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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 deploys over 13,000 military personnel in country and prepositions substantial quantities of military equipment.

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, while at the same time mediating a possible resolution to that and other regional conflicts. Kuwait is attempting to heal 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. Kuwait also has provided funds for Iraq's recovery from the Islamic State challenge and to ameliorate the effects of regional conflict on Jordan's economy. Kuwait has not followed some of the other GCC states in building 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. Kuwait has consistently engaged the post-Saddam governments in Baghdad, in part to prevent tensions with the large neighbor and prevent any repeat of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. 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.

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 been joined by public pressure for political and economic reform. 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 have arguably 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, and these levels have fallen further in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of June 1, 2020, the country has reported 28,600 COVID-19 infections and about 225 deaths. 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. Amir Sabah is over 90 years old and discussions within Al Sabah circles about the succession have expanded, particular after his hospitalization in the United States during August-October 2019 necessitated postponement of a planned meeting in Washington, D.C., 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	Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah
Foreign Minister	Dr.Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber 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, in part because it drafts legislation as well as acting 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:[1]

Government Supporters

- *"Tribalists*." Draw support from generally less educated, tribal-oriented constituents in towns and villages 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 parliamentarians have tended to side with the government.
- *Women*. The women elected to the National Assembly, to date, have all tended to support the government.

Government Critics/Opponents

- *"Liberals" and Youths*. The leaders of this grouping are highly educated, secular elites. 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 generally criticize the royal family as secular. The Sunni Islamists have tended to affiliate either with 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 Kuwaiti charity arm, *Islah*.

[1] The descriptions of Kuwait's factions are widely discussed among experts, many of whom might differ somewhat in their descriptions. This sketch of Kuwait's factions is a product of multiple conversations between the author and Kuwaiti and other observers of Kuwaiti politics.

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 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.

In three National Assembly elections during 2006-2009 (June 26, 2006; May 17, 2008; and May 16, 2009), divisions between the government and powerful National Assembly deputies emerged over the role of the Assembly in overseeing government decisions. During the period, the government accepted an Assembly demand to reduce the number of electoral districts to five (from 25), and the first women were allowed to run (2006) and won seats (2009).

The Arab uprisings that began in early 2011 expanded the divisions between the government and the elites in the National Assembly to the broader citizenry. In January 2011, opposition deputies, supported by youths, forced the Interior Minister to resign for failing to prevent the use of torture in prisons. Following allegations 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. Opposition candidates advocating a fully elected government and legalization of political parties won 32 of the 50 seats, but none of the 19 female candidates was elected. Turnout was about 62%. A leading opposition figure, 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.
- *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 – a change that appeared intended 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 July 27, 2013.* 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 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 26, 2016 Election*. Public demonstrations generally subsided after 2013, and oppositionists indicated that they would participate in the next Assembly elections. Citing "circumstances in the region" (an apparent reference

to the region's several conflicts) the Amir suspended the 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

To forestall 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, Shaykh Nasser Al Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, 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, 2019, the government of Prime Minister Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah, resigned, and the Amir named Shaykh Sabah al-Khalid Al Sabah, who was serving as foreign minister, as the new Prime Minister. In concert with the reshuffle, the Amir also dismissed his son from his senior posts for accusing a rival, the Interior Minister, of allowing embezzlement of almost $800 million in public funds.[2]

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.

[2] "Kuwait's ruler fires son over feud with fellow minister." *Associated Press*. November 18, 2019.

Broader Human Rights Issues[3]

The State Department human rights report for 2019 identifies the principal human rights issues in Kuwait as: "reports of torture; 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 same-sex sexual conduct; and reports of forced labor, principally among foreign workers."

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. Another human rights organization in the country is the Human Rights Diwan (office).

Readouts of most high-level U.S.-Kuwait meetings indicate that U.S.-Kuwait discussions focus mainly on security and regional issues.[4] However, some U.S. democracy promotion funds have 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. Some of the $4.5 million registered by the "USAID Explorer" database for FY2017, and the $3.1 million registered for FY2018, was obligated for civil society training and related functions in Kuwait, but it is unclear what proportion of those funds were spent on Kuwaitis/in Kuwait.[5] For FY2018, about $235,000 was obligated for programs to combat trafficking in persons specifically in Kuwait. No funds were spent on civil society programs in Kuwait in FY2019, and none was requested for FY2020 or FY2021, according to the State Department foreign operations budget justifications for FY2021.

Women's Rights

Kuwaiti 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, although Kuwaiti men can give their foreign spouses and their children 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 (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,

[3] Much of this section, including all subsections, is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2019. "Kuwait."

[4] For example: The White House. "Remarks by President Obama and Amir Sabah Al-Sabah of Kuwait after Bilateral Meeting." September 13, 2013.

[5] USAID Explorer Database. Kuwait. FY2017, 2018, and 2019. Accessed in May 2020.

Trafficking in Persons and Labor Rights[6]

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 (latest available). 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. These reports have occasionally caused 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 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 on labor activism. 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, some strikes have taken place, including by employees of Kuwait Airways.

Status of Noncitizens and "Stateless Persons" (Bidoons)

Non-Gulf Arabs, Asians, and stateless residents continue to face discrimination, and the issue of their citizenship rights remains unresolved. According to Kuwait government figures, there are approximately 88,000 stateless persons ("bidoons," the Arabic word for "without") in the country, while Human Rights Watch estimated the Bidoon population at more than 100,000 in 2018. In March 2011, the government set a deadline of 2017 to resolve the status of the Bidoons, but that deadline was not met. According to the State Department human rights report, since 2010 the government has given citizenship to small numbers of Bidoons.

Freedom of Expression and Media Freedoms

Since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Kuwait has increasingly restricted freedom of expression. Since 2014, the government has revoked the citizenship of some naturalized Kuwaitis for criticizing the government, but it cannot legally revoke the citizenship of Kuwait-born citizens. In July 2015, Kuwait enacted a cybercrimes law that punishes insulting religious figures, criticizing the Amir, or harming Kuwait's relations with other countries.

An official end to government press censorship in 1992 fostered the growth of a vibrant independent media, but the Press and Publications Law of 2006 establishes topics that are off limits for publication and discussion. Publishers and bloggers must be licensed by the Ministry of Information. Kuwait (like 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." On the other hand, in September 2019 one Kuwaiti court ruled that "such freedom [to express political opinion on social media] is "enshrined" in the country's constitution.[7]

[6] The most recent State Department "Trafficking in Person" report is for 2019.

[7] State Department Human Rights Report for 2019. Kuwait.

Religious Freedom[8]

Recent State Department religious freedom reports have noted little change in Kuwait's respect for religious freedoms. There is no registration requirement for religious groups, but all non-Muslim religious groups must obtain a license to establish official places 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. About 400 Baha'i's, 100,000 Buddhists, 250,000 Hindus, and 10,000 Sikhs (mostly noncitizens) also work in Kuwait. Among Kuwaiti citizens, about 300 are Christian, several are Baha'i, and none are Jewish.

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, and are able to select their own clerics without government interference. However, some Kuwaiti Shias continue to report official discrimination, including limited access to religious education and places of worship.

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. Prior to that, a U.S. consulate opened in Kuwait in October 1951 and was upgraded 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. The U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait is Alina Romanowski, who formerly was the principal deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department.

Amir Sabah has met with President Trump on several occasions, most recently in September 2018. 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 Operation Desert Storm. The DCA had an initial duration of 10 years, but remains in effect.[9] 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.[10] The DCA is accompanied by a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA),

[8] State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2018. Released June 21, 2019.

[9] Department of State fact sheet. "U.S. Security Cooperation with Kuwait." March 20, 2020.

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

an agreement that the U.S. Department of Defense typically requires to ensure that U.S. forces are subject only to U.S. law. Since 2016, the United States and Kuwait have held regular "Strategic Dialogue" meetings on bilateral security cooperation.[11]

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. Kuwait, like other manpower-short GCC states, has sometimes used military help from third countries such as Pakistan.[12]

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.[13] 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. The numbers of U.S. military personnel deployed to Kuwait might sometimes fluctuates, but the number is roughly at the 2011 level as of early 2020 – about one-third of the total U.S. forces deployed in and around the Gulf, including in Iraq and Afghanistan.[14]

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; 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.[15] The United States maintains about 2,000 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in Kuwait,[16] 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 George W. Bush Administration designated Kuwait as a "major non-NATO ally (MNNA)," a designation held by only one other Gulf state (Bahrain). The designation qualifies Kuwait for 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.

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[11] 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.

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

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

[14] U.S. Central Command figures provided to the Congressional Research Service. January 2020.

[15] Naser al-Wasmi. "Kuwait to host largest US military airport in Middle East." *The National*, July 15, 2018.

[16] State Department Fact Sheet on Security Cooperation with Kuwait.

Operational Defense Cooperation: 1980s-the Present

The following sections discuss U.S.-Kuwait defense cooperation in regional conflicts. Since 1996, Kuwait has contributed approximately $200 million per year to the costs of U.S. military operations to contain and stabilize Iraq.[17] Since 2011, the funds have consisted primarily of contributions to U.S. military construction projects in Kuwait.

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 and occupation of Kuwait, which 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.[18]

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. In addition to contributing to the costs of U.S. military operations, Kuwait furnished two-thirds of the $52 million per year U.N. budget for the 1991-2003 Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) that monitored the Iraq-Kuwait border.[19]

2003-2011: Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Post-Saddam Iraq

Kuwait supported the U.S. decision to militarily overthrow Saddam Hussein, and hosted 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 also provided $266 million to support the U.S. combat effort. 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.

2014-Present: Operation Inherent Resolve

Kuwait, along with the other GCC states, joined the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State 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

[17] White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Public Budget Database, "Budget Authority XLSX." https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/budauth_fy21.xlsx

[18] Office of Management and Budget from data provided by Departments of Defense, State, and Treasury. Provided to CRS, 1991.

[19] Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (S/2003/393). March 31, 2003.

has allowed other coalition partners to base military equipment for their participation in OIR.[20] Kuwait did not conduct any air strikes against the Islamic State in Syria.

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. The NATO center, formally titled the NATO-ICI Regional Center, opened on January 24, 2017.[21] On October 1, 2018, the NATO-ICI Regional Center held its first annual meeting to review the center's performance.[22] In November 2018, Kuwait opened a diplomatic office at NATO. In November 2017, Kuwait signed an agreement with France to strengthen their defense cooperation. The two countries hold military exercises in Kuwait each November.

U.S. Arms Sales to Kuwait

U.S. arms sales to Kuwait are intended, according to Defense Department notification to Congress, 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. As of March 2020, according to the State Department security cooperation fact sheet cited above, the United States has $19.3 billion in active government-to-government Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases. Among the major U.S. sales to Kuwait are:

- ***Missile Defense Systems***. Since the late 1990s, Kuwait has bought U.S.-made Patriot antimissile fire units as well as allowed the United States to deploy U.S.-owned Patriots in Kuwait.[23] Kuwait has not announced whether it will buy the more sophisticated U.S.-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system. On May 28, 2020, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said the State Department had approved the sale of 84 Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) interceptor missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of $800 million.[24]
- ***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.[25] The Obama Administration notified Congress of the sale of up to 32 F-18s. Kuwait later ordered 28 of them (estimated value of $5 billion).[26]

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

[21] NATO press announcement. January 24, 2017.

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

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

[24] "U.S. State Department clears $1.4 billion sale of Patriot air and missile system to Kuwait." *Reuters*, May 8, 2020.

[25] "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.

[26] White House. Remarks by President Trump and Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah of Kuwait in Joint Press

- ***Tanks***. In 1993, Kuwait bought 218 M1A2 tanks at a value of $1.9 billion. Delivery was completed in 1998. Kuwait has not bought U.S. tanks since, but in 2017 it bought new tank hulls, armament, and engines for its U.S.-made tank force, at an estimated sale value of $29 million.[27]
- ***Apache Helicopters***. In September 2002, Kuwait bought 16 AH-64 (Apache) attack helicopters, valued at about $940 million.
- ***Tactical Missiles***. In 2008, Kuwait bought 120 AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM). 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.

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. 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 Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud. Kuwait did not join Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE in withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar for several months in 2014 over similar issues.

In at least one instance, Kuwait has acted militarily to defend the leaders of other GCC countries from internal unrest. Kuwait sent a naval unit to support the March 14, 2011, intervention of the GCC's "Peninsula Shield" unit to assist Bahraini security forces against an uprising that began that month, 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 Hussein. 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

Conference. September 7, 2017.

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

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 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 Iraq formally recognized both Kuwait's independence and, subsequently, its borders, while continuing to press for access to the islands.

The threat from Saddam Hussein'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 that have been prominent in Iraq's post-Saddam leadership. 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 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. 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 its announced defeat of the Islamic State organization, which seized large parts of Iraqi territory in 2014.

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 end 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 last remaining amount to be paid was $4.6 billion of a $14.7 billion awarded for damage to Kuwaiti oilfields during the Iraqi occupation. Since then, Iraq has made several payments and reduced the outstanding

balance to about $3.7 billion.[28] In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, Iraq has asked Kuwait to cancel or accept a delay in further payments of reparations.

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 to Iraq of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister 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.[29]

As of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the search process had located the remains of 236 Kuwaitis, 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 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.[30] 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, Annex I to a June 17, 2013, report (U.N. document S/2013/357) contained 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 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. 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.

[28] "Kuwait receives $270m in war reparations." The Times, July 23, 2019.

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

[30] "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.[31] Kuwaiti officials have indicated that 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.[32] Kuwait has also purchased missile defense equipment that supports U.S. efforts to forge a joint GCC missile defense network against Iran. At the same time, Kuwait has advocated de-escalation of U.S.-Iran tensions – tensions that have led to some hostilities.[33]

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 IRGC-QF plot to blow up Kuwaiti energy facilities.[34] In September 2015, Kuwait arrested 25 Kuwaiti Shias and one Iranian who had reportedly hidden explosives near the border with Iraq.[35] 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 Kuwait, along with the other GCC states, closed its embassy in Damascus in 2012. Kuwaiti officials say the government has not funded or armed any Syrian

[31] "Kuwait Follows up U.S. Announcement on Iran's Nuclear Deal with Great Interest." *Kuwait News Agency*, May 9, 2018.

[32] "Qatar, Kuwait told U.S. they will join naval coalition, official says." *Reuters*, November 25, 2019.

[33] See: CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas

[34] "Iran Cell Planned Attacks in Kuwait, Minister Says. *Reuters*, April 21, 2011.

[35] "Kuwait charges 'terror cell tied to Iran and Hezbollah'" *Al Jazeera*, September 1, 2015.

rebel groups, and neither Kuwait nor any GCC state deployed ground forces to Syria. In December 2014, Kuwait allowed Syria to reopen its embassy in Kuwait to perform consular services for the approximately 140,000 Syrians living there. Kuwaiti officials have said they would work within an Arab League consensus on the question of rebuilding ties to the Asad regime.[36]

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. It has provided several billion in humanitarian support for this purpose.[37] 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 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 has conducted air strikes on Houthi-led positions using Kuwait's U.S.-made F-18s.[38] 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

Kuwaiti leaders, as do those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, claim that the Islamist organization Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt supports Brotherhood-linked oppositionists in the GCC, including members of Kuwait's Brotherhood-linked factions. 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 grants, loans, and investments. Kuwait also has arrested and deported some Egyptians in Kuwait for conducting (pro-Muslim Brotherhood) political activities.

Palestinian-Israeli Dispute

Kuwaiti leaders were at odds with then-Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat for opposing war to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, and they expelled about 450,000 Palestinian workers after the 1991

[36] "Kuwait expects more Arab countries to reopen embassies in Damascus: KUNA." *Reuters,* December 31, 2018.

[37] Theodore Karasik and Tristan Ober" Kuwait's Apprehension about Normalizing Relations with Syria." *Atlantic Council,* May 21, 2019.

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

war. Kuwait subsequently built and has maintained ties to Hamas, an Islamist rival to Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA).[39]

Kuwaiti officials say they will not follow the lead of Oman, UAE, and Saudi Arabia in building quiet ties to Israel's government,[40] or forging a U.S.-brokered "non-aggression pact" with Israel. Kuwait remains 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.[41] Kuwait has increased donations to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to about $50 million per year, since the Trump Administration ended U.S. donations to that organization in January 2018.[42] 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 proposals for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Yet, Kuwait's Foreign Ministers attended a U.S.-sponsored Middle East conference in Warsaw, Poland during February 13-14, 2019, during which Arab state foreign ministers discussed regional topics alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

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 related to Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. 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

Like other GCC states, Kuwait has hosted a significant number of North Korean laborers (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, Kuwait expelled North Korea's ambassador (the only North Korean ambassador in the Gulf) and four other North Korean diplomats in September 2017. North Korea's embassy in Kuwait City subsequently remained open but with only a small staff. Kuwait also ceased renewing visas for North Korean workers, causing them to start leaving, and it halted trade ties and direct flights between the two.[43]

Domestic Terrorism and Counterterrorism Cooperation[44]

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.[45] In October 2016, an Islamic State-inspired

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

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

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

[42] See: CRS Report RS22967, *U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians*, by Jim Zanotti

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

[44] Information in this section from: State Department Country Reports on Terrorism: 2018. Released October 2019.

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

individual of Egyptian origin drove a truck into a vehicle carrying U.S. military personnel, but no U.S. personnel were injured or killed. 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.[46] 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 above, 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 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 cited few new Kuwaiti initiatives. Earlier State Department reports 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. A2013 Kuwaiti law provided a legal basis to prosecute terrorism-related crimes and freeze terrorist assets. In June 2015, the National Assembly passed a law that criminalized online fundraising for terrorist purposes.

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

Still, Kuwaiti donors have been able provide 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).[47] A Treasury Department official 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."[48]

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

[47] Ben Hubbard. "Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria." *New York Times*, November 13, 2013.

[48] 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.

Subsequently, Ajmi resigned his posts.[49] On August 6, 2014, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on two Ajmi tribe members and one other Kuwaiti[50] under Executive Order 13224, which sanctions entities involved in terrorism. In March 2017, 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 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 that 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.[51] In FY2016, about $3,000 was provided for counter-narcotics programs. For FY2017, about $4 million (mostly Economic Support Funds, ESF) was obligated for programs in Kuwait to combat weapons of mass destruction, and about $460,000 was provided by DoD for counter-narcotics programs. No funds have been provided since or requested for FY2021, according to the USAID Explorer database and State Department budget documents.

Economic Issues

Global economic experts recommend that Kuwait should reduce its economic dependence on oil exports, but hydrocarbons sales still represent about 90% of government export revenues and about 54% of its gross domestic product (GDP).[52] 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's budgetary deficiencies have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused oil prices to fall to well below Kuwait's "break-even price." Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, which the government responded to in part with a fifteen-day lockdown (May 15-30), Kuwait had been deferring capital infrastructure investment and reducing public sector salaries and subsidies, according to the IMF and other observers.

[49] Karen DeYoung. "Kuwait Cabinet Minister Resigns after Allegations." May 13, 2014.

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

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

[52] World Bank. "Kuwait's Economic Update — April 2020." April 16, 2020.

Kuwait has a large sovereign wealth fund, managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority, with holdings estimated at nearly $600 billion.[53] Kuwait produces about 2.5 million barrels per day (mbd) of crude oil, adhering to OPEC production agreements.

Using National Assembly legislation that took effect in 2010, the government has moved to privatize some state-owned industries. However, the privatization of Kuwait Airways was cancelled, in part because of opposition from the airline's workforce. Domestic political disputes delayed opening Kuwait's northern oil fields to foreign investment to generate about 500,000 barrels per day of extra production. However, as part of the country's "New Kuwait 2035" economic strategy, in March 2018, Kuwait announced a vision to develop a large "Northern Gateway" economic opportunity zone encompassing five natural islands in northern Kuwait.[54] 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.

Nuclear Power. As do other Gulf states, Kuwait sees peaceful uses of nuclear energy as important to its economy over the long term. 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. No U.S. funds have been provided since, according to the USAID Explorer Database.

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. In July 20119, Kuwait 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. Total U.S. exports to Kuwait were less than $3 billion in 2018, and imports were about $2.1 billion. Exports to Kuwait were at about that same level in 2019, but imports declined to about $1.3 billion, reflecting reduced U.S. oil imports.[55] U.S. exports to Kuwait consist mostly of commercial aircraft, automobiles, industrial equipment, and foodstuffs.

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

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

[55] U.S. Census Bureau. Foreign Trade Statistics. Accessed May 2020.

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% (2019), but expected to decline in 2020 due to COVID-19 outbreak

Unemployment: 2%

Inflation: 2.5%

Oil (proven reserves): 102 billion barrels, *6% of world proven reserves*

Oil production: 2.5 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; various press.

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