

THE RT HON TONY BLAIR

Our nations' friendship has long been important. From the reign of Mubarak the Great through to the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah today, Kuwait and the United Kingdom have been strong partners and allies. And as we mark 120 years since that landmark treaty between the two countries, it is important that we reflect on the foundations on which it was built.

At its heart was a security relationship. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Britain was concerned about the rising influence of Turkey, Germany and Russia in the Gulf. Towards the end of the twentieth century, British troops were among those who supported Kuwait following Iraq's invasion and occupation, while Kuwait was invaluable to the international coalition's efforts in 2003.

The alliance has held because of the consistency of the leadership, who have long promoted a vision of unity and tolerance. This was demonstrated in 1979, in what was a seminal year for the region and which had knock-on effects that are still felt today. As others around them took wrong turns in response to the Iranian Revolution, the leadership reacted with characteristic caution. This was not an easy decision: Ayatollah Khomeini ramped up the pressure by calling it a "mini-shah." Yet as much of the region and its people reacted positively to the uprising, they held firm. Kuwait has always been a key ally, a reliable partner and a country with talented, open-minded and creative people.

It is because of these traits that the country remains a supporter in countering common threats, not least in the struggle against Islamic extremism. Right across the Middle East this is fundamentally a question of whether you have religious faith as a part of a healthy society or whether you turn one view of one religion into a political ideology that necessarily becomes totalitarian. Tragically, the country was reminded of the brutality of this ideology in 2015 when 27 people lost their lives in the bombing at the al-Imam as-Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait City. But their response spoke volumes about their commitment to fight this scourge. And it is why the country must continue to be engaged, with support from the global community, not just as a base for Western troops but as a crucial partner in the Middle East.

The relationship is deeper than just security though. Billions is traded each year and cultural ties continue to be strong. In April, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra played three concerts in the country, as part of their first ever visit. But as Britain is gripped with a question about its future, so too is Kuwait needing to think where it goes next.

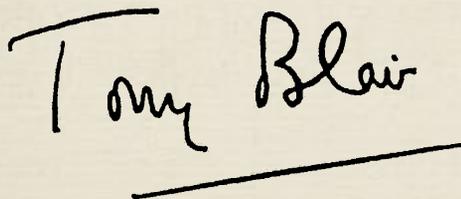
The country did not escape the turbulence of the Arab Spring, even if it didn't cause the short-term ruptures felt by many of its neighbours. And the question of how to continue to modernise has become no less pressing as others in the region make strides. As it stands, the economy is still too dependent on oil. Growth was lifted by higher oil prices last year and is expected to strengthen as prices remain stable. But revenues are still at risk from the whims of the market and the price of the barrel.

Part of the solution will be developing the private sector, as set out in its Vision 2035 strategy. Government is still responsible for around 90 per cent of development projects.

The recent announcement of the development of Silk City will see huge investment in infrastructure and create an important hub, linking the country with neighbours will be a landmark project. But more is needed to encourage foreign investment into the country.

Creating more opportunities for women and young people will also be crucial. On the former, the country has been way ahead of most around it. It is a decade since its first female MPs were elected and women make up around half of the work force, including in military institutions. But further steps can be taken alongside attracting investments to encourage job creation, including a restructuring of the labour market. This will also be key to bringing more young people into work. As with many countries in the Middle East, growing youthful populations has led to an increase in unemployment for these generations. In Kuwait, around 15 per cent are lacking in opportunity. This risks unrest, resentment and the potential for lives to remain unfulfilled.

With such a long history of friendship, Britain will remain a strong partner for the country as it continues to modernise and reform. And as we celebrate our shared past, we also reaffirm our commitment to our common future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Blair". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.