states, Kuwait closed its embassy in Damascus in 2012. In December 2014, Kuwait allowed Syria to reopen its embassy in Kuwait to perform consular services for the approximately 140,000 Syrians living there.[35]

Kuwait has focused on helping civilian victims of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, including hosting several major donors' conferences for victims of the Syria and cochairing a donors' conference for victims of the conflict, held on April 4-5, 2017, in Brussels.[36] It has provided over $9 billion in humanitarian support for this purpose, making Kuwait the largest single country donor to these efforts after the United States. All of Kuwait's donations have been composed mostly of donations to nine U.N. agencies and to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Kuwait hosts about 145,000 Syrians who fled that conflict.

In October 2018, Kuwait joined Saudi Arabia and the UAE in finalizing a $2.5 billion donation to Jordan to help it cope with the financial burdens of hosting Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The refugees are an economic burden that likely contributed to protests in Jordan over unemployment, rising prices, and the imposition of additional income taxes.

Yemen

After an Arab Spring-related uprising in Yemen in 2011, Kuwait and its GCC allies brokered a transition that led to the departure of longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh in January 2012. However, the elected government of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Al Hadi fled in January 2015 under pressure from Iran-backed Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels. In 2015, Kuwait joined the Saudi-led combat against the Houthis[37] to try to restore the Hadi government. In part because of its willingness to engage diplomatically with Iran, the key backer of the Houthis, and its membership in the GCC, since 2016 Kuwait has hosted U.N.-mediated talks between the warring sides. In July 2016, Kuwait issued an ultimatum to the two warring sides in the Yemen conflict to negotiate a

Minister Says. *Reuters*, April 21, 2011.

[33] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/kuwait-charges-terror-cell-tied-iran-hezbollah-150901134517950.html.

[34] "Kuwait Plays Uneasy Host as Canadian Jets Join Anti-ISIS Campaign." Canada Television News, October 29, 2014.

[35] http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/01/06/391924/Syria-embassy-in-Kuwait-resumes-services.

[36] http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2017/04/05/.

[37] http://www.criticalthreats.org/gulf-aden-security-review/gulf-aden-security-review-september-10-2015.

resolution to the conflict by the conflict by the following month, but the maneuver was unsuccessful. Rouhani's visit to Kuwait in February 2017 was intended, at least in part, to explore potential cooperation between Iran and the GCC to resolve the Yemen conflict.

Kuwaiti Policy on Other Regional Conflicts and Issues

Kuwait has generally acted in concert with—although not always as assertively as—other GCC states on regional issues that have stemmed from post-2011 unrest in the region.

Egypt/Muslim Brotherhood

Kuwait adopted a position on Egypt's internal struggles that was similar to that of Saudi Arabia and UAE, but at odds with Qatar, which was a major benefactor of Egypt during the presidency of Muslim Brotherhood senior figure Mohammad Morsi. Kuwaiti leaders, as do those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, assert that the Brotherhood in Egypt supports Brotherhood-linked oppositionists in the GCC. Since Morsi was deposed by the Egyptian military in July 2013, Kuwait has given at least $8 billion to Egypt in grant, loans, and investments, and has arrested and deported some Egyptians in Kuwait for conducting (pro-Muslim Brotherhood) political activities. Still, Kuwaiti leaders assert that differences over the Brotherhood do not justify the Saudi-led ostracism of Qatar.

Palestinian-Israeli Dispute

For many years after the 1990 Iraqi invasion, Kuwait was at odds with then-Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat for opposing war to liberate Kuwait. Kuwait sought to punish the Palestinian leadership by expelling about 450,000 Palestinian workers from Kuwait and building ties to Hamas, a rival to Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). That tilt was demonstrated again in June 2018 when Kuwait circulated a draft U.N. Security Council resolution calling for an international force at the Gaza border to protect pro-Hamas demonstrators who confronted Israeli forces at the border in March 2018.[38]

However, Kuwait remains staunchly critical of Israel. in line with the positions of the other GCC and Arab states, Kuwait has supported U.N. recognition of a Palestinian State and opposed the Trump Administration's recognition that Israel's capital is in Jerusalem. Kuwait's Foreign Ministers attended the U.S.-sponsored Middle East conference in Warsaw, Poland during February 13-14, 2019, during which the Arab states attending held discussions on regional topics, particularly Iran, alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. However, Kuwaiti officials denied that their participation indicated that they would follow the lead of Oman, UAE, and Saudi Arabia in building increasingly public ties to Israel's government.[39] Kuwait's foreign minister visited the Old City of Jerusalem in September 2014, but the Kuwaiti government asserted it did not coordinate the visit with Israeli officials and that the Old City represents a part of Palestine that is occupied. In 2018, Kuwait used its seat on the U.N. Security Council to block U.S.-backed efforts to censure PA President Mahmoud Abbas for an anti-Semitic speech, and it blocked U.S. condemnation of Hamas attacks on Israel.[40] In 2018, Kuwait pledged $50 million

[38] A.J. Caschetta. "Kuwait Seizes the Palestinian Cause." *Jerusalem Post,* reprinted in Middle East Forum. June 16, 2018.

[39] "Kuwait Rejects Israel Tie Normalisation Claims." Gulf News, February 17, 2019.

[40] Jonathan Schaner and Varsha Koduvayur. "Kuwait Best Get with the Porgram- or be Prepared to Face Trump's Wrath." *New York Post,* June 29, 2018.

for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in part to compensate the agency for reduced U.S. donations.

As part of U.S.-led Israeli-Palestinian peace process negotiations, during 1992 to 1997, Kuwait attended—but did not host—multilateral working group talks with Israel on arms control, water resources, refugees, and other issues. In 1994, Kuwait helped persuade the other Gulf monarchies to cease enforcement of the secondary (trade with firms that deal with Israel) and tertiary (trade with firms that do business with blacklisted firms) Arab boycotts of Israel. However, Kuwait did not, as did Qatar and Oman, subsequently exchange trade offices with Israel, and it retained the Arab League boycott on trade with Israel ("primary boycott").

North Korea

As do several other GCC states, Kuwait has had a significant number of North Korean laborers working in Kuwait (about 3,000), whose earnings are mostly remitted to the North Korean government. In concert with increased U.S. pressure on North Korea in 2017 for its missile and nuclear tests, Kuwait curtailed its relationship with North Korea. On September 17, 2017, after a meeting between the Amir and President Trump, Kuwait gave North Korea's ambassador (the only North Korean ambassador in the Gulf) and four other North Korean diplomats 30 days to leave Kuwait. North Korea's embassy in Kuwait City subsequently remains open but with only four staff persons, including a charge d'affaires. Kuwait also ceased renewing visas for North Korean workers, causing them to start leaving, and it halted trade ties and direct flights between Kuwait and North Korea.[41]

Domestic Terrorism and Counterterrorism Cooperation[42]

Kuwait has prevented most, but not all, terrorist attacks by the Islamic State and other groups, since an attack on a mosque in Kuwait City on June 26, 2015, killed 27 persons. A local branch of the Islamic State claimed responsibility. In July 2016, Kuwait said its security forces thwarted three planned Islamic State terrorist attacks in Kuwait, including a plot to blow up a Shia mosque.[43] On October 10, 2016, an Islamic State-inspired individual of Egyptian origin drove a truck into a vehicle carrying U.S. military personnel, but no U.S. personnel were injured or killed.[44] In April 2017, a suspected mid-ranking leader of the Islamic State was extradited from the Philippines to Kuwait for involvement in operational planning to attack Kuwait.[45]

U.S. agencies help Kuwait's counterterrorism efforts, border control, and export controls. Recent State Department fact sheets on security cooperation with Kuwait, referenced earlier, state that Kuwait's Ministry of Interior and National Guard participate in U.S. programs to work with local counterterrorism units via training and bilateral exercises. At the September 8, 2017, U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue meeting in Washington, DC, Kuwait's Ministry of Interior signed a counterterrorism information sharing arrangement with the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). And, the U.S. Customs and Border Control signed an agreement to share customs information with Kuwait's director general of customs. Kuwait also has ratified a Saudi-led GCC

[41] "Qatar, Kuwait Stop Renewing Visas for North Korean Workers." *Reuters*, September 19, 2017.

[42] Some information in this section is taken from the State Department country report on terrorism for 2017. https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2017/282844.htm

[43] "Kuwait Says It Thwarted 3 Planned ISIS Attacks." Reuters, July 3, 2016.

[44] https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/10/10/US-embassy-Troops-in-Kuwait-came-under-terrorist-attack.html.

[45] *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 14, 2017.

"Internal Security Pact" to enhance regional counterterrorism cooperation. In April 2011, Kuwait introduced biometric fingerprinting at Kuwait International Airport and has since extended that system to land and sea entry points.

Kuwait long sought the return of two prisoners held at the U.S. facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, under accusation of belonging to Al Qaeda. Both were returned to Kuwait by January 2016. Kuwait built a rehabilitation center to reintegrate them into society after their return.

Terrorism Financing Issues

The State Department report on international terrorism for 2017, cited above, contains praise for recent Kuwait government steps to counter the financing of terrorism. The report praises Kuwait's October 2017 announcement, with the GCC and the United States, of 13 terrorist designations of individuals associated with the Islam State-Yemen and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The report also cites the Central Bank of Kuwait for implementing a "same business-day" turnaround policy for imposing U.N. terrorist financing-related sanctions, requiring Kuwaiti banks to monitor U.N. sanctions lists proactively.

Kuwait is a member of the Middle East North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), and many of the steps that Kuwait has taken to address the criticism were the product of an action plan Kuwait developed with the broader FATF to address Kuwait's weaknesses on anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing (AML/CTF). A law Kuwait enacted in 2013 provided a legal basis to prosecute terrorism-related crimes and freeze terrorist assets. In May 2014, the Ministry of Social Affairs warned Kuwaiti citizens that the fundraising campaigns for Syrian factions were a violation of Kuwait law that requires that financial donations only go to authorized charity organizations. As of mid-2014, Kuwait has been no longer deemed deficient on AML/CFT by the FATF. In June 2015, the National Assembly passed a law that criminalized online fundraising for terrorist purposes. In 2017, Kuwait joined two counter terrorism-financing conventions, the Egmont Group and the U.S.-GCC "Terrorist Financing Targeting Center."

Still, Kuwait's record on this issue has been mixed. Kuwaiti donors have been able, in recent years, to raise funds for various regional armed factions, including the Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra Front operating in Syria (which publicly severed its connection to Al Qaeda and changed its name in August 2016).[46] The then-Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence of the Department of the Treasury said on March 4, 2014, that the appointment of a leading Kuwaiti donor to Al Nusra, Nayef al-Ajmi, as Minister of Justice and Minister of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf), was "a step in the wrong direction."[47] Subsequently, Ajmi resigned his government posts.[48] On August 6, 2014, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on two Ajmi tribe members and one other Kuwaiti[49] under Executive Order 13224 sanctioning support for international terrorism. Two Kuwaitis were sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council for allegedly providing financial support to Al Nusra Front, and the Treasury Department sanctioned a Kuwaiti person in March 2017 under E.O 13324 for providing support to Al Nusrah Front and Al Qaeda. Earlier, in June 2008, the Department of the Treasury froze the assets of a Kuwait-

[46] Ben Hubbard. "Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria." *New York Times*, November 13, 2013; and http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/how-does-isis-fund-its-reign-terror-282607.html.

[47] Department of the Treasury. Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for New American Security on "Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing." March 4, 2014.

[48] Karen DeYoung. "Kuwait Cabinet Minister Resigns After Allegations." May 13, 2014.

[49] Department of the Treasury, Office of the Press Secretary. August 6, 2014.

based charity—the Islamic Heritage Restoration Society—for alleged links to Al Qaeda, under E.O. 13224.

The United States has, at times, provided very small amounts of aid to help Kuwait counter terrorism financing. In FY2013, about $83,000 was provided to training Kuwaiti authorities on methods to counter terrorism financing. In FY2015, about $100,000 was provided for similar purposes.

Countering Violent Extremism. State Department terrorism reports also praise Kuwait's programs to encourage moderation in Islam in Kuwait. The government supports a number of local counter-messaging campaigns on radio, television, and billboards. In late 2015, the government moved a "Center for Counseling and Rehabilitation" from Central Prison to a new facility with an expanded faculty and broadened mandate. In July 2017, the government established a new Directorate for Cybersecurity within the Higher Authority for Communication to "fight violent extremism."

Economic Issues

Political infighting and the drop in oil prices since 2014 have affected Kuwait's economy, but the country is taking steps to try to reduce its economic vulnerability. Hydrocarbons sales still represent about 90% of government export revenues and about 60% of its gross domestic product (GDP). Because Kuwait requires that crude oil sell for about nearly $75 per barrel to balance its budget—well above prices for most of the time since 2014—Kuwait has run budget deficits of about $15 billion per year since 2015. Kuwait deferred capital infrastructure investment and reduced public sector salaries and subsidies, according to the IMF and other observers. Subsidy reductions were contemplated even before the decline in oil prices: in October 2013, Prime Minister Jabir said the subsidies system—which cost the government about $17.7 billion annually—had produced a "welfare state" and was "unsustainable" and must be reduced.

On the other hand, Kuwait still has a large sovereign wealth fund, managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority, with holdings estimated at nearly $600 billion.[50] Kuwait, which produces about 3 million barrels per day of crude oil, agreed to slightly reduce its crude oil production (by 130,000 barrels per day) as part of a November 2016 OPEC production cut agreement that remains in effect. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, including during a September 30, 2018, visit to Kuwait by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, discussed jointly increasing production by 500,000 barrels per day by reactivating two closed fields in their joint "neutral zone." The Khafji field closed in October 2014 due to environmental concerns and the Wafra field closed in May 2015 over technical issues. However, the Crown Prince's visit did not result in any announced agreement to resume production at the two fields.

Using National Assembly legislation that took effect in 2010, the government has moved forward with long-standing plans to privatize some state-owned industries. However, the privatization of Kuwait Airways was cancelled, despite the passage of legislation in January 2014 authorizing that privatization, in part because of opposition from the airline's workforce.

Political disputes also delayed movement on several major potential drivers of future growth, most notably opening Kuwait's northern oil fields to foreign investment to generate about 500,000 barrels per day of extra production. The Assembly blocked the $8.5 billion project for over 15 years because of concerns about Kuwait's sovereignty. However, a fourth oil refinery, estimated to cost $8 billion, is under construction and is scheduled to open in 2019. At an

[50] http://www.swfinstitute.org/fund-rankings/.

investment forum in March 2018, Kuwait announced a vision to attract foreign direct investment through development of a large "Northern Gateway" economic opportunity zone encompassing five natural islands in northern Kuwait.[51] That project has since been retitled "Silk City," after attracting investment from China as part of that country's region-wide Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project, which might involve almost $90 billion in total investment, will encompass a new airport, railways, and port facilities. Kuwait and China have formed a $10 billion "Kuwait-China Silk Road Fund" to finance initial stages of the expansion. The development of the northern reaches of Kuwait is part of the country's overall "New Kuwait 2035" economic strategy.

Nuclear Power. Like other Gulf states, Kuwait sees peaceful uses of nuclear energy as important to its economy, although doing so always raises fears among some in the United States, Israel, and elsewhere about the ultimate intentions of developing a nuclear program. In 2012, Kuwait formally abandoned plans announced in 2011 to build up to four nuclear power reactors. The government delegated any continuing nuclear power research to its Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR). Kuwait is cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure international oversight of any nuclear work in Kuwait. In FY2015, the United States provided about $38,000 to help train Kuwaiti personnel in nuclear security issues, and about $58,000 was provided in FY2016 for this purpose.

U.S.-Kuwait Economic Issues

In 1994, Kuwait became a founding member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In February 2004, the United States and Kuwait signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), often viewed as a prelude to a free trade agreement (FTA), which Kuwait has said it seeks. In the course of the September 8, 2017, U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue, the U.S. Department of Commerce finalized a memorandum of understanding with Kuwait's Direct Investment Promotion Authority to encourage additional investments in both countries. Kuwait gave $500 million worth of oil to U.S. states affected by Hurricane Katrina.

The United States' imports of oil from Kuwait have been declining as U.S. oil imports have declined generally. The United States imports about 100,000 barrels per day of crude oil from Kuwait, as of mid-2018. Total U.S. exports to Kuwait were about $5.1 billion in 2017, and total U.S. imports from Kuwait in 2017 were about $3 billion. Based on figures through November 2018, U.S. exports to Kuwait in 2018 were only about half of what they were the prior year, and imports from Kuwait fell by about 25% in that time period. U.S. exports to Kuwait consist mostly of automobiles, industrial equipment, and foodstuffs. Following his meeting with Amir Sabah on September 7, 2017, President Trump stated that Kuwait had taken delivery of 10 U.S.-made Boeing 777 commercial passenger aircraft in 2017, which might account for the spike in U.S. export figures to Kuwait in 2017.

U.S. Assistance

Because Kuwait's per capita GDP is very high, Kuwait receives negligible amounts of U.S. foreign assistance. The assistance Kuwait does receive is targeted to achieve selected objectives that benefit U.S. national security, including promoting civil society, and training on nuclear security and counterterrorism financing.[52] In FY2016, about $3,000 was provided for counternarcotics programs in Kuwait.

[51] The National (UAE). March 21, 2018.

[52] Source: USAID Explorer Database.

Figure 1. Kuwait at a Glance

Population: About 4.6 million, of which 1.4 million are citizens
GDP (purchasing power parity, PPP): $300 billion
Religions: Muslim 85% (of which: Sunni 70%, Shia 30%); other (Christian, Hindu, Parsi) 15%
GDP per capita (PPP): $70,000/year
GDP growth rate: 2.5% (2018), *a rebound from -2.3% in 2017*
Unemployment: 2%
Inflation: 2.5%
Oil (proven reserves): 102 billion barrels, *6% of world proven reserves*
Oil production: 2.8 million barrels per day
Oil exports: 2.15 million barrels per day

Sources: Map created by CRS using data from Department of State, Esri, and Google Maps (2013). Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook,* and IMF; 2017, various press.

Author Information

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.