

More than a friendship

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SIMON MAYALL joined Greenhill in 2015 after a career with the British Army, where he held a series of roles including Commanding Officer, 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards, Commander, 1st Mechanised Brigade from and Deputy Commanding General for Multi-national Corps (Iraq). He served as Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Operations) from 2009-2011, Defence Senior Adviser (Middle East) from 2011-2014 and Prime Minister's Security Envoy to Iraq from 2014-2015. He holds an MA in Modern History from Oxford University and an MA in International Relations from King's College London.

My first visit to Kuwait was on the morning of 4th March 1991, when the British 1st Armoured Division cut the Kuwait to Basra main road as part of the final phases of *Operation Desert Storm*, the campaign to liberate Kuwait from its seven-month occupation by Saddam Hussein's army. Camped in the Mutla farms, just North of the Multa Ridge, where the main road rises out of Kuwait City, the scene was desolate and shocking. Destroyed vehicles and dead bodies littered the desert, and huge oil fires belched plumes of thick smoke into the air. A path had been cleared through the, so-called, '*Highway of Death*' and, as an Arabic speaker, I was tasked to go into Kuwait City to contact our fellow Coalition partners from the Gulf States.

We drove through quiet streets, where the results of the brutal and predatory Iraqi occupation were evident everywhere in looted shops and a general level of wanton destruction. However, already the remarkable Kuwaiti people were shrugging off the nightmare of their seven-month ordeal. Shopkeepers were putting goods out on display, women were shopping, children were playing outside their houses, and neighbours were

greeting each other again, and asking after friends and relatives that were missing. The Union Flag, flying from my Land Rover quickly attracted friendly and enthusiastic attention. Everybody waved, everybody wanted to shake hands, everybody offered tea. It was humbling, but uplifting at the same time. The British and the Kuwaitis: old friends getting together again after times of danger and hardship. The resilience of the Kuwaiti civilians was astonishing, as had been the courage and sacrifice of their soldiers, who had made such a contribution to the liberation of their own country. As a British soldier I felt honoured and proud to be in Kuwait on that bitter-sweet day nearly 30 years ago, and to watch brave and dignified people, who had been through great hardship and anxiety, dust off the trials and tribulations of the recent months, and set about restoring their lives.

For we were old friends, and the United Kingdom's relationship with the State of Kuwait is close, deep and enduring and, while Kuwait has many friends around the world, much of the remarkable success of Kuwait has derived from the close partnership between these two countries over the last 120 years. Historically famed as great traders, merchants, sailors and pearl-



An oil field on fire during the 1991 Gulf War

divers, Kuwait's position at the head of the Arabian Gulf made her an important link in the trade routes from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, via Basra and Aleppo, but also vulnerable to the predatory instincts of her larger neighbours. In 1899, threatened by the Ottoman Empire, the ruling Al Sabah family sought the protection of the British Empire, whose important links to India had already led them to establish mutually beneficial relationships with other tribes and families further down the Gulf. Under the provisions of the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement, Britain pledged to protect the territorial integrity of Kuwait in return for Kuwait restricting the access of foreign powers to the Sheikdom. There would be frictions, inevitably, but so began a long and fruitful association, lasting through two World Wars and a range of global and regional upheavals, until Kuwait's new wealth, and her naturally independent nature, led to the ending of her treaty with Britain in 1961.

This was the start of a new era in the relations between the two countries, and the benefits were seen almost immediately when Britain deployed troops rapidly in the same year to deter a potential invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. From that time, until now, the political, diplomatic, military and commercial links and bonds have remained strong and vibrant. These deep and important connections were seen again, at their most tangible, in the days that followed the invasion of August 1990, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and, in his turn, Prime Minister John Major, committed tens of thousands of British soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines to confront Saddam Hussein, and

to ensure his crimes against the people of Kuwait would not stand. I was one of those servicemen.

Since the successful outcome of that operation, hundreds of thousands of Kuwaitis continue to visit Britain each year, and huge flows of commerce, trade and investment go in each direction annually. Young Kuwaiti men and women attend British schools and universities, and Kuwaiti officer cadets attend courses at Sandhurst, Dartmouth, and Cranwell, while more senior officers attend Staff College at Shrivenham, and the Royal College of Defence Studies in London. A British Military Mission has been in Kuwait since the liberation, as an important element of a new British-Kuwaiti Defence Agreement, signed in 1991, helping the continued professional development of Kuwait's Armed Forces. A further Defence Agreement was signed in 2018, reflecting the changing politics of the region, new threats in the region, and new ambitions for the two countries.

I have returned to Kuwait many times since 1991, and the welcome has always been as warm and as genuine as it was on that sombre March day. Kuwait continues to thrive, to be a force for stability and moderation in the region, and to offer its citizens security and freedom. It does this in the sure knowledge of the continued commitment of her international friends and admirers, not least those in the British military who have been privileged to have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Kuwaitis in both the bad and, thankfully more often, the good times. I salute the people of Kuwait as we mark, merely, the first 120 years of a remarkable and successful association and friendship. 

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A British Challenger tank during Operation Desert Storm