

# A special Kuwaiti perspective

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**ABDULLA BISHARA** attended Cairo, Oxford, and St John's Universities before entering his country's diplomatic service. He was director of the Office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, before being named Kuwait's permanent representative to the United Nations between 1971 and 1981. While serving as Kuwait's representative at the UN, he became President of the Security Council in the month of February, 1979. He was unanimously selected by the GCC leaders to be the first Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council. A former Ambassador to both Brazil and Argentina, Dr Bishara is President of the Diplomatic Centre for Strategic Studies in Kuwait and Chairman of the North Africa Investment Company.

**T**he tranquil flow of British-Kuwait relations which the treaty of January 1899 embodied continues to amaze me. I never thought that the signing of the treaty could make the United Kingdom and Kuwait such close partners. It was surely destiny.

The signing was timely; Sheikh Mubarak demonstrated great wisdom when he pursued his instinct for security at a time when Kuwait was threatened by the Ottoman Empire and by tribal incursions that had destabilised his reign. The treaty was a happy marriage of friendship that was beneficial to both sides. The British gained an important foothold that enabled them to emerge as the *grand master* of Gulf Politics and the Sheikh enjoyed freedom from his worries about the expansionist designs and intentions of the big neighbour.

The years 1900 to 1961 were the best in Kuwait's history in terms of stability and during this time the Kuwaiti people expanded their maritime adventure into India and East Africa unperturbed by the Ottoman bullies. As a result, Kuwait thrived in trade and excelled in navigational expertise, becoming more prosperous and more reliable as skilful merchants and able sailors. They experienced the rewards from this important Treaty. The Treaty also relieved the Sheikh of Kuwait from his fears over his neighbour's claim over his territory. It also sharpened his appetite for enlarging the size of his principality. He moved south with a view to increasing his territorial influence.

Kuwait therefore gained fame as a safe and secure centre for regional trade and for transit facilities with both Iraq and Iran. We have to remember that, because of the treaty, Kuwait was not adversely affected by the two great World Wars. Its identity and integrity remained intact; its political system was not touched and its domestic harmony was not breached. No doubt, the Treaty was the secret that scared off the hounding neighbours!

On the other side, the British government was very loyal to the spirit of the Treaty, which involved the defence of Kuwait against expansionist powers and marauding tribes. The treaty did not allow for interference in domestic affairs, and the British observed this fact faithfully. It was an immaculate loyalty for which Kuwait was very grateful.

The Treaty was not a clumsy set of rules, it was a defensive wall from outside threats, and the Sheikh of Kuwait's authority was never challenged by the

provisions of the treaty. To him and to his people, it was a benign arrangement and his enemies were conscious of the benefits which the Ruler reaped. The British succeeded in obtaining the confidence of the Ruler and this helped mitigate any shortcomings. They were protectors, not colonialists or governors, for their mandate was to shield Kuwait from the volatility of regional politics.

The British presence in the gulf was based on pragmatic considerations and the British revealed their best interests in pursuing it to the end game. The British army made its presence felt on a number of occasions and its air force was active in quelling tribal encroachment in the 1920s. The major intervention of the British army was in July 1961, when the Iraqi Prime Minister claimed Kuwait as part of Iraq and threatened to invade the country.

The Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Abdulla Al-Salem Al Sabah, could not ignore the seriousness of the situation and requested that the British government activate the Treaty as he envisaged a serious threat to the existence of the country. There was no time for vacillation, Sheikh Abdulla was a man of moral courage and a high set of values. He was the Amir, trusted by his people to ensure their safety and he acted as the moment warranted; he showed clear loyalty to the advice of his forebearers.

The British response was swift and effective in honouring the stipulations of the treaty. Two thousand British troops had already landed by the end of July 1961. The fear from Iraq receded and the confidence in Great Britain rekindled. It was a spectacular performance of a historic commitment. We value the power of affinity that binds the Kuwaitis and the British people. The rapport is pure and the connection is perfect. The British troops had to leave as Kuwait became a member of the Arab League, the job was well done. We are proud of their performance.

Sheikh Abdulla Al Salem, the ruler, acknowledged the historic contribution of Great Britain in ensuring the safety of Kuwait and being a man of realism, considered that Kuwait was entering a different phase after its independence and especially after becoming a member of the Arab League. He therefore wanted to demonstrate sensibility to the powerful influence of Arab Radicals in Arab politics. The seven year agreement signed by Sheikh Abdulla in 1961 with the British government for the defence of Kuwait expired in 1968. After that date,

Kuwait entered, for the first time in its modern history, the complexity of regional politics without the defence obligation from Great Britain.

Self-reliance was a new watch-word for Kuwait but the legacy of the 1899 treaty had not disappeared from Kuwaiti life. Britain occupied a unique seat given the powerful relationship which combined both sides. Kuwaitis are familiar with the British mood and traits; we admire the British adherence to commitments and obligations, the way they honour these obligations regardless of the passage of time or the size of commitment. The British are all-weather friends, regardless of dangers and complexity; they are ready to defend us in prosperity and in adversity.

On 2nd August 1990 Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait, in complete violation of the Arab League Charter and UN Authority. We followed Mrs. Thatcher's rallying cry to President Bush and her advice not to wobble and her steadfast position to liberate Kuwait regardless of complexity. With stunning appreciation of the situation her dynamic approach was pivotal in the Kuwait liberation narrative. Britain played a key role in building the international coalition that liberated Kuwait.

We are indebted to Great Britain; to its vision in world politics; to its proverbial *realpolitik* and to its military insight and courage. We salute Great Britain and admire its people and we will remain faithful to the demands of friendship all our life. We cannot forget the British role in the downfall of the Iraqi regime in 2003 that relieved the Iraqis from the brutal

grip of their government. We are certain that British gallantry and diplomacy is an asset in which we trust especially its effectiveness when the need arises.

After the invasion and in light of the powerful re-emergence of the unity of purpose in policies, Great Britain and Kuwait renewed their security partnership and signed a new model for military cooperation. As a result of this new step Britain's presence in Kuwait has progressed and touched different fields, notably the increasing number of British exports in various branches of Kuwait Society.

In 2012, His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber paid a State Visit to the UK that enabled him to gauge the special warmth that characterised the relations between the two nations. He had extensive talks on trade, economic ties and diplomacy. Both sides agreed to establish a commission of high officials to meet regularly to take stock of the achievements in the agenda of mutual interests.

The British role in Kuwait's development plan rose to unprecedented levels and involves a large number of activities. Consequently the British community in Kuwait has become very important and its presence is felt in crucial areas. So we are justified in our commitment to looking forward to celebrate the occasion of the signing of the protection Treaty of 1899; we are aware of the role it played in the protection of Kuwait and the preservation of its identity.

We rejoice with certainty that the future will retain the rock-solid basis that ties our two countries. 

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HE Khaled Al-Duwaisan, Kuwait's Ambassador to the Court of St James's and Dr Abdullah Bishara