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

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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 prepositions military equipment to be able to project power in the region.

Kuwait is a partner not only of the United States but also of the other hereditary monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman). Kuwaiti forces are part of the Saudi-led coalition that is trying to defeat the Iran-backed "Houthi" rebel movement in Yemen, but Kuwait has also sought to mediate a resolution to that and other regional conflicts. Kuwait has been the main GCC mediator seeking to end 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 several donor conferences for victims of the Syrian civil conflict as well as to fund Iraq's recovery from the Islamic State challenge and ameliorate the effects of regional conflict on Jordan's economy. Kuwait has not followed some of the other GCC states in building quiet ties to the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.

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 and has not advocated U.S. or GCC confrontation of Iran. U.S. government reports have praised steps by Kuwait to counter the financing of terrorism, but reports persist that wealthy Kuwaitis are still able to donate to regional Islamist extremists. 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, since the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, Kuwait has followed other GCC states in incarcerating and revoking the citizenship of social media and other critics. Kuwait's fundamental political stability has not been in question but long-standing parliamentary opposition to the ruling Sabah family's political dominance has in recent years included some 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. The Amir's declining health, necessitating hospitalization in the United States during August-October 2019, might have contributed to the reigniting of political fissures in Kuwait that caused the resignation of the government and appointment of a new Prime Minister in November 2019.

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 since 2014. 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.

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History and 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.

The origin of modern Kuwait dates to the early 18th century, when the Banū Utūb families of the ʿAnizah tribe in the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, migrated to the area that is now Kuwait. In 1756, the settlers appointed the Ṣabāḥ family to exercise political authority. Toward the end of the 19th century, Kuwaiti leaders aligned with the Ottoman Empire but did not come under Ottoman rule. The Al Sabah ruler known as Mubārak the Great (who came to power by assassinating his brother) later built close ties to Britain to counter Ottoman threats. An 1899 treaty basically granted Britain control of Kuwait's foreign affairs. Following the outbreak of World War I (1914–1918), Kuwait became a British protectorate. On June 19, 1961, Britain recognized Kuwait's independence.

Leadership Structure

Under Kuwait's 1962 constitution, an Amir (Arabic word for prince, but in this context means "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.

Amir Sabah, who is 90 years old, has tended to be directly involved in governance, particularly foreign policy issues. Over the past few years, discussions within Al Sabah circles about the succession have expanded, and the issue will likely gain currency following the Amir's hospitalization in the United States during August-October 2019, and which necessitated postponement of a planned meeting in Washington, DC, with President Trump.

Table 1. Senior Leaders in Kuwait

Amir (Ruler)	Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah
Crown Prince	Nawwaf al-Ahmad Al Sabah
Prime Minister	Sabah al-Khalid al-Hamad Al Sabah
First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister	Appointment pending
Foreign Minister	Appointment pending
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, in part because it drafts legislation as well as acts on legislation drafted 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." Kuwait's leaders have, on nine occasions (1976-1981, 1986-1992, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2016), conducted a constitutional dissolution of the Assembly, mandating 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.

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*." Draw support from generally less educated, tribal-oriented constituents in towns and villages that in the outer rings of Kuwait City. Sometimes referred to as "service deputies"—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" and Youths*. The leaders of this block are highly educated, secular elites, some of whom supported Arab nationalist movements in the 1960s and 1970s and in the 1980s and 1990s banded together as the "Kuwait Democratic Forum" political society. Since 2008, Kuwaiti youth groups have organized to support Kuwait's liberal figures, using such names as the "Orange Movement" or "Fifth Fence."
- *Sunni Islamists*. Kuwait's Sunni Islamists have tended to affiliate either with the the Muslim Brotherhood supporters (Islamic Constitutional Movement, ICM), or harder-line "Salafists." Neither has a record of violence. However, the government has sought to disband the Brotherhood's Kuwait charity arm, *Islah*.

Political Turmoil: Repeated 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. The State Department has consistently called Kuwait's elections "generally free and fair."

Elections during 2006-2009

- *June 29, 2006*. 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 five (from 25). The proposal sought to reduce "vote buying" and the effects of intra-tribal politics. In the June 29, 2006 election, the opposition, backed by youths, won 34 out of the 50 seats. Women were allowed to vote and run for the first time, but none of the 27 women candidates won. After the election, the government reduced the number of electoral districts to five.
- *May 17, 2008*. 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. Pro-government and other independent tribalists and Shias held the remaining 19 seats. No woman was elected.
- *May 16, 2009*. 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. Among the 20 new parliamentarians elected were four women, the first women ever elected in Kuwait. Two votes of no confidence in the Prime Minister (in December 2009 and January 2011) failed.[1]

Arab Uprisings Intensify Political Strife

The Arab uprisings that began in early 2011 brought fissures in Kuwait onto the streets. In January 2011, opposition deputies, supported by youths of 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. September 2011 protests followed reports that two Kuwaiti banks had deposited $92 million into the accounts of several parliamentarians. On November 16, 2011, oppositionists in and outside the Assembly stormed the Assembly building and demanded the Prime Minister's resignation. On November 28, 2011, he did so, and the Amir appointed then-Defense Minister Shaykh Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah to that post. 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. 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,

[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.

Ahmad al-Sadun, returned to the Speaker post he held during 1985-1999, and four oppositionists were named to the cabinet. In June 2012, when the Assembly requested to grill the Interior Minister, the Amir exercised his constitutional authority to suspend the Assembly for one month (renewable for two months, with the concurrence of the Assembly).

- *December 2012 Election Triggered by Court*. 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. A boycott by Sunni Islamist factions produced a "pro-government" Assembly, including an unprecedented 17 Shias. 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 for 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). Several opposition groups, including the ICM, boycotted again, producing another pro-government Assembly. A miscount deprived one of the two women winners of her seat, and the other resigned in 2014. The 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 split between pro-government and opposition deputies.

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, but appointed a new government in December 2017 with a policy outlook little different from its predecessor. 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.

Following the Amir's returned to Kuwait on October 16, 2019, after medical treatment in the United States, parliamentary questioning of alleged corruption led to challenges to two ministers, including one of the women cabinet ministers, Minister of Public Works Jenan Bushehri, who resigned before a likely vote of no confidence. On November 14, the government of Prime Minister Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah, resigned. On November 18, 2019, the Amir named Shaykh Sabah al-Khalid Al Sabah, who was serving as foreign minister, as the new Prime Minister. The Amir also dismissed his son, Shaykh Nasser Al Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, as defense minister.

The next National Assembly elections are due to be held in late 2020—four years after the last election.

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 (pro-government)	5	9	7	17	8	6
Sunni Independents (tribalists, pro-business deputies, and women). Pro-government	14	17	11	28	30	20
Women (pro-government) 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: arbitrary detention; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; restrictions on free expression, the press, and the internet, including criminalization of libel, censorship, and internet site blocking; interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; restrictions on freedom of movement; trafficking in persons; criminalization of consensual adult male homosexual conduct; and reports of forced labor, principally among foreign workers. 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.

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.

Readouts of most high-level U.S.-Kuwait meetings indicate that U.S.-Kuwait discussions focus mostly on security and regional issues.[3] However, some U.S. democracy promotion funds have in recent years been used for Kuwait to train civil society activists, enhance the capabilities of independent Kuwaiti media, and promote women's rights. In FY2016, the United States gave about $51,000 to the National Endowment for Democracy, for an unspecified grantee, to promote civil society in Kuwait.

[2] Much of this section is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2018.

[3] For one such readout, see https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/13/remarks-president-obama-and-amir-sabah-al-sabah-kuwait-after-bilateral-m.

Women's Rights

Kuwait women enjoy substantial legal rights, but are not treated equally by custom and tradition. 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. Female police officers in public places combat sexual harassment.

Women serve in national appointed positions and, since 2006, have been able to run and vote in national elections, although the number of women elected to the National Assembly has always been small, to date (see the table above). Women are allowed to drive and own businesses. An estimated 16% of the oil sector workforce is female. Women run several Kuwaiti organizations dedicated to women's rights, such as the Kuwait Women's Cultural and Social Society,

Trafficking in Persons and Labor Rights[4]

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," and was further upgraded to "Tier 2" in the report for 2019. The 2019 report credits Kuwait for deploying a specialized unit to initiate more criminal investigations of trafficking crimes and for increasing prosecutions under the anti-trafficking law.

On broader labor issues, there have been repeated reports of beatings and rapes of domestic workers, who are almost always expatriates, by their Kuwaiti employers, occasionally causing diplomatic difficulties for Kuwait. 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. In 2016, the Kuwaiti government set a minimum monthly wage for maids working in Kuwait.

Kuwait's labor laws protect the right of workers to form and join unions, conduct legal strikes, and bargain collectively, but contain significant restrictions. However, the only trade federation authorized by the government, to date, 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.

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. According to Kuwait government figures, there are approximately 88,000 stateless persons ("bidoons," the Arabic word for "without") in the country, while in Human Rights Watch estimated the Bidoon population at more than 100,000 in 2018. The legal status of the Bidoons has vexed Kuwait for decades. In March 2011, the government set a deadline of 2017 to resolve the status of the Bidoons, but that deadline was not met. 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.

[4] The most recent State Department "Trafficking in Person" report for 2019 is at https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/kuwait/

Freedom of Expression and Media Freedoms

Since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Kuwait has increasingly restricted freedom of expression. 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.

Governmental press censorship ended in 1992, fostering the growth of a vibrant independent media, 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."

Religious Freedom[5]

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, some 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, but they 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, 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, 250,000 Hindus, and 10,000 Sikhs—are mostly noncitizens working in Kuwait. Among Kuwaiti citizens, about 300 are Christian, several are Baha'i, and none is Jewish.

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, then 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 of relatively left-wing Kuwaiti figures. Lawrence Robert Silverman is U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait, and Alina Romanowski, the principal deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department has been nominated, and her Senate confirmation hearings were held on October 31, 2019.

[5] The latest State Department report on International Religious Freedom (2018) can be found at https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/

Amir Sabah has met with President Trump on several occasions, most recently in September 2018 to discuss the U.S. concept of an anti-Iran Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). His scheduled August 2019 meeting with President Trump was postponed when the Amir was hospitalized.

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.[6] 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.[7] The DCA is accompanied by a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), an agreement that the U.S. Department of Defense typically requires to ensure that U.S. forces serving abroad are subject only to U.S. law. Since 2016, the United States and Kuwait have held regular "Strategic Dialogue" meetings on bilateral security cooperation.[8]

Kuwait's military has more than 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. 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.[9]

U.S. Troops in Kuwait and Facilities Used

At the time of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, nearly 14,000 U.S. troops remained in Kuwait under the DCA.[10] Then-Defense Secretary James Mattis noted during a 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. 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. Additional deployments since 2017 have brought U.S. military personnel deployed to Kuwait to over 16,000,[11]constituting about one-third of the total U.S. forces deployed in and around the Gulf, but not including in Iraq itself or in Afghanistan.

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

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

[8] 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.

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

[10] Thom Shanker. "In Kuwait, Panetta Affirms U.S. Commitment to Middle East," *New York Times*, December 11, 2012.

[11] Trump's Secret War? U.S. Military's Presence in Middle East Has Grown 33 Percent In Past Four Months. Newsweek, November 21, 2017.

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. In addition, U.S. forces are using a large facility at Kuwait's international airport as the largest U.S. air logistics in the region. This function is scheduled to relocate to West Al Mubarak Air Base when that facility is completed in 2023.[12] The United States maintains 2,200 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in Kuwait,[13] and 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 Defense Cooperation: 1980s-the Present

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

1980s: 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).

1990s: Operation Desert Storm and Iraq Containment

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.

After the war, about 4,000 U.S. military personnel—and enough prepositioned U.S. armor to outfit two combat brigades—were stationed 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

[12] Kuwait to host largest US military airport in Middle East. The National, July 15, 2018.

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

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

U.N. budget for the 1991-2003 Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) that monitored the Iraq-Kuwait border.

2003-2011: 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. According to Defense Department budget documents, Kuwait contributed about $210 million per year in similar in-kind support to the costs incurred by the U.S. military in Kuwait during 2003-2011.

2014-Present: Operation Inherent Resolve

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 (CENTCOM)—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.[15] Kuwait did not conduct any air strikes against the Islamic State in Syria.

For FY2020, according to the *Appendix, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2020*, Kuwait will make estimated contributions to U.S. operations as follows: $136 million for the Allied Contributions and Cooperation Account (compensate local employees, military construction, and supplies and services); and $198 million to the Mutually Beneficial Account (for construction, maintenance, and repair projects beneficial to DoD and to Kuwaiti forces.

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.[16] 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.[17] In November 2018, Kuwait opened a diplomatic office at NATO.

In November 2017, Kuwait signed an agreement with France to strengthen their defense cooperation and the two countries hold military exercises in Kuwait each November.

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

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

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

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, but it is not eligible to receive U.S. excess defense articles. Major U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) include the following:

- ***Missile Defense Systems***. In 1998, Kuwait took delivery of five Patriot antimissile fire units, which were used to intercept Iraqi missiles during the 2003 Iraq war. The United States also has deployed four U.S.-owned Patriot systems in Kuwait for most of the time since the 1991 Gulf War, although the system was at least temporarily redeployed in late 2018 to areas pertinent to U.S. competition with Russia and China.[18] Kuwait has not announced whether it will buy the more sophisticated Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system that the UAE has purchased.
- ***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 2015, Kuwait asked to buy up to 40 additional F/A-18s.[19] The Obama Administration notified the sale of up to 32 F-18s[20] and, on November 28, 2016, U.S. officials stated that Kuwait ordered 28 of them, with an estimated 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 (DSCA) 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) attack helicopters (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 Obama 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, 2018, DSCA notified Congress of a potential sale to Kuwait of 300 additional Hellfire air-to-ground missiles, with an estimated value of $30.4 million.
- 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.

[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.

International Military Education and Training (IMET)

In some past years (FY2007-2010), Kuwait received very small amounts ($10,000-$20,000 per year) in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding. The aid was provided primarily to qualify Kuwait for discounts on the training it pays for its officers to undergo in the United States. Kuwait spends a total of about $10 million per year on this program, which funds approximately 200 Kuwaiti military personnel to study intelligence, pilot training, and other disciplines at various U.S. military institutions.

Foreign Policy Issues

Kuwait has long been aligned with the United States and the other GCC states.

Intra-GCC Issues

Kuwait has tended to act within a GCC consensus and to try to preserve GCC unity as an effective means for countering 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 largely unsuccessful "shuttle diplomacy" on the issue from Kuwait in July 2017, and later that year Amir Sabah worked with President Trump to broker brief direct talks between Qatar's Amir and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud. Since then, Kuwaiti leaders have continued to work with U.S. officials to resolve the rift, and the visit of Qatar's Foreign Minister to Saudi Arabia in November 2019 might indicate a resolution is near. More indications of the status of the dispute might come at the annual GCC summit to be held the second week of December in Riyadh. Kuwait did not join Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar for several months in 2014 over similar issues.

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's contentious relationship with Iraq long predated the rule of Saddam Husayn. At the 1922 Conference of Al-ʿUqayr, Britain negotiated the Kuwait-Saudi border, with substantial territorial loss to Kuwait. A memorandum in 1923 set out the border with Iraq on the basis of an unratified 1913 convention. The first Iraqi claim to Kuwait surfaced in 1938, the year oil was discovered in the emirate. Although neither Iraq nor the Ottoman Empire had ever actually ruled Kuwait, Iraq asserted a claim to at least part of Kuwait, notably the strategic islands of Bubiyan and Al-Warbah. Immediately after Britain recognized Kuwait's independence in June 1961, Iraq renewed its claim, which was rebuffed by British and Arab League forces. It was not until October 1963 that a new Iraqi regime formally recognized both Kuwait's independence and, subsequently, its borders, while continuing to press for access to the islands.

The threat from Saddam Husayn's rule in Iraq was not the only concern for Kuwait. Pro-Iranian Shia opposition groups in Iraq conducted attacks in Kuwait. 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. Seventeen Da'wa activists were arrested for those attacks. Da'wa activists hijacked a Kuwait Airlines plane in 1987.

Even though two of Iraq's post-Saddam leaders (Nuri al-Maliki and Haider Al Abadi) had been members of the Da'wa Party's political wing, Kuwait has built political ties to them and other Shia politicians in Iraq in order to move beyond the legacy of the Iraqi invasion and to prevent further Iraqi Shia violence in Kuwait. 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 end of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Yet, in July 2011, the Iran-supported militia of Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr rocketed Kuwait's embassy in Iraq.

In part to implement its post-Saddam policy, 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 to help Iraq reconstruct after the ISIS challenge.

Residual Issues from the Iraqi Invasion

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 reflected Iraq's insistence that the U.N. Security Council remove any "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—that ended Saddam-era sanctions against Iraq but did not ending the "Chapter 7" U.N. mandate or 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.[23] In 2015, Kuwait extended that deadline until 2018,[24] 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, but budgetary difficulties in Iraq led to another suspension of the payments as of late 2018.[25]

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

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

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

Missing Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti National Archives. The U.N. resolutions of December 2010 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 Kuwaiti national archives. A U.N. envoy, Gennady Tarasov, was U.N. High-Level Coordinator for these issues. The June 16, 2013, visit of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister to Iraq 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.[26]

As of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the search process had located the remains of 236 Kuwaitis, to date, leaving 369 cases unresolved. 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 to determine the fate of the Kuwaiti missing, noting no progress since the U.S. invasion period.[27] In August 2019, some progress was announced with the handover to Kuwait of the remains of 48 Kuwaiti citizens discovered in a mass grave in southern Iraq.[28] This leaves about 321 cases yet to be resolved. 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.

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, 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.

Other Outstanding Bilateral Disputes/Iraqi Airways. Kuwait has not forgiven about $25 billion in Saddam-era debt, but Kuwait has not apparently been 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 $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.

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

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

[28] "Iraq Hands over Human Remains to Kuwait." Reuters, August 8, 2019.

Iran

Kuwait undertakes consistent high-level engagement with Iran, in part 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, some of whom were members of groups that 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 an unsuccessful attempt to establish a broader Iran-GCC dialogue.

Yet, as a GCC and Sunni Arab state and a close U.S. ally, Kuwaiti leaders support U.S. efforts to reduce Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the region. Kuwaiti firms have not been cited for any violations of U.S. sanctions against Iran, and Kuwait has not pursued a plan to import Iranian natural gas. 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 publicly supported the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), and 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.[29] Kuwaiti officials have indicated the country will join a U.S.-backed Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) to counter Iran, if such a bloc is formed, but discussions on the pact have generally stalled amid the continuing intra-GCC rift. Kuwait reportedly told U.S. officials it would join a U.S.-led maritime security coalition to try to deter further Iranian attacks on Gulf commercial shipping, which Iran conducted during May–July 2019 in response to U.S. sanctions. The security operation, termed the International Maritime Security Construct, was inaugurated in Bahrain in November 2019.[30] Kuwait has also purchased missile defense equipment that supports U.S. efforts to forge a joint GCC missile defense network against Iran.

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.[31] In September 2015, Kuwait arrested 25 Kuwaiti Shias and one Iranian who had reportedly hidden explosives near the border with Iraq.[32] In January 2016, a criminal court sentenced two of the defendants, including the Iranian (in absentia), to death, and 12 to prison terms. Another 12 were acquitted.

Syria

Kuwait's leaders asserted that Syrian President Bashar Al Asad should leave office in the face of the 2011 rebellion there and it, along with the other GCC states, Kuwait closed its embassy in Damascus in 2012. Kuwaiti officials say the government has not funded or armed any Syrian rebel groups, and neither Kuwait nor any GCC state deployed ground forces to Syria. In

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

[30] https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/11/25/world/middleeast/25reuters-usa-gulf-qatar-kuwait.html

[31] "Iran Spy Cell Dismantled in Kuwait." Associated Press, May 6, 2010; "Iran Cell Planned Attacks in Kuwait, Minister Says. *Reuters*, April 21, 2011.

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

December 2014, Kuwait allowed Syria to reopen its embassy in Kuwait to perform consular services for the approximately 140,000 Syrians living there.[33]

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 co-chairing a donors' conference for victims of the conflict, held on April 4-5, 2017, in Brussels.[34] 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, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE donated $2.5 billion to Jordan to help it cope with the financial burdens of hosting Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

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, in January 2015, the elected government of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Al Hadi fled in the face of an offensive by Iran-backed Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels. In March 2015, Kuwait joined the Saudi-led coalition that intervened militarily to try to restore the Hadi government. Kuwait's contribution has primarily been in the form of air strikes on Houthi-led positions using Kuwait's U.S.-made F-18s.[35] In part because of its willingness to engage Iran, the key backer of the Houthis, Kuwait has also hosted U.N.-mediated talks between the warring sides.

Kuwaiti Policy on Other Regional Conflicts and Issues

Kuwait's positions do not always align with all of its GCC partners.

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. Kuwaiti leaders, as do those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, assert that the Islamist organization Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt supports Brotherhood-linked oppositionists in the GCC, including members of Kuwait's Brotherhood-linked Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) faction. Since President Mohammad Morsi, a senior Brotherhood figure who was elected president in 2012, was deposed by the Egyptian military in July 2013, Kuwait has given at least $8 billion to Egypt in grant, loans, and investments. Kuwait also has arrested and deported some Egyptians in Kuwait for conducting (pro-Muslim Brotherhood) political activities.

Palestinian-Israeli Dispute

Kuwait was at odds with then-Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat for opposing war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq's occupation and Kuwait expelled about 450,000 Palestinian workers from Kuwait after its government was restored in 1991. Kuwait subsequently built ties to Hamas, an Islamist rival to

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

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

[35] Kuwait Air Force chief inspects troops with coalition in Yemen. Kuwait News Agency, March 13, 2018.

Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA)—a tilt demonstrated most recently in June 2018 with a Kuwaiti draft U.N. Security Council resolution calling for an international force at the Gaza border to protect pro-Hamas demonstrators.[36]

Yet, Kuwait remains staunchly critical of Israel and supportive of a Palestinian state. 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.[37] In 2018, Kuwait pledged $50 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to help compensate for reduced U.S. donations. Kuwait opposed the Trump Administration's recognition that Israel's capital is in Jerusalem, and it did not attend the June 2019 U.S.-sponsored "workshop" in Bahrain at which the Trump Administration presented its economic and commercial proposals for an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

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 quiet ties to Israel's government,[38] which might include a U.S.-brokered "non-aggression pact" between Israel and some GCC and other Arab states. 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.

Earlier, 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 and the other GCC states ceased 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 remained 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.[39]

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

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

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

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

Domestic Terrorism and Counterterrorism Cooperation[40]

Kuwait has prevented most, but not all, terrorist attacks by the Islamic State and other groups, since an Islamic State attack on a mosque in Kuwait City on June 26, 2015, killed 27 persons. 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.[41] 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.[42] 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.[43] Kuwait has claimed to have uncovered and foiled multiple Iran-backed attacks in Kuwait in recent years.

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, D.C., 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 "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 2018, cited above, generally praises Kuwait government efforts to counter the financing of terrorism, but the report for 2018 cited few new Kuwaiti initiatives undertaken. A previous such report cited the Central Bank of Kuwait for implementing a "same business-day" turnaround policy for imposing U.N. terrorism financing-related measures requiring banks to monitor U.N. sanctions lists proactively.

Kuwait is a member of the Middle East North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF). Kuwait developed an action plan to meet the broader FATF's standards of anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing (AML/CTF) and, in 2014, Kuwait was deemed no longer deficient on AML/CFT by the FATF. 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. In June 2015, the National Assembly passed a law that criminalized online fundraising for terrorist

[40] Some information in this section is taken from the State Department country report on terrorism for 2018. Released October 2019.

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

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

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

purposes. In 2017, Kuwait joined two counter terrorism-financing conventions, the Egmont Group and the U.S.-GCC "Terrorist Financing Targeting Center" (TFTC). However, despite hosting meetings of the TFTC, Kuwait declined to designate Lebanese Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as a sanctioned entity.

Still, 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).[44] A Treasury Department officials 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."[45] Subsequently, Ajmi resigned his posts.[46] On August 6, 2014, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on two Ajmi tribe members and one other Kuwaiti[47] under Executive Order 13224, which sanctions entities involved in 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 Treasury Department froze the assets of a Kuwait-based charity—the Islamic Heritage Restoration Society—for alleged links to Al Qaeda, under E.O. 13224.

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." In 2018, Kuwait's Ministry of Education implemented a program to counter extremist ideology in schools through teacher training and student counseling.

U.S. Assistance

Although Kuwait is a wealthy state that gets virtually no U.S. foreign assistance, the United States has, at times, provided very small amounts of aid in the form of training to improve Kuwait's counter terrorism financing and law enforcement authorities.[48] In FY2013, about $80,000 was provided to train Kuwaiti authorities on methods to counter terrorism financing. In FY2015, nearly $50,000 was provided for similar purposes. In FY2016, about $3,000 was provided for counter-narcotics programs. For FY2017, about $4 million (mostly ESF) was obligated for programs in Kuwait to combat weapons of mass destruction, and about $460,000 for counter-narcotics programs.

Economic Issues

Kuwait is trying to reduce its economic vulnerability to fluctuating commodity prices and regional uncertainty, but hydrocarbons sales still represent about 90% of government export

[44] 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.

[45] 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.

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

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

[48] Obligations provided in: USAID "Explorer" Database, accessed in July 2019.

revenues and about 54% 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 has, in response, deferred capital infrastructure investment and reduced public sector salaries and subsidies, according to the IMF and other observers. In October 2013, the Prime Minister said that subsidies, which costs the government about $17.7 billion annually, had produced a "welfare state" that was "unsustainable."

Kuwait has a large sovereign wealth fund, managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority, with holdings estimated at nearly $600 billion.[49] Kuwait produces about 2.75 million barrels per day (mbd) of crude oil, and it agreed to reduce 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. In late October 2019, Kuwait announced its production targets for 2020 would be only marginally higher than current levels, in part because climate change is reducing global demand for oil.[50]

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, has been completed in 2019.

At an 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

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

[50] Al Jazeera, October 24, 2019.

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

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. Kuwait has signed a contract with U.S. oil services firm Halliburton, reportedly worth about $600 million, to explore for oil offshore in Kuwait – a first such deal with a U.S. firm for the Kuwait Petroleum Corp.

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. 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. U.S. exports to Kuwait fell by nearly half in 2018 to less than $3 billion, and imports fell by about one-third to $2.1 billion. 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.

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: 2.75 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.

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